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e-fa News Round-Up May/June 2011

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

Key issues over the past few weeks included:

- **E-coli outbreak**
- **S4C future raised with European Commission**
- **EU calls for a new era of social justice**
- **Scots political bloggers**
- **EFA Group visit to Limburg**
- **Food security and price volatility**
- **Independence for South Sudan**
- **Plight of the Tuareg in the Libyan Conflict**
- **Junqueras elected mayor of large Catalan town**
- **N-VA launches new international website**

E-coli outbreak

MEPs debated the e-coli outbreak in Europe at the Strasbourg June plenary session. Many expressed concerns at the delays in tracing the source of the outbreak and called for lessons to be learnt with adequate measures put in place to compensate producers. Speaking in the debate, Catalan MEP Oriol Junqueras questioned the haste of German authorities in rushing to apportion blame before the source of the outbreak had been clearly identified. He went on to call for proper compensation for farmers.

Junqueras said: *"European authorities should take a two-fold approach. In the short term, we must ensure the implementation of a compensation mechanism for those European farmers who have been most affected; in the medium term we need to implement a rapid warning system for dangerous foods to help avoid any unfounded presumptions like this in future."*

Junqueras added: *"Aid to farmers should take account of the diversity of European agriculture. That's why*

the Commission's proposal is unacceptable - to channel aid through vegetable producer organisations won't work as, for example, in Catalonia, our agricultural sector isn't set up that way. We need to see that adequate compensation gets to those farmers who've been affected by this."

Frieda Brepoels was also critical of the German response, commenting: *"The amateurish approach of the German government has been amazing: by prematurely rushing to conclusions they have caused serious damage. European agencies have also been slow to respond, waiting too long to send in experts. All in all there has been a total lack of co-ordination."*

S4C future raised with European Commission

Plaid's Jill Evans and members of Cymdeithas yr Iaith (Welsh Language Society) met Culture Commissioner, Androula Vassiliou, in Strasbourg to discuss the future of Welsh language TV channel S4C.

The meeting was an opportunity to brief the European Commission on the threat to S4C's future posed by the ninety-four per cent cut to the channel's funding, and to highlight the UK Government's obligations to Welsh language broadcasting under the European Charter on Minority Languages. Mrs Vassiliou expressed her interest in the campaign.

Speaking after the meeting, Jill said: *"The attack on S4C is an attack on the Welsh language itself. As a recognised EU language, this has implications way beyond Wales. S4C is seen as a model for many other countries and the European Charter for Minority Languages requires the provision of television and radio in the relevant languages of each country. As someone committed to the rights of minority language speakers, I am confident that the Commissioner has recognised the magnitude of the threat to S4C."*

"I'd like to see responsibilities over broadcasting devolved to the Welsh Assembly, as it clearly lacks the respect it should have equality with other from the Westminster Government. Minority languages should have equality with other European languages with regards to broadcasting, which means sufficient funding and no interference by politicians."

EU calls for a new era of social justice

In its June plenary session the European Parliament adopted by a substantial majority a resolution calling for a better implementation of social standards and rights for workers. The debate coincided with the 100th conference of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva.

Speaking in the debate Tatjana Zdanoka MEP, who sits on the Parliament's Employment Committee said: *"The role of the International Labour Organisation should be strengthened. Voluntary corporate social responsibility is a good thing, but the primary role in promoting and protecting human rights belongs to states and international organisations. It would be wrong to avoid having legally binding standards in the field of corporate responsibility."*

"In Europe we should establish new standards in the field of company reporting, and we should insist in our bilateral and multilateral relations with our partners that decent work and standards are properly complied with. Europe should promote its social model and improve rather than diminish social standards both within its borders and without."

Scots political bloggers

Recognising the growing influence and relevance of political blogging, the European Parliament is arranging for political bloggers to visit the parliament and see at first hand how the institution works.

This month saw well-respected Scots bloggers from Better Nation (www.betternation.org) and Burdz Eye View (www.burdzeyevue.wordpress.com) come to Strasbourg.

The SNP's Ian Hudghton invited them to meet EFA MEPs and staff for a working lunch which one of them later wrote was 'a real highlight' of their visit to the Parliament.

EFA Group visit to Limburg

In late May, N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels invited the EFA Group on a fact-finding trip to her home region of Limburg which has seen substantial investment from EU structural funds in recent decades.

MEPs and staff visited a number of projects which have benefitted from European funding, helping transform the fortunes of this former coal mining area. In the space of two decades, with European help, GDP has risen substantially and is now much closer to the EU average.

Food security and price volatility

SNP MEP Alyn Smith, a member of Parliament's Agriculture Committee, supported European Commission proposals for greater transparency of market projections and stocks in the European Union. Smith called it an important step in the battle for food security and against price volatility.

The European Commission is talking about a data collection system at EU level for short term market projections on cereals, oilseeds, milk and milk products, and meat, with member states informing the Commission on the state of all private and public stocks, including the EU's own intervention stocks.

Alyn commented: "Securing adequate food production, and accessibility to food supplies for all, is one the major challenges of the coming century. We need look no further than this year's disastrous drought across much of Europe: Germany is expecting a drop in 7% of wheat production and France 11%. In a worst case scenario the UK's exportable surplus could be wiped out, and we would be reliant on increased imports from Australia and the Ukraine. Farm-gate prices might be rising, but rocketing input costs mean that the farmer does not necessarily see much benefit.

"That's why action is needed on an international scale. Europe should be leading and I'm glad that our Commissioner is voicing his concerns over these dangers. Transparent information on production and stocks is an absolute necessity for efficient food distribution and future production planning. Given that global

stocks are building up in countries like China, which we may well not always have access to, it's essential to ensure we have adequate reserves in Europe."

Independence for South Sudan

Earlier in June, the European Parliament debated the situation in Sudan following the recent independence referendum. The EU is providing some 350 million euros in aid to support the most vulnerable groups in Sudan with education, agriculture, food security and institution building.

The European Parliament approved a resolution setting out its expectations for independence by a large majority. N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels welcomed the move, commenting: *"This resolution clearly recognises the right of the Sudanese people to set their own course. The European Union has a duty not only to recognise that right, but to actively support it."*

Plight of the Tuareg in the Libyan Conflict

Corsican MEP François Alfonsi hosted a conference at the European Parliament in June that looked at the plight of the Tuareg and Berber people in Libya in the context of the current conflict in the country.

There are two Berber communities in Libya: the Tuareg people and the regions of Zwara and Adrar Nefussa which along with Misrata are putting up fierce resistance to troops who are encircling and bombarding them.

The Tuareg are indigenous habitants of the central Sahara and northern Sahel regions estimated to number some 6 million across five countries, namely southern Libya and Algeria, northern Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Speakers included Belkacem Lounes, President of the Amazigh World Congress, Moussa El Kony, former Libyan Consul General in Mali, and Abo Sata Shaban Ali Issa, Member of the Transitional National Council of Libya.

Junqueras elected mayor of large Catalan town

Esquerra MEP Oriol Junqueras has been elected mayor of the town of Sant Vicenç dels Horts near Barcelona following his party's impressive showing in the town in recent local elections. His party formed a coalition to govern the town, forcing the previous socialist/popular administration out of office.

The town of 28,000 people in the Barcelona metropolitan area is symbolically important as it is the largest town to be taken control of by Esquerra at local level for over seventy years.

N-VA launches new international website

The N-VA has launched a new website targeting European and international audiences in several

languages. This comes as a response to dramatically increased interest in the party since its spectacular election success in 2010. More information about the party is available in French www.n-va.be/fr, English www.n-va.be/en, and German www.n-va.be/de

The website includes a Who's Who, a set of FAQs, background information relating to N-VA's structure and history as well as an A-Z of Belgian politics.

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