

Report to Nottinghamshire from Bill Newton Dunn MEP (14 Sep 2012)

The European Parliament is back at work after its summer break. So, here is my first report of the autumn to you.

"State of the European Union"

The president of the Commission, Barroso, reported to the parliament this week. He called for a full federation to be created because Europe's countries must confront the fact that they can not deal individually with the world-scale problems which they face. See the attached pdf. if you wish to read his full report. There is an online video of the debate if you have plenty of time to spare, at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ep-live/en/plenary/video?debate=1347433435512>

The Parliament gave Barroso the programme of work which it wants to see carried out by the Commission over the next twelve months. See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120907IPR50821/html/Parliament-sets-out-its-policy-priorities-for-2013>

Perhaps this was a good week for Europe, hopefully a turning of the tide.

Proposals were announced for legislation to create a full Banking Union ; and the Constitutional Court In Germany ruled in favour of the Financial Stabilisation package, so removing a threatened block ; and in the Netherlands, there was a General Election, in which the two pro-European parties easily defeated the anti-EU parties. But of course we still need the Greeks to put the reforms which they have frequently promised into place.

Foreign Affairs debate with Commissioner (Baroness) Ashton

See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120907IPR50810/html/EU-foreign-policy-must-be-more-strategic-geared-to-results-and-based-on-values>

A delegation came to the parliament this week from Syria. They estimate that 27,000 people have been killed so far in the revolution. Al Q'aida has been detected. They had hoped for intervention from the outside. "We are proud to be present in the parliament, an example of advanced democracy", said one. Inevitably the Assad regime will fall. Then the challenge will be to institute democracy.

All fullscale debates in the parliament and in many committees can be watched live by googling EuroParlTV or at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/en/home.aspx>

Fisheries

Reform continues slowly. This week's debate in the parliament is reported at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120907IPR50823/html/Stop-overfishing-of-mackerel-MEPs-back-sanctions-against-third-countries>

Brussels v Strasbourg : the fight for the parliament to meet in a single place preferably Brussels.

Previously : to try to move towards a single seat, and to save money, MEPs voted in March 2011 to hold two Strasbourg sessions in a single week in October 2012 and 2013, thereby cutting the number of annual visits to Strasbourg from twelve to eleven. France and Luxembourg took the parliament to court, and the UK government declined to help on the grounds, according to their minister for Europe (now moved to a different job) "we don't want to upset the French".

This week the Advocate-General of the Court of Justice (the EU's supreme court in Luxembourg) gave his preliminary advice to the full court. He supported France,

but offered the judges scope to rule in favour of the Parliament's position by suggesting that there is no clear rule and that all relevant factors – including cost and the strong objections to the obligation of the Parliament to sit in Strasbourg – should be taken into account. The whole question should be put on the agenda of the 27 national leaders (who decided it in 1992 and have not discussed it since). His opinion does not bind the Court, which is not expected to give its final judgment for some time.

You can read his advice to the Court at

<http://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2012-09/cp120110en.pdf>

Meanwhile, three wooden beams in the ceiling of the debating chamber in Brussels have been found to be dangerous. So, MEPs can not debate there until substantial repairs are done. Whether this will mean more debates in Strasbourg is still not decided.

Stem Cells controversy

The parliament is sharply divided about research into the use of stem cells, in particular over whether EU money should be given for research on them. Stem Cells are becoming increasingly important because people are living longer and stem cells (which repair or regrow organs) can help to improve the quality of life for older people.

There are two types of stem cells - those from embryos (which are potentially all-powerful since they can grow into any part of a human) and those from living humans (from blood in the umbilical cord or from bone marrow) which are not all-powerful and work best on the person themselves or somebody with similar immunology (as with organ transplants). The ECJ ruled last year that life begins when an embryo is fertilised and therefore to destroy an embryo is against human dignity and therefore EU money must not be used for research into embryos (although there are different laws about this in the 27 member states).

There is a risk that this controversy will spread into the question of Abortion in Europe, perhaps on the lines of Roman Catholics against Protestants - as it already has in the USA where great bitterness divides those for and against. At present, the EU has no power to legislate on Abortion but nobody knows what might happen if somebody asks the ECJ for a ruling based on their judgment about embryos.

There was a debate in the parliament this week - see

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20120907IPR50817/html/MEPs-oppose-paid-donation-of-tissues-and-cells>

Finally, a thought on the government "reshuffle" at Westminster

One wonders whether any large business would "reshuffle" its heads of department and hope it would run better. "Marketing Director, from tomorrow you will now do Basic Research. Finance Director, you will now do Exports. R & D Director, you will now do Personnel. Personnel you will now do Finance." Most people would immediately sell their shares in the business. In the EU Commission in Brussels and in the USA Administration in Washington, unelected outsiders are chosen to run government departments, they are quizzed by elected MEPs and Congressmen, who vote them into office (or not), and then they are left to do their special job. It seems to me that the reservoir of real talent at Westminster is small enough already, being limited to elected MPs, without reshuffling them after a while to do something completely different and hoping the country will be run better.

All the best