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# e-fa: News Round-Up September 2011

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

Key issues over the past few weeks included:

- **Oriol elected party leader**
- **Plaid Conference**
- **Developments in the Basque peace process**
- **Welcome for transaction tax announcement**
- **SNP disappointment at fish quota proposals**
- **Call for ban on eggs from caged hens**
- **Strong backing for Palestinian statehood**
- **Europe's tourism policy needs more co-ordination and focus**
- **... and much more**

### Oriol elected party leader

Esquerra MEP Oriol Junqueras was elected President of his party in mid September with an overwhelming 92% of the vote. Junqueras was elected leader on a joint ticket with Marta Rovira, current Secretary General of the EFA political party who now becomes Secretary General of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. Junqueras succeeds Joan Puigercos who has stood down.

It is an exciting time for ERC as they move forward with new leadership to face the next major electoral challenge - Spanish state elections scheduled for 20 November. In his campaign for the leadership Oriol emphasised his commitment to a new pluralistic, open and collective style of leadership. He also talked about creating a more open and democratic party, making greater use of open primaries to select candidates.

For more information see www.junqueras.cat

### Plaid Conference

Plaid Cymru's annual conference in Llandudno was memorable for the farewell speech of party leader Ieuan Wyn Jones who is stepping down after ten years in the job. Party president Jill Evans gave a keynote speech which praised the contribution of party members and talked about the importance of local elections due to take place in Wales next May.

On the conference fringe, EFA Adviser Daniel Wylie spoke at a packed meeting on the theme of 'What has the EU ever done for you?' Daniel highlighted how much Wales misses out by not being a full member of the EU, in terms of support for areas such as agriculture, but also in terms of direct influence in Brussels.

**Welcome for transaction tax announcement**

Plaid MEP Jill Evans welcomed September's announcement by the European Commission of plans to introduce a financial transaction tax in the EU. It is hoped that such a tax will be able to curb harmful financial speculation as well as generating much needed revenue and improving public finances at a time of economic turbulence.

The tax was proposed by European Commission President José Manuel Barroso in his annual address to the European Parliament and it is estimated that such a tax could generate up to €55 billion a year.

Jill commented: *"It is only fair that the banks and financial sector which have received massive injections of public money now begin repaying that debt. This financial transaction tax is one way of doing that. It has the potential to clamp down on damaging speculation as well as raising much needed revenue for the public finances. We have seen Europe's public finances raided time and again in order to bail out the banks leaving governments short of cash to invest in public services. Why should people across Europe pay the price for bankers' greed?"*

**SNP disappointment at fish quota proposals**

The SNP's Ian Hudghton criticised the European Commission's recent proposals for fishing quotas for 2012. Amongst the proposals, the Commission called for a zero TAC on cod in west of Scotland waters - despite such a policy by definition increasing the amount of discards. They also proposed a 25 per cent increase in haddock catches in the same waters - despite scientific advice suggesting that a 410 per cent increase would be sustainable.

Ian commented: "*Just as the negotiations for reform of the CFP get under way, the Commission has served up a timely reminder of the total inadequacies of the current system. The Commission has ignored scientific advice and has made proposals which would see an increase in discards. The Commission has proposed a zero quota for cod off the Scottish west coast, in their words 'to stop fishing for cod'. A zero quota of course won't stop cod from being fished - it simply means that all cod caught will have to be discarded.*

*"Scotland's fishermen have worked hard to use innovative fishing techniques aimed at increased sustainability. These efforts have not been rewarded and instead the Commission are using the same old blunt and failed tools. These proposals merely highlight the failings of a centralised CFP - and increase the urgency for total reform and the return of real powers to Europe's fishing nations."*

**Call for ban on eggs from caged hens**

SNP MEP Alyn Smith called for an all-out ban on imports of eggs and egg products from laying hens housed in battery cages from next year. This is in response to reports that some Member States will not have completed the change-over to better cages by the deadline. Scotland's farmers have invested and complied with the legislation, meeting the challenge of the EU animal welfare legislation and the demands of consumers. Alyn has called for the European Commission to launch proceedings with heavy fines if there is a lack of compliance with all elements of the Directive.

Alyn said: *"Having had twelve years to get ready for this ban, it is inexcusable that we are getting so close to the deadline and still hearing reports that some Member States will have severe difficulties complying. I simply do not accept this, and want the Commission to throw the book at them.*

*"Our farmers in Scotland, especially the sheep boys right now, are well used to the Commission taking a firm line on EID, it is only right the Commission will be similarly tough with those member states who have not complied over battery cages. If the Commission does bottle it, then the UK government must be ready to implement a full ban on eggs and egg products produced illegally from 2012 and I have written to the London Minister stressing this point."*

**Strong backing for Palestinian statehood**

Jill Evans called on European Union member states to support international recognition of an independent Palestinian state. Jill spoke in a European Parliament debate on the situation in the Middle East, in the presence of Baroness Ashton, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. Jill backed Palestine's bid for full UN membership as an independent state, arguing that it could be a means of stopping illegal Israeli settlement building on Palestinian land. This would be a way of helping the resumption of peace talks towards a lasting two-state solution.

Jill said: *"As the United Nations considers Palestine's application for full state membership, I would join the many others across Europe and beyond in urging the EU member states to support the Palestinian request. Talks so far have failed. Of course, peace can only be achieved through negotiation. The recognition of the State of Palestine could lead to a freeze on the building of settlements in the West Bank and an end to the occupation - the way to ensure that further talks take place and that a two state solution will still be possible. The Palestinians have the right to be recognised as a state and that means they would have full rights to participate in all international agreements and treaties.*

*The Palestinian leadership has submitted its bid for full UN recognition, whilst the US administration has indicated its readiness to veto Palestine's application. The approach of the European Union is crucial in taking forward Palestine's bid for statehood, and for building a lasting and sustainable peace based on a two-state solution.*

**Developments in the Basque peace process**

François Alfonsi and Frieda Brepoels called on the EU to step up its support for the Basque peace process following recent developments. Both raised the issue in the European Parliament during September.

Hundreds of Basque political prisoners have indicated a willingness to sign the Gernika accord of 2010 which paves the way for a peaceful, democratic and lasting solution to the Basque conflict. The MEPs welcomed this as a major step forward in building a lasting peace, but called on the EU to play a greater role in encouraging the peace process. François Alfonsi also warned of the unacceptable threats to democracy within the EU with Spanish authorities pursuing Basque activists through the courts.

In his speech in Parliament François Alfonsi said: *"The ongoing situation in the Basque country leads me once again to raise at European level the behaviour of the Spanish state which is worrying for democracy. The European Parliament must make clear its disapproval of the Spanish state's policy with regard to the Basque Country, particularly now when the peace process shows such potential and which could as in Northern Ireland, lead to a lasting peace which is in the interests of the Basque people, of Spanish citizens and indeed of all citizens of Europe."*

Frieda Brepoels commented: *"The European Union must now engage in supporting the Basque peace process. I have repeatedly raised the issue at senior level, but the EU has so far preferred to remain silent. This is no longer acceptable, particularly following last weekend's announcement and the genuine possibilities to build a sustainable and lasting peace."*

**Europe's tourism policy needs more co-ordination and focus**

On World Tourism Day, the European Parliament considered a report which focussed on how to keep Europe as the world's number one tourist destination. N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels was her group's shadow rapporteur on the issue. Frieda welcomed the fact that tourism is now on the European agenda.

Frieda commented: *"The tourism sector accounts for some 10 million jobs in Europe and generates around 5% of Europe's GDP. In Flanders, the industry is responsible for 5% of jobs and is an important motor for our economy. It's vital that Europe thinks through how to further strengthen the competitiveness of the tourism sector with particular attention paid to SMEs.*

The new policy framework for tourism has come about based on the new article 195 of the Lisbon Treaty which allows for Europe to supplement member states' tourism policy in a manner which adds value. Europe is not allowed to take over tourism policy from the member states, indeed harmonisation in this field is ruled out.

**Petition against development in rural Wales**

Plaid's Jill Evans welcomed the announcement that the petition by Bodelwyddan Action Group to the European Parliament has been declared admissible and the European Commission has been asked to look into the matter.

The petition was presented by Jill in May 2011. It is part of the ongoing campaign against the building of up to 2,000 new houses in Bodelwyddan. Jill has commissioned research into the community and linguistic impact of the development and has had several meetings with the residents.

She said: *"I am pleased that the deep concerns of the residents have been recognised and that these issues will be looked into by the European Commission. Proposed developments in communities should be based on local need. They should also be planned in consultation with the residents of those communities and must be sustainable, both in environmental terms and in terms of their impact on language and society. I look forward to welcoming representatives of the Action Group to Brussels to put their case to the Petitions Committee."*

**EFA MEPs seek justice for Western Sahara**

EFA MEPs Frieda Brepoels, Alyn Smith and Jill Evans joined others in trying to force a full legal ruling from the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on the validity of the EU's fisheries agreement with Morocco over the occupied territory of Western Sahara.

The EU Commission is in the process of renewing the EU-Morocco fisheries agreement which gives the EU the right to fish in Western Saharan waters. EFA MEPs and others tried to have this referred to the European Court of Justice with the aim of ultimately ensuring that the agreement is revised. Unfortunately they were unable to secure a majority of MEPs in favour.

Frieda Brepoels said: *"This particular agreement is the most controversial of the EU's fisheries agreements and we felt it vital that it should be referred to the ECJ so that the legal uncertainties might be cleared up. I regret that this has not happened."*

Jill Evans said: *"I am sorry to see that so many Conservative and Socialist MEPs failed to support us on this. Western Sahara is recognised by the UN as a non-self-governing territory therefore it is a violation of international law that the Moroccan government and the EU are exploiting Western Sahara resources in this way. The agreement's compatibility with international law is highly questionable and it was a mistake for the Parliament to conclude this agreement without first seeking legal clarity."*

Alyn Smith said: *"It has been a huge frustration for me for years that we MEPs have been legally unable to do much to actually help the people of Western Sahara, where the EU has maintained breathtaking double standards. The Lisbon Treaty gave us some new powers and I am proud that 77 of us had the gumption to use them to trigger a formal vote on the floor of the house."*

The motion to refer the agreement to the European Court of Justice was rejected with 221 votes in favour and 302 against.

**SNP calls for more EU action to tackle food waste**

Speaking on European Food Safety Day, SNP MEP Ian Hudghton called for the EU to do more to tackle the significant problem of food waste. It is estimated that across Europe around 89 million tonnes of food goes to waste every year and this is expected to rise to 129 million tonnes by the end of the decade. The European Commission has decided to make tackling food waste the focus of this year's Food Safety Day in the hope of getting to grips with this growing problem.

Ian praised the Scottish Government's initiatives to deal with the issue and invited the European Commissioner to visit and see local initiatives for himself. The Scottish Government is funding a £4million Food Waste Programme to encourage councils and businesses to reduce food waste. One scheme to benefit from the funding was sees kerbside food waste collections being rolled out to 140,000 households in Edinburgh. The food collected will be recycled and turned into green energy.

In Scotland wasted food costs each household an average of £430 a year, with an estimated 341,000 tonnes being thrown away. A report earlier this year estimated that the hospitality sector in Scotland alone could save £64m a year by tackling food waste.

Commenting, Ian said: *"Once again we see Scotland leading the way with these ambitious plans to reduce food waste, produce green energy, and move towards making Scotland a zero waste society. I'm very pleased that the European Commission is taking the issue seriously by focussing on food waste during this year's Food Safety Day. If Europe's Health Commissioner would like to visit Scotland, I'm sure he'd be more than welcome to see for himself our ambitious plans to deal with this."*

**SNP welcomes European rejection of oil moratorium**

SNP MEPs Ian Hudghton and Alyn Smith welcomed a vote in the European Parliament which rejected

calls for a moratorium on deep-sea oil exploration. The vote was on a report relating to the safety of offshore oil and gas activities. There had previously been calls in the European Parliament for a ban on deep-sea oil drilling following the Gulf of Mexico disaster. But the vote in the European Parliament saw such a ban being described in the report as "a disproportionate reaction".

Ian commented: *"This summer's oil leak in the North Sea highlights the need to enforce high standards in the offshore sector. Scotland's marine environment as well as the safety of offshore workers require oil companies to be held to account. Nevertheless, calls for a ban on deep-sea oil exploration were wholly disproportionate. Scotland's oil industry has already been hit hard by Westminster using it as a cash cow - unnecessary interference from the EU would only have compounded matters."*

Alyn said: *"I am pleased that it is clear from this vote that we have won the argument. This final report has taken a proportionate, sensible approach to this important subject, and its tone is markedly more reasonable than some of the comments we have seen emanating from this building in the past. The drilling activities that take place in EU waters do not operate in the same way as those that take place in the Gulf of Mexico, and to suggest they do is mischievous in the extreme. Nobody can afford to be complacent but our safety regime is thorough. It is important to keep these things in constant review, but completely halting new authorisations is not in any way a proportionate or measured response."*

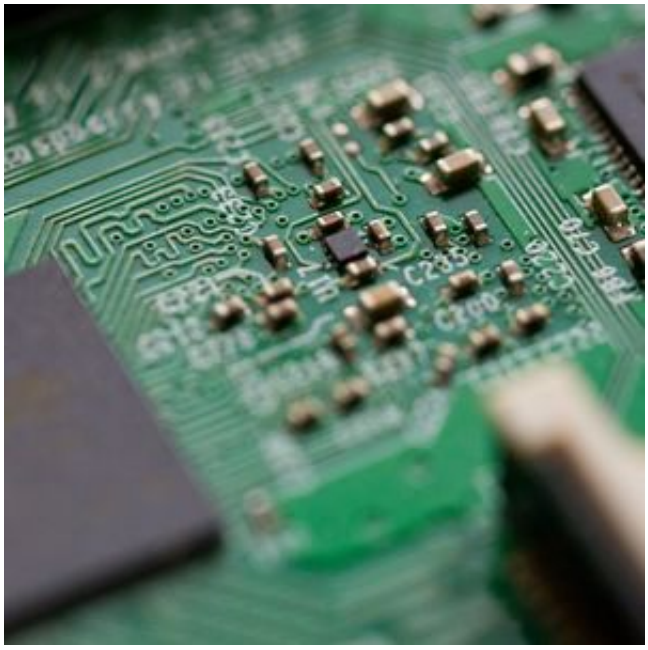
**Fair trade**

MEPs this month backed a resolution calling for a new EU trade policy in the framework of the 2020 strategy. The report also emphasises the importance of free and fair trade. Frieda Brepoels is a member of the European Parliament's Fairtrade Workgroup. She wants to see Fairtrade play a greater role in international trade.

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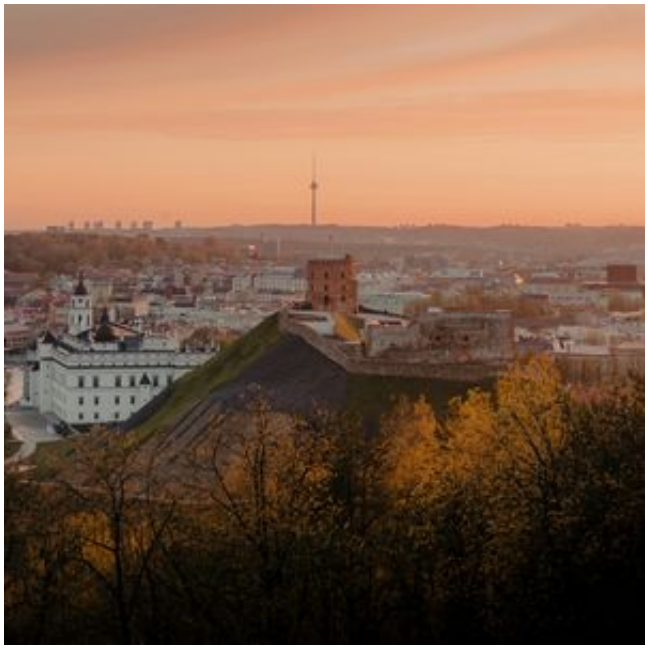
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**Responsible MEPs**



Jill Evans

Member



Ian Hudghton

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Heather Anderson

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Steven Cornelius

EFA Press, Communications & Campaigns Officer

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