

HELLO ! The European Parliament has resumed work after its summer break so here is my first report of the autumn (dated 12th September, 2013).

State of the Union report

Barroso, the President of the EU's executive body, the Commission, gave his tenth and final annual "State of the Union" speech.

Barroso has been a disappointment to the parliament, because he has repeatedly spoken about leading Europe to further integration but behaved instead as an obedient errand-boy for reluctant national leaders. Next summer he leaves the job and a new President of the Commission will be appointed for five years : a constitutional crisis looms, because the national leaders will probably again propose an obedient errand-boy or girl, but MEPs, who can withhold their approval of the national leaders' candidate for President of the Commission, want a true leader for the EU who will also command majority support in the new parliament which will be elected next May.

Biofuels

This week the most contentious issue in the parliament (about which I received hundreds of email from people in our region) was about how much the EU should subsidise the growing of Biofuels (plants such as maize grown to create fuels) and thus how agricultural land should be used, the effect on third-world agriculture and food prices, and the link with greenhouse gas emissions.

The parliament, by an extremely narrow majority, decided to set the upper limit at 6%. I wanted 5%.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing this, the full text is not yet available to send to you.

Syria

The parliament debated the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The winding-up resolution, passed by a huge majority, gave no support to the use of American force, called on Assad to go, and called on Russia and China to face up to their responsibilities to facilitate a common position within the UN Security Council.

My personal line, if I had had to vote in the Commons, would have been against joining a UK-USA attack on Syria. Lib Dems are internationalists, who believe in working through international institutions, particularly the United Nations, and not acting alone.

Next month's controversial issues to be decided in the parliament :

1. The proposed **Tobacco directive** which will determine how large health warnings should be on cigarette packets, whether electronic cigarettes should be available without a medical prescription, and whether Snus (a form of chewing tobacco used only in Sweden and Norway) should be allowed more widely.
2. Whether there should be **minimum road-worthiness testing for Caravans** which travel across Europe.
3. **Money laundering**. As the draft stands, it would require **on-course bookmakers** (who exist only in Ireland and in the UK) to check anybody who brings them a bet of 1700 pounds or more in notes.

Watch out for:

1. The German national election on Sunday 22 September. The Christian-Democrat party of Chancellor Angela Merkel, already the longest-serving leader in Europe, is expected to win again but to need to find a coalition partner.
2. The continuing pantomime of Berlusconi. Last Tuesday a vote was scheduled in the Italian

Senate in Rome to eject him and so end his political career, and strip him of his parliamentary immunity and thus send him to prison to serve four years for tax evasion crimes. He responded that if he was expelled, he would pull his party out of the coalition government and thus precipitate a general election with the ensuing financial instability that would create. His party is entirely his own : after the fall of communism and the collapse of the Christian-Democrat party in Italy, he created his own party, totally finances himself being a billionaire, and personally chooses all its candidates for election, so he can collapse it now if he wishes.

The scheduled vote in the Senate to expel him was delayed - surprise ! - to "allow for more questions to be answered". The expectation is that a compromise will be found in order to avoid holding a new general election and therefore that, somehow yet again, Berlusconi the billionaire politician will survive.

3. The proposal to **ban all telephone roaming charges within the EU** from next April. The USA manages without roaming charges across its fifty states, so why should Europeans put up with having to pay them. See <http://euobserver.com/economic/121397>

All the best

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