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News | 11.02.2010

e-fa News Round-Up February I 2010

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 joint European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in 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 - Partitu di a Nazione Corsa
Oriol Junqueras MEP - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Zdanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

This week in Strasbourg: 8 - 11 February

EFA MEPs have been in Strasbourg this week for a plenary session of the European Parliament. Subjects on the agenda included the vote to approve the new European Commission, the SWIFT accord with the USA on the exchange of banking data, the use of body scanners at EU airports and the situation of car maker Opel following the closure of its Antwerp plant.

Future of Opel

Following car maker Opel's recent announcement of the closure of its Antwerp operation, directly affecting 2600 jobs, the European Commission made a statement to Parliament in Strasbourg on Monday evening.

N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels spoke in the debate and sharply criticised the Commission for failing to help

avoid closure of the Antwerp plant. Brepoels said: *"How can it be that the Commission still hasn't asked to see GM's restructuring plan? And why does the Commission fail to take an active role in Opel's restructuring plans. The Commission seems happy to look the other way whilst Opel slashes thousands of jobs in Europe, whilst at the same time wanting to keep its hands on 2.3 billion euros in state aid."* Brepoels added: *"This is more than a missed opportunity. Europe could have shown its worth in the case of Opel, but instead the Commission failed to stand up to a multinational which chose to ignore European rules."*

European Commission approved

A majority of MEPs voted to approve the new European Commission on Tuesday. EFA Group President and Plaid MEP Jill Evans spoke in the preceding debate. She expressed regret that European Commission President José Manuel Barroso had failed up until now to adequately address what she termed the 'internal enlargement of the EU', referring to the process by which a country which is already part of an existing EU member state can gain independence.

Speaking in the debate, the Plaid Cymru MEP said: *"We have not even begun to address internal enlargement - where countries inside the EU borders gain independence. These questions have not been answered in the debates on the election of the new Commission despite the changes happening all around us. I would ask President Barroso again to do so."*

Frieda Brepoels called for the newly approved Commission to show leadership and hoped that in future the selection procedure could be improved. Brepoels commented: *"We need to see the Commission show leadership over the next five years, leadership on issues such as the response to the economic crisis, climate change and immigration. We cannot afford to lapse into a Belgian-style paralysis at European level."*

Meanwhile SNP MEP Ian Hudghton welcomed the decision of newly confirmed Fisheries Commissioner Maria Damanaki from Greece to accept his invitation to visit Scotland and see at first hand Scottish efforts to conserve fish stocks. Hudghton commented: *"As the EU embarks upon a wholesale review of the CFP, it is important that the European Commission is fully aware of the Scottish model. The new Fisheries Commissioner has agreed to come to Scotland in order that she can see for herself the positive work of the Scottish fishing sector."*

SWIFT and body scanners

Civil Liberties committee member Tatjana Zdanoka reminded colleagues of ongoing concerns with the interim EU - US accord to supply banking data to the US via the SWIFT mechanism, in the context of anti-terror measures.

MEPs continue to be unhappy with the lack of assurances on data protection and personal privacy, and question whether a new accord is needed given the existence of other legal instruments in this field. Under new powers following the Lisbon Treaty, MEPs approval is required for this agreement to be confirmed. MEPs eventually voted 378 to 196 not to approve the agreement.

MEPs were also discussing the use of controversial full body scanners at EU airports. Flemish MEP Frieda Brepoels commented that the European Commission should properly consider concerns regarding human rights, health and privacy. She commented: *"Technology alone will not protect us from the threat of*

terrorism, though it could be a part of the answer. We need a balanced, proportionate approach at EU level, rather than seeing individual member states implement varying measures."

Egunkaria and press freedom

EFA MEPs Oriol Junqueras (Catalunya) and François Alfonsi (Corsica) hosted a press conference with Martxelo Otamendi, former editor of the banned Basque language newspaper Egunkaria where they presented a statement in favour of acquitting the newspaper and its staff. Twenty two MEPs from four different parliamentary groups have signed up in support, including every member of the EFA Group.

It will be seven years on 20 February since the popular Basque language newspaper Egunkaria was closed down by the Spanish state authorities. The banning order has been kept in force and a prosecution maintained in spite of a recommendation to the contrary by the State Prosecutor. The MEPs argued that maintaining a ban on Egunkaria contradicts the guarantees on freedom of expression of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights as now enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon. They want the ban lifted on what was the only daily newspaper published in the Basque language.

Oriol Junqueras told a press conference at the European Parliament in Strasbourg: *"Media organisations cannot be closed down as a precautionary measure without any conviction having been secured. Freedom of the press is a fundamental right that has to be protected. Every millimetre of press freedom is sacred and must be defended scrupulously."*

Corsican MEP François Alfonsi said: *"Freedom of the press is a fundamental right which must be defended and Europe must give a lead. It is disgraceful that a newspaper can be closed on the basis of incorrect allegations. If this can happen today in the Spanish state, then we must be vigilant that such behaviour is not repeated elsewhere in the European Union in future."*

Safer Social Networking

The SNP's Ian Hudghton welcomed moves by the European Commission to make social networking sites safer for children who use them. Hudghton commented following the publication of a new EU study which revealed that 50% of European teenagers give out personal information on the web which is openly available to anyone. The SNP MEP wants all social networking sites to sign up to the EU's Safer Social Networking Principles which aim to help protect children and young people from online predators.

The SNP MEP commented: *"With an estimated fifty per cent of teenagers giving out personal information online, we need to make sure that robust measures are taken to protect young people from internet predators. Many young people find the internet absolutely invaluable for socialising and learning, and for most the experience will be a positive one. But there are clear risks involved in posting personal information online, and that's why I'm supporting the European Commission's Safer Internet Campaign.*

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Responsible MEPs

Jill Evans

Member

Ian Hudghton

Member

Heather Anderson

Member

Contact person

Steven Cornelius

EFA Press, Communications & Campaigns Officer

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