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Conservatives
in the European Parliament

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Change

As we approach the end of this Parliamentary mandate it is noticeable how "change" is in the air. Whether a concomitant of the success of President Obama's campaign slogan or just a fact of life before an imminent election, it is hard to tell. It is anticipated that about 50% of MEPs will change after June 4th, regardless of party gains or losses, merely because of retirements - whether voluntary or otherwise! So the new intake will have different objectives, different perspectives as well as different attitudes to existing Parliamentary procedures. Add to that the likely alterations to the party group structure and you have a recipe for complete change - or maybe even temporary chaos!

New Group

British Conservatives have now given formal notice to our existing Group (EPP-ED) that we will leave on July 13th (the last day of the current Parliament) and are in the process of setting up a new centre-right group with effect from July 14th. Under Parliament's rules, it must have at least seven nationalities within its membership and we are well on the way to exceeding that. We estimate that we should end up being the fourth largest group in the Parliament with about 60 MEPs, subject, of course, to the vagaries of the ballot box.

Spain

The long-running saga of the so-called "Spanish Land Grab" came to a head in a controversial vote last Strasbourg. All Spanish MEPs, of whatever political colour, made common cause against the sensible and balanced Auken Report, but to no avail. I was one of a handful of Members who have driven this campaign on behalf of British - and other- expatriates and was execrated and lambasted by some Spaniards as one who was "insulting" their country. But they now realise that the tide of EU opinion is against the scandal of corrupt planners, developers and local politicians and, whilst Parliament does not have the power to intervene, it can and has highlighted the abuses and forced the Spanish Government to investigate and take action.

Equitable Life

And, whilst on the subject of financial irregularity, the Petitions Committee has just received a reply from HMG in response to the detailed and critical report that I persuaded Parliament to produce on the saga of Equitable Life Assurance. Needless to say, the response to 15 months hard investigative work was dismissive, with the Minister washing his hands of any Government blame. So it has been with their reaction to the UK Parliamentary Ombudsman, who was even more critical in her conclusions. Small wonder then, that aggrieved policy-holders have lost patience and are taking legal action against the Government. All power to their elbows, I say, and every success in their endeavours.

Piles and Piles...!

We have established recently that a huge amount of bureaucratic paperwork has been passed by EU Ministers during Labour's time in Government and we showed its effects by way of a photograph!



Brown Nose

The Prime Minister broke with tradition earlier this month when he invited himself to Strasbourg to address the Parliament. It is quite an honour to be invited to speak to a Parliamentary Session and is usually reserved for Heads of State or very special guests. Never before has a Party Leader demanded a hearing.



Unsurprisingly, Gordon Brown was not well received, largely because of the anodyne, self-serving and fawning nature of his speech but also because everyone knows that he is on the way out. Even Labour MEPs were conspicuously unimpressed.

No Confidence

The present President of the Council of Ministers, Czech PM Topolánek, was presiding over a session of Parliament a few days ago when the news came through that his Government had fallen. Consternation all round but he carried on regardless and an announcement was made later that, despite the fact that the Czech Government had no majority, it would continue in the EU Presidency. An unusual, not to say extraordinary, state of affairs!



Angling

My colleagues and I have been receiving worried representations from recreational anglers about a Commission proposal which would force amateur fisherman to have to abide by the strict rules and regulations that apply to commercial fishing operations. This is wholly unacceptable and totally unnecessary and Tory MEPs took the battle to the Fisheries Committee where success was eventually achieved. Another nail in the coffin of Brussels bureaucracy!

Events

Two big events last month which commanded my attendance. Firstly, the NW "Blue Skies" Conference which was a great success and enjoyed by all participants. I was especially pleased to obtain a public assurance from Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, that the next Conservative Government would honour the recommendations of the UK Ombudsman's critical report on the Equitable Life debacle



Secondly, a routine regular visit to Cumbria CC Tory Group meeting turned out to be an excellent question and answer session with both County Councillors and likely candidates. They are an enthusiastic and articulate bunch and they were all raring to take control!



Singing For My Supper

I have spoken at two dinners in the last two or three weeks - at Warrington and Wigan - where I was hugely heartened by everyone's high morale and cheerful enthusiasm in what are usually "safe" Labour areas. Of course, nothing is safe with HMG in such a slough of despond at present, but the presence of many young people and the commitment of all concerned was a real fillip. The often unsung Tory heroes of Socialist seats need proper recognition and I am happy to give it to them!



Warrington N & S



Wigan

Au Revoir...

This will probably be the last Newsletter until after the June Elections as campaign law must prevail. So thank you for your support over the last five years. Normal service will be resumed after July 14th - I hope!

Robert Atkins