

Strasbourg Round-Up

Business as usual – In Strasbourg!

It was not just the global financial crisis wiping the smile off MEPs' faces this month. It was also the thought of being back in Strasbourg for the October plenary session, following completion of repairs to the main debating chamber's roof. Hard though that was for many MEPs to stomach, not least Labour Leader Gary Tittley, they were soon down to business as usual, dealing with one of the busiest parliamentary agendas of the year.

Agency Workers

In a landmark decision this month, the European Parliament finally gave its seal of approval to the Temporary and Agency Workers' Directive. Labour MEPs have been championing the rights of temporary and agency workers for years. The new directive will give temporary and agency workers the same rights as full time workers after twelve weeks in a job.

This should finally put an end to the days when cowboy bosses thought they could get away with treating people badly simply because there were on a short term contract. Speaking after the vote, Gary said: *"It just goes to show that even though negotiations with business leaders were tough, it was worth sticking to our guns because we got the right result."*

Global Financial Crisis

MEPs welcomed the coordinated action taken by the European Commission and member state governments to try to stave off the worst of the current global financial crisis, which is already leading to significant job losses across the EU. But they warned that a stronger regulatory system needed to be put in place to prevent "casino capitalism" getting the chance to wreak similar havoc again. Gary said: *"Labour MEPs have long been pressing for closer supervision and better regulation of the financial systems. With all the tax payers' money being used to rescue the banks and prop up the economy, it is only right that it is accompanied by greater scrutiny and stricter rules."*

Plaudits for new UK Commissioner

After Prime Minister Gordon Brown recalled Peter Mandelson from Brussels to head up the Department for Business and Enterprise, as part of his government reshuffle, someone capable was needed to take over his job in the European Commission. Arguably one of the most important trade negotiators on the world stage, the EU Commissioner for trade certainly needs to know their stuff. That's why Gary was delighted when Baroness Ashton, the highly experienced former Leader of the House of Lords, was asked to take up the post.

As part of the vetting process for all new Commissioners, Cathy Ashton appeared before the European Parliament's Trade and Development Committees. Confounding many of those who were initially sceptical about her appointment, she gave a sterling performance during an exhausting three hour hearing. Despite some Tory MEPs trying to make mischief, she subsequently won the overwhelmingly endorsement of MEPs when the final vote was taken.

After her appointment was confirmed, Gary said: *"It's good to know the EU trade portfolio is in such safe and capable hands. With the urgent need to kick start the world trade talks, the ongoing debates about Economic Partnership Agreements with developing countries and trying to hold back the mounting tide of protectionism, Cathy's negotiating skills will be a big plus."*

Crack-down on Timeshare Touts

For too long, unsuspecting British holiday-makers in continental Europe have been the victims of holiday clubs and timeshare touts who have exploited loopholes in existing timeshare laws. However a new law, approved by MEPs in Strasbourg this month, will crack down on such practices. It will extend consumers' rights across all kinds of timeshare purchases, sales and exchanges, from holidays and cruise boats, to caravans and 'discount holiday clubs'. It will also bring greater transparency by forcing the timeshare industry to give would-be customers more information in their choice of language, before they sign contracts.

The move has been welcomed by both consumer groups as well as the legitimate timeshare industry in Europe, whose image is seriously tarnished by rogue operators. And it is especially good news for the British, who make up a third of the European timeshare market. *"Over the years, I have dealt with countless numbers of constituents who have fallen foul of the timeshare sharks,"* said Gary. *"But, thanks to this new law, Brits abroad will be able to make timeshare deals with greater confidence and security than ever before".*

EU 2009 Budget

This month MEPs voted on the EU's budget for 2009. Its priorities are to make funding available to combat climate change, to promote jobs and economic growth and to improve social protection. The Parliament has also focused on providing money for reconstruction and development in Palestine, Kosovo, Georgia and Afghanistan.

This year a hot topic has been looking for ways to finance the €1bn food facility recently promised by the Council of Ministers and the Commission, which will help farmers in developing countries to increase production in the wake of high global food prices. The Parliament and Finance Ministers from the 27 EU member countries will now go on to broker a deal on the budget as a whole next month, before it goes back to the Parliament for a final vote in December.

And Finally...

MEPs have put the brakes on plans to introduce body scanners as an airport security measure. They fear that the right to privacy and dignity would be jeopardised, because the scans are the equivalent of a "virtual strip search". They have now asked the Commission to conduct a full study in to the impact of these body scanners on fundamental rights, before they consider putting them into action. Luckily for some of us, this means it may be a little while before the full repercussions of that extra helping of Christmas pud or other festive season indulgences show up on screen before we board a plane.....

Gary Titley MEP
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