

## Conservative MEP Monthly Report – February 2009

### EU confirms UK debt is out of control

In mid-February, the European Commission published a damning [report](#) on Britain's national finances. It said that Britain needed a "more ambitious" effort to reduce its record levels of public debt in the medium term. Conservative Leader in the European Parliament, [Timothy Kirkhope MEP](#), said the warning is further evidence that British families will be saddled with Gordon Brown's debt for years to come.

"Public debt in Britain was already close to breaching EU rules when our economy was growing. Even without the stimulus package and bank debts being added to the government's balance sheet, it was unlikely we would have stayed within the rules in the event of a downturn. Labour played fast and loose with our public debt in the good times and now we are seeing the consequences," he said.

Mr Kirkhope added that the EU anti-protectionism summit, called at short notice in mid-February by the Czech EU Presidency, had to deliver positive action as well as sentiment. He said: "This is a real test of leadership in the EU. Of course, we can understand why there will be calls for EU countries to erect barriers to each other and to the rest of the world, but our leaders must stand firm. A summit that sends out an anti-protectionist message to the rest of the world is a first step, but words and rhetoric must be backed up with action. If the EU and the USA give up on free trade and open markets, the rest of the world will follow and a downward spiral of economic nationalism will result."

### Labour MEPs vote for 'EU Army'

Labour and Liberal Democrat MEPs have supported proposals that amount to a blueprint for a European army. A [report](#) adopted by the European Parliament in February stated that the EU should seek "strategic autonomy through a strong and effective foreign, security and

defence policy" and that "a common defence policy in Europe requires an integrated European Armed Force which consequently needs to be equipped with common weapon systems." Conservative MEPs voted against the report. [Geoffrey Van Orden MEP](#), Conservative Defence Spokesman and former Brigadier-General warned that British ministers were "in denial, they are sleepwalking towards a European army and seem to have little awareness of what is going on."

### MEPs adopt tough stance on climate change

In February, the European Parliament adopted a report calling on the EU to lead other developed nations with solid action to back up its words on tackling climate change. The European Parliament's Special Committee on Climate Change made a number of detailed recommendations which are based on hearings with experts and scientific studies. It calls for the EU, and other industrialised countries, to reduce CO2 emissions by 80% by 2050 compared to 1990 levels and proposes that all new buildings should be energy neutral after 2020. Conservative Environment Spokesman [John Bowis MEP](#), who served on the Committee, said: "The EU has led by example with the climate change package but only our actions will encourage other industrial countries to follow suit. We need to make it clear to all countries that reducing emissions can be good for growing an economy and turning it green. However, this will only work if we provide incentives for our businesses to invest in green technologies and practices."

### Sheep tagging campaign continues

A Conservative campaign to halt the imposition of mandatory electronic tagging of all sheep in Europe from 1 January 2010 has been making good progress. Over forty MEPs have signed a resolution calling for the new tagging

arrangements to be voluntary, which Conservative Agriculture Spokesman [Neil Parish MEP](#) delivered to the European Commission in February. The tags come at a cost of £1.50 each which is only slightly less than the market value of the animal. The UK, with over 30 million sheep, is likely to be the most affected by the new rules, although farmers and farming organisations around Europe have expressed grave concerns.

Mr Parish said: “We have been campaigning for over a year to make the system voluntary yet the Commission always refers back to two decisions in the Council of Ministers where the British government voted to introduce the scheme. Electronically tagging sheep is not only hugely expensive, but has not been shown to be reliable or to improve animal health and traceability. Until the cost becomes more manageable and the systems more reliable, it is sheer folly to continue down the path of forcing every farmer to electronically tag every single sheep.”

### **MEPs demand fair energy bills for all**

Conservative MEPs have welcomed the [announcement](#) of an investigation by the European Commission into energy prices in Europe. The investigation will try to establish why price rises are so high and whether unfair commercial practices, billing or a reticence to switch suppliers are making the situation worse. Conservative Consumer Affairs Spokesman [Malcolm Harbour MEP](#) said: “Consumers are becoming incredibly frustrated that their bills seem to be going up yet their level of service is going down. One of the European Commission's main roles is to ensure market forces serve the interests of consumers. Full undistorted competition leads to lower prices for all and if any energy companies are shown to be blocking competition, the Commission must act decisively.”

### **MEPs vote for VAT flexibility**

In February, the European Parliament supported [proposals](#) to extend the facility which allows governments more flexibility to set VAT rates on locally-provided and labour-intensive

services. The proposals allow governments to reduce the rate of VAT to five percent on services such as building renovations, cleaning, hairdressing, restaurants and gardening, although the British Government has never taken advantage of this facility.

Conservative MEP [John Purvis](#), Vice-Chairman of the European Parliament's Economic Affairs Committee, said: “The blanket two and a half per cent VAT cut in the UK has been ineffective in stimulating our economy, but governments should use the freedom to decide if a targeted VAT cut is the best option for their economies. Targeted VAT reductions will be far more affordable and effective than the Government's current across-the-board cut.”

### **Release of Egyptian politician welcomed**

Conservative Vice-President of the European Parliament [Edward McMillan-Scott MEP](#), welcomed the release from prison in February of former Egyptian Presidential candidate Ayman Nour. Mr McMillan-Scott is a long-standing campaigner for the political freedom of Mr Nour and was instrumental in securing his release from prison in 2005. However, he was then re-sentenced for alleged vote rigging. Mr McMillan-Scott said: “As an election observer at the parliamentary elections in November 2005 when Mr Nour lost his seat, I saw at first hand how the regime was responsible for intimidation of him and his Party. But I am delighted that this distinguished Egyptian democrat has been belatedly released from his grossly unfair imprisonment. I am convinced he will play an important role in Egypt's political future. The European Parliament has been tireless in its efforts to secure Mr Nour's freedom. I am sure that all will rejoice today.”

**The European Parliament next meets in plenary on 9-12 March in Strasbourg.** The agenda includes debates on further Enlargement of the EU, the 19-20 March European Summit, EU Asylum and Border Control, the EU Small Business Act, and a package of legislation on Maritime Transport.