

# Bill Newton Dunn's report from the European Parliament (18<sup>th</sup> April, 2013)

The parliament seems to have entered pre-election mode. The next European election is still thirteen months away - on Thursday 22 May 2014 - but already parliamentary committees are working hard to ensure that the legislation and initiatives, on which they are working, will be completed. The parliament is very efficient, despite having 753 members, and having to work with 23 languages and in two locations, and will certainly complete all its work on time. The reason is because MEPs have effective rules of procedure, meet in public, and take votes in order to make the decisions.

However...the problem is the Council of Ministers. EU laws are made by co-decision between two equally-powerful chambers (as is the case in the USA but is not the case unfortunately in the UK).

But the Council of Ministers meets in secret and has only 27 people sitting around their table but they are reluctant to take decisions and to accept majority-voting. Each minister thinks his own country is the most important, and is afraid of making a deal because back in his national capital, public opinion might not understand or he might be fired afterwards for making a compromise for the greater good. So, a log-jam is building of of important decisions over which the national ministers and the member states do not feel brave enough to take - including Fishing reform, Agricultural reform, and the EU Budget.

## **Fisheries**

In February, MEPs voted for new and better rules for Fisheries which are intended to take effect from January 2014 All the Council says in reply so far is "In the early hours of 27 February, national ministers in charge of Fisheries agreed a general approach on a proposed regulation on the CFP."

## **Agriculture**

In March, MEPs voted for new and better rules for agriculture. Progress is now stalled inside the Council of Ministers. All their website says is at

[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/agricult/136582.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/agricult/136582.pdf)

## **EU budget**

In February, the 27 national leaders met in secret for thirty hours in Brussels and produced a complicated draft EU budget for the next seven years. It was full of flaws - cutting money for vital work at EU level such as cutting the EuroPol budget to fight crime at a time when crossborder crime is growing and is eating into genuine jobs and government tax revenues.

In a compromise, the 27 leaders proposed to simultaneously cut the EU budget but to increase spending in future years to buy off other unhappy leaders in their secret meeting - thus creating a long term deficit with no money to finance it and despite the EU treaties forbidding the EU to incur debts and to borrow (the EU being required by treaty to always have a balanced budget). In reply, MEPs produced a list of Amendments to the leaders' seven-year EU budget - and, guess what, there is no response yet from the 27 national leaders. Both chambers must agree before anything can take effect.

## **Data Privacy**

Another "hot topic" within the parliament is Data Privacy (about where to draw the line between the rights of privacy of the individual on the Internet and how much power to give police and governments to take control over our private data and to use it for themselves. It is a difficult debate but it has to be decided at European level because of the Single EU market and rights of free movement for all of us across 27 countries.

## **The Cyprus banking bailout**

MEPs condemned the handling of the Cyprus bailout programme, blaming the Eurogroup for its appalling communication, the Commission for not defending insured depositors, and some member states for their 'colonial' approach when addressing Eurozone troubles. Opening the debate, Commissioner Olli Rehn said that the Commission would have preferred a more gradual adjustment for Cyprus but since member states were only committing EUR 10 billion this was not possible. Guy Verhofstadt MEP said that it was essential to find out exactly what went wrong, adding that the ECB, the Troika and the Eurogroup president had difficult questions to answer. If these answers were not forthcoming then the EP should set up a committee of inquiry.

## **Cigarettes**

Another burning topic, literally, is the revision of the EU Tobacco law.

Smokers who are trying to give up, are emailing us in defence of a new invention, the electronic cigarette.

The big topic is what health warnings to put on cigarette packets, with the majority view in the parliament that stronger deterrents are needed to discourage young people from starting to smoke and killing themselves prematurely.

## **Fighting Organised Crime**

A small delegation, which includes me, from the parliament's temporary Committee on Organised Crime is going to Washington DC and New York at the end of this month. We are seeking advice and know-how which we can include in our committee's report later this year, as recommendations for fighting crime more effectively. My committee estimates that tens of millions of legitimate jobs are lost in the EU, and hundreds of billions of tax revenues are lost each year, to Organised Crime gangs. The American government and the Department of Homeland Security are arranging a series of insider briefings for us. I will report back to you next month.

## **28<sup>th</sup> member country of the EU**

Croatia is set to join the EU in July 2013.

## **Finally...**

I learn that there is a discrete room in the Italian parliament in Rome where members may go to have their speeding and parking offences erased. Poor Chris Huhne might wish that he had been born Italian.

And I invite you to ask a question or to give your opinion to my Cyber Assistant on my website at [www.newton-dunn.com](http://www.newton-dunn.com)

**All the best**

**Bill Newton Dunn MEP**