

## **Strasbourg Round-Up**

### **Energy Package**

Gary Titley has long held the view that one of the biggest weaknesses in the European single market has been the absence of a coordinated energy policy. That is why he welcomed this month's vote in favour of a new energy package which should improve the competitiveness of energy companies. They will now have to separate the supply and production of energy from transmission and distribution. Ultimately this should bring down gas and electricity bills.

The new package will give consumers more rights. They will be able to switch gas and electricity suppliers within a three week time frame and without incurring any charges, demand compensation for poor service and be provided with information on their levels of gas and electricity consumption. Households and small businesses are also guaranteed access to electricity at reasonable prices. And thanks to the efforts of Labour's Eluned Morgan, MEPs approved an action plan to tackle energy poverty at EU level.

Addressing the Parliament, Gary said: "National energy policies have led Europe to a dead-end with an extreme dependence on expensive imported fossil fuels. Currently there is neither a European energy grid nor a strategic energy storage policy. As a matter of urgency we must diversify our energy supply, reduce consumption, encourage low carbon energy and establish a stable competitive internal market. This energy package is an important step in that direction."

### **Tyre Labelling**

Earlier this year, the European Parliament approved a new regulation that will introduce new standards for tyres which are designed to improve fuel efficiency and safety, as well as reduce tyre noise (see Strasbourg Round-Up March (1) '09). This month in Strasbourg MEPs backed this up with a new scheme for tyre labelling that will provide consumers with clear information about the tyres they are buying so that they can make an informed choice. The label could also help save money at the petrol pump by indicating what impact the tyre will have on a vehicle's fuel consumption.

### **Cross-border Healthcare**

Over the years, the Tories have gained a notorious reputation for saying one thing then doing another and this month's vote on cross-border healthcare was a classic example. David Cameron's MEPs say they want to put people first and maintain the quality of our NHS. But when push came to shove, they voted against crucial measures to ensure that new rules will not jeopardise the care the NHS is able to provide to us.

The directive in question sets out the rules that apply to people who choose to have treatment in an EU country other than their own. At the moment, this sort of treatment is possible, but the rules on who pays for what and when it can happen are not at all clear. Labour MEPs called for measures to make sure patients were referred by the NHS before they go abroad for treatment, in order to prevent NHS money being spent abroad when it doesn't need to be. The Tories voted this down, believing it's more important for the wealthy to be allowed to fly wherever they want for treatment, whilst people back home have to pick up the tab.

Speaking later, Gary said: "This directive is certainly not what the doctor ordered, thanks to the Tories. The only saving grace is that not many people should be affected – last year there were

just 552 cases in the UK and I doubt that figure will change very much. However, we still need to have the rules in place”.

Gary was at pains to stress that this was an entirely separate issue from the European Health Card, which will continue to give holiday-makers the same health cover as local residents receive. He reminded people that it was still always important to take out travel insurance when they go abroad as the health card only covers certain parts of their treatment.

## **Copyright Extension**

There has been a lot of debate recently over whether to extend copyright for musicians. As things stand at present, 50 years after a song was originally recorded, anyone has the right to use the music for whatever purpose they want. That could mean, for example, in less than three years' time the BNP taking a Beatles' song and adopting it as their theme tune.

The new directive will allow musicians to continue to make money from their music for a further 20 years beyond the current 50. This could have a huge impact on the lives of some musicians. Not everyone is a Paul McCartney or a Cliff Richard – many lesser known musicians depend on royalties to keep themselves afloat in later life. The new rules will also recognise the contribution of session musicians who would previously just have had a flat fee, but will now be able to make royalties for 20 years.

Other provisions in the directive include a “use it or lose it” clause to stop record companies getting away with keeping old music in the archives and a musicians' fund which record companies will have to pay into. Commenting on the changes, Gary said: “Not everyone will agree with the outcome, but there are some good provisions in this directive that will certainly help lesser-known musicians get by.”

## **And Finally...**

This was the last but one Strasbourg session before the European Elections on 4<sup>th</sup> June. So there was a lot on the agenda as MEPs tried to finalise all the work they've been doing over the last five years. This led to an unusually long three hour voting session at lunchtime on Thursday for MEPs. Most were patient, understanding the importance of what they were voting on. But one Tory member couldn't wait to satisfy his rumbling stomach. Edward McMillan-Scott held up proceedings to ask the Vice-President calling the votes to get a move on! To partly plagiarise another Macmillan, Harold, priorities dear boy, priorities.

**Gary Titley MEP**

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