

Conservative MEP Monthly Report – January 2009

Czech EU Presidency launched

In January, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek visited the European Parliament to present his programme for the Czech EU Presidency in the first half of 2009. Mr Topolánek is also leader of the ODS Party which sits as a member of the European Democrats in the European Parliament alongside the British Conservatives. Prime Minister Topolánek told the Parliament his key priorities would be “the three ‘E’s’: Economy, Energy and Europe in the world” and said the motto of the Presidency would be a ‘Europe without barriers’.

Responding in the debate, Timothy Kirkhope MEP, Leader of the Conservatives in the European Parliament, said that assuming the EU Presidency was a historic moment for the Czech Republic and congratulated Mr Topolánek on his handling of the two major crises that had erupted in early January: the Russia/Ukraine gas crisis and the war in Gaza. He added: “I know we can rely on you, Prime Minister, to establish a good working relationship with President Obama. I know you share my view that the future of the transatlantic alliance is vital to our security and prosperity. We look to you to ensure that this most crucial of relationships is reinvigorated in the months ahead.”

Mr Kirkhope also highlighted the economic crisis welcoming the fact that the Czech Presidency seemed well aware of the need for sensible measures to ensure that the economic slowdown is tackled and reversed. He also praised the Czech's emphasis on the importance of not allowing the economic crisis to make life even more difficult for business and industry by imposing new and heavy-handed regulation. He said: “You have spoken rightly of mobilising those countries who share your liberal economic outlook in Europe to oppose protectionism at this time. What we need to do is ensure that any regulatory changes are proportionate and sensible.”

Concern over EU pesticides ban

The European Parliament has voted for far-reaching restrictions on plant protection products, including a ban on many commonly-used pesticides, despite a concerted effort by Conservative MEPs to achieve a more balanced approach. Robert Sturdy, a Conservative member of the European Parliament's Environment Committee, warned that the vote reflected an over-zealous approach which could reduce yields of a number of foods (including carrots, cereals, potatoes, onions and parsnips) and thus push up prices for consumers, without achieving any clear or proven benefits to the environment or human health. He said: “We do need robust restrictions on pesticide use but it should be based on sound science, rather than on the whim of politicians. MEPs have failed to see pesticides as necessary tools in maintaining our crops. Many of the products on the market today are safe when used correctly, and have been around for years.” Conservative MEPs were however able to ensure that the draft legislation contains the possibility of a five year derogation (which may be extended) while research and development work is carried out on replacement products for those that will be banned by the Directive.

Conservatives pledge to fight Fisheries plans

Conservative MEPs have pledged to oppose plans to bring recreational fishing under the direct control of the EU Common Fisheries Policy. The European Commission has put forward a regulation that would require recreational fishermen to register their boats (as opposed to just professional fishermen as at present) and whatever they catch would be counted against the national fisheries quota. Struan Stevenson MEP, Conservative Fisheries Spokesman, said: “Recreational fishing is a simple pleasure that would become a bureaucratic nightmare if these plans become law. This kind of draconian approach would do very little to assist in the recovery of fish stocks,

yet it will cause a great deal of damage to tourism and to fishing as a sport. If the European Union is serious about acting to protect fish stocks in the EU, it should launch a fundamental overhaul of the CFP, not target an ancient hobby.”

Spanish property ‘land-grab’ condemned

Victims of so-called ‘Valencian land-grabs’ visited the European Parliament in Brussels in January to set out their case to the European Parliament’s Petitions Committee. Thanks to provisions in local law, thousands of properties in Spain have been demolished without compensation for their owners - many of whom are British expats. Members of the European Parliament’s Petitions Committee have been highlighting this scandal for several years. Sir Robert Atkins MEP, who has been at the forefront of the campaign to scrap the land-grab law and provide justice for those affected, said: “The continuing failure by the Spanish authorities of all persuasions to address this situation is a scandal. I have been beset by British expatriates who have suffered severe financial and emotional trauma and citizens from many other countries are in the same position. The Petitions Committee has received hundreds of petitions representing thousands of residents. Their plight simply cannot be allowed to go on. There is considerable support for action across all parties and all EU countries. We all demand immediate action from Spanish Regional and National Governments.”

Call for a new approach on mobile ‘roaming’

In Brussels in early January, the European Parliament held a debate on the European Commission’s proposals to cut prices for consumers who send texts or download data when they are abroad. The Commission has proposed a regulation establishing a regime of price caps, but Conservative MEP Syed Kamall has called for an alternative approach. He said: “We need to create an environment that brings prices down for everybody, and often price caps and blunt regulation have unintended consequences. Regulation should always be an absolute last resort, particularly when the technology and applications for mobile phone data are still developing at a fast pace. I have

proposed the parliament rejects the price-cap approach, not least because the Commission has not provided a comprehensive impact assessment. We should explore if there are alternative ways to reduce prices and provide much clearer information to consumers, without clumsy interference.”

Conservatives reject Euro call

In January, the European Parliament held a series of debates to mark the tenth anniversary of the launch of the Euro. Timothy Kirkhope MEP underlined Conservative opposition to British membership of the currency. He said: “It is not in Britain’s interest for the Euro to fail, but it would also not be in our interests to sign up to it either. The Pound’s recent fall in value in no way strengthens the case for Britain to give up our currency. The weak Pound is a side-effect of Labour’s recession and a weak economy. Just because our own government has lost control of the British economy, that does not justify handing over control to the EU.”

New Works Councils Directive agreed

The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers have reached agreement on a revision of the Directive on Works Councils. Conservative MEP Philip Bushill-Matthews was Parliament’s *rapporteur* on this important dossier. He commented: “Although Conservatives do not believe there needs to be such a Directive, the fact is it already exists and was due to be revised. The Socialists were very keen to take over this dossier to build in more rights for Trade Unions, which is why I was so keen to take control myself instead!” A few minor revisions to the Directive were agreed, and Business Europe (the European association of industries and employers which includes the CBI) said they were very happy and relieved at the outcome.

The European Parliament next meets in plenary on 2-5 February in Strasbourg. The agenda includes debates on Energy Policy, the closure of the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, Kosovo, consular protection and the future of EU policy on Climate Change.