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e-fa News Round-Up February 2011

News bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group

The European Free Alliance (EFA) draws together political parties fighting for democracy and self-determination for the stateless nations and regions of Europe. European Free Alliance MEPs sit in a European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in the European parliament.

EFA MEPs are:

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)
Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (Vice-President)
Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (Vice-President)
François Alfonsi - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Oriol Junqueras MEP - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Zdanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

On the agenda in February:

- Basque Peace Process
- New rights for bus and coach passengers
- World Social Forum - Dakar
- Tax Autonomy Conference, Rijeka
- CAP reform
- European Destinations of Excellence
- Welsh referendum, Belgian world record

Basque Peace Process

EFA MEP François Alfonsi, together with Bairbre de Brún of Sinn Fein hosted a press conference in Brussels in early February to publish a written statement of support for the Basque Peace process. They were joined by the left wing mayor of a Basque town who came to Brussels to emphasise the need for EU level support in order for peace to be built following the ETA ceasefire. *Frieda Brepoels addresses a rally in Donostia*

Later in February N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels and EFA Party President Eric Defoort travelled to Donostia to add their support to the peace process. Both addressed a meeting held to welcome the Guernica accords which established a ceasefire by ETA and paves the way towards a verifiable and lasting end to violence.

Frieda described the long history of links between the progressive democratic national movements in Flanders and the Basque Country. She said that similar principles underpinned both movements, notably that every people has a right to its own language, culture and territory.

New rights for bus and coach passengers

EFA MEPs voted in favour of giving more rights to bus and coach passengers, with the European Parliament adopting a new EU law on the issue at its February Plenary Session in Strasbourg.

SNP MEP Ian Hudghton said that the new EU law would be particularly important for improving services for disabled users of bus and coach services. N-VA MEP and Transport Committee member Frieda Brepoels supported the measures but said that the final version was far from perfect and could have been more ambitious.

The new law, which comes into force in 2013, will provide for compensation for delayed or cancelled long-distance coach services. It will also, regardless of distance, enshrine the principle of non-discriminatory access to transport and provide for compensation if wheelchairs or other mobility equipment are lost or damaged. In addition, relevant staff will need to be offered training on giving assistance to passengers of reduced mobility.

Ian Hudghton commented: *"This new law is an important step forward in improving the rights of bus and coach passengers, particularly those with reduced mobility. I've been contacted by many organisations and individuals in Scotland who've been extremely supportive of the new requirements."*

Frieda Brepoels explained her point of view: *"This accord is far from perfect and the European Parliament had wanted to go much further. Nonetheless I'm pleased that thanks to the pressure we've applied, these new rules really do represent a great step forward for passengers with reduced mobility. And I'm particularly pleased that the rights of passengers with reduced mobility will be protected regardless of the distance they travel."*

World Social Forum - Dakar

EFA MEP Oriol Junqueras of Catalonia took part in the 2011 World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal earlier in February. The Catalan MEP addressed a conference in Dakar where he warned of the threat to global stability from rising energy and food prices.

He also urged governments to remember the social necessity of implementing energy saving policies to mitigate rising energy prices. Junqueras warned that lack of access to food could trigger further popular revolts which could have a knock-on effect of further increasing energy prices. *Oriol Junqueras at the*

World Social Forum in Dakar

In his speech, the left-wing nationalist pointed out that high energy prices have encouraged biofuel production, and for this reason, many multinational companies have bought large farms. As a result millions of farmers in developing countries have lost the land where they practiced subsistence agriculture and, with rising food prices have serious difficulties in acquiring food.

"We need a more equitable redistribution of income", said Junqueras. *"In recent years we've seen the banking sector in the first world become enormously wealthy before coming to the brink of collapse, whilst much wealth in developing countries remains in the hands of export companies and corrupt ruling classes."*

For more on the World Social Forum visit www.fsm2011.org

Tax Autonomy Conference, Rijeka

EFA MEPs Tatjana Zdanoka and Frieda Brepoels travelled to Rijeka, Croatia in mid February to take part in a conference on tax autonomy with local partner party LZR, in a visit organised by the European Free Alliance political party. *EFA Group and Party delegation in Rijeka, with representatives of LZR*

Frieda gave a presentation on a new financing law for Flanders whilst Tatjana talked about the experience in Latvia concerning the financing of minority languages and tax autonomy.

The visit followed a European Parliament resolution in February which potentially paves the way for Croatia to join the EU during 2011, becoming the 28th member state.

CAP reform

SNP MEP Alyn Smith cautiously welcomed a European parliament report on CAP reform by Bavarian Christian Democrat Albert Dess. Reforming the EU's Common Agricultural Policy is due to be completed by the end of 2013.

The report calls for the retention of direct payments and recognises demands for a more even and fair distribution of CAP funds across Member States; acknowledging that in certain fragile regions coupled payments are necessary and will have to continue; calling for a simplification of CAP administration and cross compliance; and allowing for flexibility in the future basis of CAP payments.

Smith said: *"All in all, not a bad start to what will be the Parliament's official position ahead of the Commission's legislative proposals in late summer 2011. Food production and food security is at the heart of the CAP, and I'm delighted that Dess has recognised this through the retention and, indeed, improvement of direct payments, which will give farmers the security they need to produce. I'm also pleased that he has dropped some of the more silly ideas that were floating about, such as the notion of "capping" individual payments, which would not help the provision of food security and public goods, and indeed would just lead to the division of efficient farm units."*

European Destinations of Excellence

Plaid MEP Jill Evans launched a campaign for Wales to become the first country in Europe that is not a member state to join the European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) tourism programme. Until now

Wales was unable to take part in the Eden project because the UK Government had chosen not to, even though almost every country in Europe has.

EDEN is a project that encourages sustainable tourism in lesser known areas by holding national competitions in participating countries. Winning destinations are then promoted around the EU and join the EDEN network where they receive help to become established tourist destinations.

Jill said *"Tourism is worth billions to the Welsh economy and we need to maximise Wales' status with tourists. Wales has some beautiful and interesting destinations for tourists and, through EDEN, people across Europe would know more about them."*

Welsh referendum, Belgian world record

Wales goes to the polls on Thursday 3 March in a referendum on giving the National Assembly the right to legislate on devolved matters. Opinion polls have consistently favoured a 'yes' vote but campaigner say turnout will be a crucial issue. Meanwhile, Belgium remains without a federal government more than 250 days after the last elections, setting a world record. Yet another royal negotiator has stood down having failed to hammer out a compromise. EFA member party the N-VA became the largest party in Flanders and in the Belgian state at the elections of June 2010.

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