

**March (1)'09**

## **Strasbourg Round-Up**

### **Greener, cheaper cars**

Months of hard work for Gary Tittle, in his role as Labour's chief negotiator on a new EU car law, finally paid off at the first of two week-long Strasbourg plenaries, scheduled for March. MEPs approved the new regulations, which will boost car safety, reduce CO2 emissions and cut costs for consumers across the EU by improving fuel consumption. In addition, they will also lead to a reduction in traffic noise, which recent studies have linked to ill-health.

All this will be achieved by setting new standards for tyres and introducing rules which will make new safety features compulsory. These include tyre pressure monitoring systems for passenger cars, as well as advanced emergency braking and lane departure warning systems for lorries.

Speaking after the measures had been voted through, Gary said: "These laws may be very technical, but that doesn't make them any less important. The new rules will save lives and help protect the environment, but at the same time, cut costs for drivers as they see their petrol bills go down".

### **Tories' true eurosceptic colours**

Gary accused the Tories of showing their true colours yet again by putting their blind euro-scepticism before promoting the interests of the people they one day hope to serve. Tory Deputy Leader, William Hague, was at the Strasbourg plenary to meet with the leader of the European People's Party (EPP), the largest political group in the European Parliament. Hague confirmed that the Conservatives intended to abandon the centre-right EPP – and the political mainstream – by forming their own group after the June European elections.

Commenting on the announcement, Gary said that everyone in the Parliament knew this would do the Tories – and with them, the people of Britain – no favours. "If you are not part of a big political group, you are less likely to be able to speak in debates and influence the outcome of votes," he added. "Even worse, the Tories may well end up having to associate themselves with a group of right-wing extremists. Even if they claim they don't want to, they could easily have no other choice at the end of the day."

### **European day for the victims of terrorism**

The European Parliament marked the European day for victims of terrorism at this plenary session. This sombre occasion was made even more poignant because it coincided with the fifth anniversary of the Madrid bombings that left 191 dead and nearly 2000 injured. After the recent attacks in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka, the Parliament's President, Hans-Gert Pöttering talked of the suffering of the victims, describing terrorism as "a crime that can never be justified".

Coming from a region that had experienced more than its share of terrorist outrages over the years, Gary said that the pain and suffering caused have untold effects for many years to come after the attacks. It is therefore entirely appropriate that Europeans show their solidarity for those who have suffered and are still suffering", he added.

### **Targeting the texting trap**

When you get back from holiday, the last thing you need is a huge phone bill clocked up when calling, texting or using the internet on your mobile from abroad. This month in Strasbourg, MEPs on the Industry Committee voted to update the existing EU rules which already help to keep phone call costs down. In future, texts, data roaming and per second billing will be covered by the revised regulations. That means it could cost as little as 9p to send a text from abroad. The

recommendations also include measures to stop phone companies rounding up phone call charges to the nearest minute, instead of paying for exactly what you use.

Welcoming the decision as yet another “victory for consumers” in Europe, Gary said: “The EU caps on call charges may already be in place, but we do need to update our rules to make sure consumers aren’t hit by the latest wheezes from companies trying to squeeze even more money out of them. This vote is an important first step in that updating process. It’s now up to all the 27 EU member states to endorse what MEPs have decided”.

## **Green economy**

The recession has started to bite hard across the EU. Eurozone unemployment has already reached 8.2% and is set to rise further. Against such a grim economic background, MEPs discussed how to set the EU on the road to recovery. Many favoured the creation of green jobs, including the renovation of energy inefficient houses and investing in green transport like trains. Such moves would not only help the economy but also improve the environment at the same time.

The European Economic Recovery Plan, announced late last year, will be a big step towards this with the EU itself, the 27 member states and the European Investment Bank all joining forces to provide a €200bn stimulus. The EU element of the package will focus on loans to small businesses, improving energy networks, creating wind farms and making money available for the development of innovative carbon capture and storage plants. Gary said: "The challenge now is to make sure the money is spent on time so that it has a real impact when we need it most. That time is now”.

## **Small businesses**

As well as opening up credit lines for small and medium sized businesses, MEPs also discussed a series of further measures designed to help them survive the economic downturn. These include steps to cut unnecessary red tape and make it easier for companies to do business in different countries. Gary welcomed the measures, but complained that they did not go far enough.

"Small businesses are vital to the economy and they are bearing the brunt of the current difficulties", he said. “We often talk about better regulation, but we really need legislation that is proportional to the problems we are dealing with. Often EU law focuses on big businesses. Now is the time to think about the specific needs of small business too, in terms of funding, market access and legislation”.

## **And Finally...**

Yet again UKIP showed how much they really care about their fellow human beings - by voting against EU Solidarity Fund money for Romania. Last summer, the country experienced its worst flooding in decades, causing €470 million worth of damage. Most MEPs backed the €11million EU donation towards the repair bill. But in their usual spirit of goodwill towards no-one but themselves, UKIP MEPs voted against. Yet this time last year, they were all in favour of giving EU money to the UK after our floods. Perhaps they simply don't understand the meaning of the word ‘solidarity’!

**Gary Titley MEP**

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