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e-fa: News Round-Up March 2012

news bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament

March 2012 Round-Up

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 (EFA Group Vice-President)
Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (EFA Group Vice-President)
François Alfonsi MEP - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Ana Miranda MEP - Bloque Nacionalista Galego
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Ždanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

Key issues this month include:

- International Support for the Basque Peace process
- Standing together against colon cancer
- SNP MEP positive on Commission's view on independence
- Chronic Kidney disease highlighted
- Women in political decision making
- Call for rethink on European economy
- More action against diabetes
- UK opts out of school fruit scheme

International Support for the Basque Peace process

Several EFA MEPs have been active members of the European Parliament's cross party Basque Friendship Group, set up to promote European support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Basque country.

In Strasbourg this month, together with MEPs from other groups, **François Alfonsi** and **Ana Miranda** spoke at a press briefing to announce that a conference will take place in the European Parliament on Thursday 29 March, focussing on the Aiete Declaration of last October. This declaration, at a conference in Donostia/San Sebastian attended by figures such as Kofi Annan, Jonathan Powell and Bertie Ahern, was followed by ETA's announcement of an end to armed activity.

Open to the public, the conference will hear from Jonathan Powell, former chief of staff to the UK Prime Minister, who played an important role in the peace process in Ireland.

Key issues are likely to be the Aiete Declaration's role in providing a road map to peace in the Basque Country, and the EU's role in supporting the peace process.

When: 09h00 - 11h00, Thursday 29 March 2012
Where: Room A1G3, European Parliament, Brussels

Standing together against colon cancer

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** organised a day of action at the European Parliament on 29 February as part of European Month Against Colon Cancer. To raise awareness of this disease, 3000 blue ribbons together with information folders were handed out as people arrived at the Parliament.

Later, a specially made piece of art based on a blue ribbon design from top Antwerp designer Tim Van Steenbergen was unveiled, as was brand new online network platform entitled "United Europe Against Colon Cancer". The disease affects almost 400,000 people in Europe annually.

Commenting, Frieda Brepoels said: *"One European in twenty will be confronted by colon cancer at some point in their lives. In Flanders, we see almost 5000 new victims each year. But there still remains a taboo about colon cancer that's difficult to break down. That's what we want to change with this awareness raising campaign."*

The events were jointly organised with Flemish non-profit organisation Stop Darmkanker, and the Dutch Foundation Pixels tegen Darmkanker.

SNP MEP positive on Commission's view on independence

SNP MEP **Ian Hudghton** welcomed a statement by the European Commission in which it described a possible future independent Scotland and the remaining parts of the UK equally as "the parties concerned"

- refusing to differentiate between them in terms of EU membership.

The statement came in an answer to a question from a Catalan MEP. The Commission said that they are unable to comment on specifics, given that the terms and result of the proposed independence referendum are not yet known. But the treatment of Scotland and the remainder UK (rUK) as equal parties is fully in line however with legal opinion that Scotland and rUK will constitute two successor states to the current UK.

Ian commented: *"The Commission is right not to speculate on the outcome of the referendum given that the Scottish government's consultation is still ongoing, and it is not the EU's role to pre-empt the democratic will of the Scottish people. A number of supporters of the anti-independence parties have attempted to spread scare stories about Scotland's future role in the EU - and they would perhaps be better advised not to pre-empt that democratic will.*

"The Commission make clear however that they regard both Scotland and the rUK equally as 'the parties concerned'. They go on to speak of the future relationship 'between those parties and European Union partners' - again implying both that Scotland and rUK are being treated equally and that the rest of the EU remain 'partners'. As a matter of fact Scotland, together with the rest of the UK, is already a member of the EU. The Commission states that the terms of the European Treaties are decided by its Member States - and both Scotland and the rUK will play their role as equal Member States in amending those Treaties to take account of the two successor states post-independence".

Spain's Foreign Minister has already stated that his government would not stand in the way of Scottish EU membership, saying that it was a matter for the two parties concerned. And at a press briefing in Brussels, Scotland's Deputy First Minister stated that Scottish independence would set no precedent for independence movements elsewhere, and was based on a unique set of circumstances.

Chronic Kidney disease highlighted

On the occasion of World Kidney Day (8th March), N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels**, Chairwoman of the MEP Group for Kidney Health, drew attention to the serious shortage of kidney donors in Europe.

Speaking at the seminar of the MEP Group for Kidney Health, Frieda commented: *"There is a significant variation in donor rates between EU Member States and hence a huge potential to increase donor availability in Europe. The European Parliament has always highlighted that the organisation of the donation and transplantation process is a key factor in this regard. With the Action plan and the Directive on quality and safety - that has to be transposed by Member States by 27 August of this year, the EU has taken important steps ahead.*

"The Parliament will of course monitor the implementation and results of these instruments with great attention. Raising awareness on donation is equally important to tackle the donor shortage. I sincerely hope that the seminars of the MEP Group on kidney health can contribute to this end and to our general goal, the prevention of CKD."

Women in political decision making

EFA MEPs backed moves to boost the role of women in political decision making, and to close the gender pay gap. The European Free Alliance in the European Parliament has a majority of female members.

Proposals to reduce the gender pay gap and move towards gender parity in political decision making were backed by MEPs on in Strasbourg in March. Across Europe, women earn on average 17.5% less than men and only 12% of top executives are women. More than a third of MEPs are women, but in national

parliaments across the EU barely a quarter of members are female on average.

Galician MEP **Ana Miranda**, who spoke in the parliamentary debate, has also proposed that the European Parliament should use gender neutral terms in languages that distinguish between the two.

Ana Miranda said: *"Almost a century after the first International Women's Day, effective gender equality remains a mirage for most women on this planet. We as female parliamentarians have an obligation to contribute to this valuable work to transform voluntary measures into mandatory ones. Where there are female victims of gender violence, this problem is more serious and urgent, and this Parliament must make greater efforts.*

Where there is discrimination in the workplace and inequality of opportunity we must also act. Where there are disparities in pay between men and women, our policy initiatives are clearly failing. Unless the sexual and reproductive rights of women are protected, such as the right to abortion, there cannot be effective equality. The battle for equality, social justice and dignity can never be over while half of humanity continues to be discriminated against."

Jill Evans said: *"In Wales the National Assembly has a very good record on representation of women and this came about as a result of positive action by political parties. Equality will not happen by default. We need to keep highlighting just how far we still need to go and put forward proposals on what governments can do."*

Frieda Brepoels said: *"We need to ensure a mainstreaming of equality between men and women in all areas, and at all levels of government. This is particularly important and relevant in times of economic crisis. Strengthening women's position in the employment market is an absolute must - not only to increase participation but also to create equal conditions in terms of salaries and career progression."*

Tatjana Zdanoka said: *"The European Parliament has highlighted the challenges that women across Europe continue to face in terms of achieving equal pay and fair representation. Women make up half the population, but only make up a third of MEPs and in most national parliaments the position is much worse. I'm pleased that in the European Free Alliance group, women now make up a majority of members. I hope our example will inspire others and will encourage more women to become active in politics."*

Call for rethink on European economy

In a debate at the European Parliament in Strasbourg attended by European Commission President Barroso, and Council President Van Rompuy, Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** spoke of the need for radical thinking to tackle the economic crisis in Europe.

Speaking in the debate Jill called for a rethink of the current approach and highlighted the protests that have taken place across Europe against public spending cuts and job losses.

Jill said: *"The series of European summits since May 2010 have taken place against the backdrop of massive protests against cuts in public spending and job losses. Yet the result of the March council has shown once again that government leaders are focussed on spending cuts as the way forward. We all know the magnitude of the crisis. But I believe that crisis demands radical rethinking.*

It is a time to seize new opportunities - to learn from past mistakes and ensure we don't repeat them. The European economy has to be put on a path that will equip it for future challenges, like investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects that can create thousands of sustainable jobs as well as protecting our environment. We need a long term plan for financial, social and environmental recovery."

She said that the needs of the people should drive European economic policies, adding: *"The response we*

have now is one in which the costs are borne by the most vulnerable - those least responsible for causing such havoc in our economy. Young people in particular will feel more excluded and rejected instead of being encouraged to play a full part in building the kind of Europe we want to see. We must show solidarity with all the people of Europe."

More action against diabetes

The European Parliament called for more action to tackle diabetes following a debate on the issue in March. The call was supported by N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** who sits on the Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety. MEPs backed a resolution calling for greater focus on prevention, diagnosis, management, education and research in tackling diabetes.

Frieda backed the resolution but also emphasised the need for a horizontal approach to non-communicable diseases.

She commented: *"Diabetes has enormous challenges for us in Europe, not least when it comes to children. We can and must do more. We must absolutely not forget that other non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and cancer are in just as much need of further measures. A horizontal approach to this is absolutely right, given that the risk factors for these conditions are to a large extent the same. By having a co-ordinated vision, Europe can add value to the work of the relevant authorities in the member states."*

Today, 32 million European citizens are affected by diabetes. This might even increase to 40 million by 2030. The disease causes much distress for the patients, and also for family members. At the same point, diabetes has a serious socio economic impact with direct costs estimated at 80 billion Euro. Diabetes is incurable but treatable and most patients suffer from type 2 diabetes, which can be avoided by tackling risk factors such as lack of exercise and obesity.

Jill acts over LNG terminal

The European Commission threatened to take legal action against the UK government in relation to Milford Haven's Liquefied Natural Gas Terminal. The news came at a meeting of the European Parliament's petitions committee. With the support of Plaid MEP Jill Evans, local residents have petitioned the European Parliament, highlighting several potential breaches of EU law, and in particular the UK's obligation to carry out proper Environmental Impact and Safety assessments.

Now the Commission is threatening infringement proceedings over the UK government's failure to comply with repeated requests for information about safety aspects of the Liquefied Natural Gas terminal.

Jill said: *"The European Commission is clearly losing patience with the UK government's failure to produce information about important safety aspects at Milford Haven. The government has missed the deadline to provide information on the safety assessment. Now they've asked for the deadline to be extended until June 2012. It's not acceptable that they say the information is there but won't let the public see it.*

The London government cannot stall any longer. Local people have a right to the facts, and need to be reassured that the use of Milford Haven for LNG is safe and plans are in place for any emergency. I am very grateful to the residents who have campaigned tirelessly on this for several years. They should not have to live with this fear."

UK opts out of school fruit scheme

The SNP's **Alyn Smith** expressed disappointment with the decision of the UK Government to opt out of

the EU's School Fruit Scheme for another year. The scheme, worth 90 million Euro a year and in its fourth year of application, supports programmes providing free fruits and vegetables to school children and promoting healthy eating habits at a young age. More than 8 million school children benefitted from the scheme in 2010/11. The UK is one of just three Member States to not participate.

Alyn said: *"It's disappointing, but I can't say that I'm surprised. On issue after issue, from supporting workers laid off by globalisation, to stabilising the Euro, to helping school children adopt healthy diets, the UK Government just doesn't get it - they have shown a shocking unwillingness to engage in partnership with its neighbours to find mutually beneficial solutions, an attitude which has grown worse under David Cameron."*

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Responsible MEPs

Jill Evans

Member

Ian Hudghton

Member

Heather Anderson

Member

Contact person

Steven Cornelius

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