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Conservatives
in the European Parliament

Newsletter Edition 76

January 2011

Mail Delivery

The postal services over Christmas were simply appalling and I know that many of you did not receive the Annual Newsletter and Calendar until the New Year, despite the fact that they were mailed on December 8th. I am still receiving Christmas cards! Complaints have been made although whether they will make any difference remains to be seen.

Winter Weather

The cold weather made travelling difficult for everyone but you can imagine the problems for we regular airline commuters. I was delayed for three hours on one occasion and left Strasbourg early on another to avoid problems in Paris but otherwise was lucky. Not true of many of my colleagues, though, and it does make one realise how precarious one's travel arrangements can be in the face of treacherous weather conditions.

Elections

We had the Delegation annual elections last month and there has been a complete change of officers. Tim Kirkhope, our Leader for the last three years, stood down and his place was taken by Martin Callanan. I have now "retired" to the back benches although my commitments in Parliament remain exactly the same.

UKREP

We had a lengthy and detailed meeting with UKREP (UK Permanent Representative to the EU) to discuss liaison between HMG and Conservative MEPs. Sir Kim Darroch is the head man and he bought a team of 20 senior civil servants to field questions. We have a pretty good working relationship with the relevant policy specialists in UKREP but contacts with Ministers leave a bit to be desired. We compare badly with the Labour and Liberal Parties in this respect, whose MEPs are actively involved with their Westminster colleagues, and it is essential that Tory MPs and Ministers understand that it is in their own interests to communicate regularly with their European counterparts.

Oldham East and Saddleworth

I happen to believe that the result of the Oldham By-Election was a good one for the Government - if not for our Conservative candidate. He worked as hard as at the General Election but circumstances have changed. It is quite clear that many Oldham Conservatives like what they are seeing of the coalition and felt that the best way to support it was by transferring their allegiance to the Liberal who had been expected to lose badly - and then didn't. Not ideal for us as a party of course, but good for the Government of which we are the largest part. A period of silence from some backbench Tory MPs would be helpful as well.



Oldham E & S

Milk

All NW MEPs were invited to a meeting with the regional NFU recently but only I and a Liberal turned up, to be briefed on the state of the milk market by various dairy farmers. They are having increasing difficulties with a milk price from the processors/supermarkets which does not provide much in the way of profit - if anything - and contracts which prevent them from selling surplus milk on the open market. The EU is proposing to loosen the terms of these present contracts between farmers and processors, thereby helping the dairy industry but probably raising the price of milk in the supermarket. I am clearly on the side of farmers. They deserve better treatment from us, the customers, and if that means a penny or two more on a bottle then so be it.



With Dairy Farmers

Eastern Europe

The Foreign Affairs Committee has been devoting some time to the east of Europe recently. Energy problems in the Ukraine, the thuggish behaviour and fraudulent elections in Belarus and the continuing difficulties in capturing the genocidal Serbian generals, have all featured large on the agenda. The President of the EP is visiting Belarus to lobby for the release of the many journalists and others who have been tortured and imprisoned - assuming, of course, that he is allowed into the country!

Serbia is conspicuously failing to track down the recalcitrant former generals, due to be tried for war crimes at The Hague, and it is beginning to be a serious impediment to that country's oft-declared desire to join the EU.

Around and About

A number of visits over the Holiday period. Dulcie and I went to an excellent dinner in Clitheroe just before Christmas, hosted by the Chairman of Lancashire CC., to raise funds for charity. We have also had the pleasure of hearing Lord Strathclyde in the company of Eric Ollerenshaw MP and I sang for my supper recently at West Lancashire's Disraeli Club. And, as recorded earlier, we went to Oldham East and Saddleworth to help Kashif Ali.



With Lord Strathclyde



With the Chairman of the County Council



With the Party Chairman at Oldham

Memories

On a sad note, I attended a Memorial Service for Lord Lyell of Markyate, former Attorney-General, last Thursday at St. Margaret's, Westminster. Nick Lyell is the first

of my friends in the 1979 Parliamentary intake to die and it makes one focus on one's own mortality!

The Ashes

On a much cheerier note - and Nick would have loved it - the retention of The Ashes by England in Australia was a splendid achievement and beating them three times by an innings a unique one. Quite the highpoint of Christmas and New Year!

Paul Atkins

