

## **Strasbourg Round-Up**

### **Gaza**

The international news at the start of 2009 has been dominated by the crisis in Gaza and Russia's decision to cut off gas supplies to Ukraine at the coldest time of year. It was no different in the European Parliament at the January plenary session, with emergency debates taking place on these two very serious issues.

On Gaza, the Parliament adopted a resolution calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, including a halt to rocket attacks by Hamas on Israel and the end of Israel's military action in Gaza. Deploring the humanitarian crisis that the conflict had caused, MEPs called for a continuous and unimpeded flow of aid to the Gaza Strip. They also wanted a negotiated truce to be guaranteed by the presence of multinational peacekeepers and for the smuggling of illicit arms to be stopped.

Speaking after the emergency debate, Gary Titley said: *"We are all shocked by the terrible situation in the Gaza Strip, made all the worse by the stories of suffering of innocent men, women and particularly children. We must do everything we can to help and this starts with finding a way to reach a lasting ceasefire as a matter of urgency"*.

### **Gas**

When Russia halted the supply of gas to Ukraine on 1<sup>st</sup> January, the EU immediately sprung into action – and with good reason. Russia supplies 42% of the EU's imported gas, 90% of which travels through the Ukraine. Close that pipeline and EU countries suffer, especially the likes of Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, who are almost totally dependent on Russian gas in the middle of one of the harshest winters in years.

The dispute is a throw-back to the Soviet era. As one of the satellite states before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Ukraine enjoyed very low prices for gas. Moreover, even after the Cold War ended, the subsidies continued and it never paid the full market price for gas.

Consequently, when the Russians announced they wanted to raise the price from the beginning of this year, the Ukrainians said they could not afford the increase. Eventually, negotiations broke down and the gas supply was stopped. In the end, the EU stepped in and helped to put together a deal which should not only start to get the gas flowing again but also reduce the risk of further interruptions of supplies to EU member countries in the future.

### **Gary last day...**

Gary's six years as Labour's Leader in Europe finally came to an end this month in Strasbourg, when Labour MEPs elected East Midlands MEP Glenis Willmott to succeed him. Glenis will be the first woman in 16 years to take up the post, and follows in the footsteps of the former Cabinet Minister and North West MEP, the legendary Barbara Castle.

Welcoming Glenis Willmott's election, Gary said: *"She will do a fantastic job. She's already earned her spurs in the European Parliament sitting on the Environment Committee and serving as Labour whip. On top of that, she brings loads of previous work experience to the position, firstly as a medical scientist and, more recently, as a senior trade union officer with the GMB trades union."*

Prime Minister Gordon Brown also added his congratulations. He said: *"Glenis will provide excellent leadership of the EPLP as they continue to work hard for a progressive future for the EU. I would also like to pay tribute to the outstanding work done by Gary Titley who has held the post of EPLP Leader for the last six years."*

## **Pesticides**

It is always difficult trying to achieve the right balance between protecting consumers from health risks, while making sure that there are not too many unintended, negative consequences. This was exactly the problem MEPs faced with this month's vote on a new pesticides law. Some feared food prices would go up as a result of the new legislation, whilst others were worried that the measures did not go far enough, given how dangerous some pesticides can be.

In the end, Labour MEPs decided to vote against the proposals, on the basis that not enough had been done to find out the real impact of the new rules. But the measure still won parliamentary backing. However, whilst this means that the new rules are now likely to come into force, it will not be until 2015. Moreover, Labour MEPs ensured that the UK will have some flexibility in setting its own rules on individual pesticides, if the authorities think they are necessary to protect crops.

Speaking after the vote, Gary said: *"The new system is not going to be perfect. But it will go a long way towards protecting people from pesticides which can sometimes be really dangerous. At the same time, it's not all doom and gloom for farmers, because the UK will be able to make its own rules when necessary."*

## **Euro's 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

*"As a currency, it may have started as the ugly duckling in the money markets, but it's now a fully grown swan, protecting its members against the worst of the financial crisis."* That was Gary's message as the European Single Currency celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. The occasion was marked by a special debate in Strasbourg with several high profile European figures addressing MEPs. For his part, the President of the European Central Bank, Jean Claude Trichet, said that the euro had brought economic stability to Europe over the last decade.

## **And Finally...**

1<sup>st</sup> January 2009 marked the beginning of the Czech Republic's 6-month Presidency of the European Union. In a parting shot as Labour Leader, Gary gave a rousing speech to MEPs, criticising the lack of leadership shown by the Czechs so far. He complained that they had been forced to withdraw statements they had made on the crisis in Gaza; they had criticised the EU's climate change package as a "silly luxury" and, to top it off, they had commissioned a work of art for the European Council Building in Brussels to celebrate their Presidency which only managed to offend everyone, especially the Bulgarians, who were represented as Turkish toilets. In a final twist of the knife, Gary concluded: *"The Czech Presidency so far has just given us all the more reason to have a full time President of the European Council."*

**Gary Titley MEP**

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