

## **January 2014 Report from the European Parliament**

### ***Syria, the unfolding catastrophe***

Talks start tomorrow between all sides, organised by the United Nations at Geneva. Nobody is optimistic about a settlement, with an estimated twelve hundred separate fighting groups involved. Meanwhile, the death and refugee toll mounts and mounts, the trickle of refugees into Europe grows, the flow of British citizens fighting there increases, with the overall fear that other Arab states and Israel may be drawn in, resulting in an all-out explosion in the Middle East.

### ***2014, the EU transition year.***

This year a new European Parliament will be elected in May. (Don't forget to register to vote with your local Council, if you wish to, or for a postal vote).

Afterwards, the heads of the EU's executive body (the Commission) are elected into office. The Lisbon Treaty which came into effect in 2010 says that, for the first time, the President of the Commission shall be chosen according to the result of the election to the parliament.

The three main European political parties are currently choosing their presidential candidates : the largest party, the Christian-Democrats, will make their choice in March at a conference in Dublin : the Socialists have already chosen Martin Schulz MEP, the current speaker of the parliament : the Liberals look set to confirm their choice, Guy Verhofstadt MEP, at a conference in Brussels in twelve days' time. There is no chance of a British candidate for the top executive job, because our endless complaining and threat of a referendum means the continentals have no confidence in any Brit for the top job. (Only one Brit has held the job, Roy Jenkins, in the 1970s when goodwill for Britain was high).

But, although the parliamentary elections will be highly significant, Chancellor Merkel of Germany last year ruled out any automaticity in the process. She wants the top jobs in Europe to be settled as in the past - in behind-the-scenes bargaining on a package of powerful posts, including the head of the EU Council, the EU foreign affairs chief, the Nato head and the European Parliament speaker. Aside from political affiliation, the bargaining between the 28 national leaders traditionally involves considerations on countries representing the north, south, east and west, as well as the need to have at least one woman in the top phalanx.

This is five months away, but there could perhaps be a confrontation between the wishes of the parliament and the wishes of the 28 national leaders.

### ***Two pieces of controversial legislation now in the pipeline***

#### ***1. E-cigarettes***

Originally, the Commission (supported by almost all national governments) wanted to make e-cigs subject to strict pharmaceutical prescription.

A majority in the parliament disagreed - because e-cigs are a way of stopping smoking, and since ordinary cigarettes are available without prescription, so should e-cigs.

In the final "trilogue" negotiation between parliament and the governments, a compromise had to be reached. It is likely to be voted on, yes or no, by MEPs sometime during February.

The major stumbling block was about safety of the refillable phials and how to keep them away from children.

If three countries can prove that there is a safety risk with a particular type or brand or cartridge, then the European Commission can adopt measures to ban it. But this will only apply to the specific product, not to all, and the European Parliament has the right to veto any such ban.

A spoonful of concentrated nicotine could kill a child so restrictions of some kind were inevitable. The original proposal was for a restriction of 4mg/ml and no refillable cartridges so this is a far better deal than we MEPs could have expected. It might mean people have to refill more often or take longer puffs but it won't have any impact on the amount of nicotine they can physically breathe in.

## **2. Seeds**

A highly complicated proposal by the Commission for registration and marketing of seeds - which has drawn fourteen hundred different amendments in the parliament's Agriculture committee. It therefore seems likely to die when the parliament finishes work in mid-April and the election campaign begins.

### ***The Right to vote in May if you are not living in your home EU country***

See [http://www.europeansabroadvote2014.eu/?utm\\_source=Members+of+European+Parliament&utm\\_campaign=870a102f01-Email%231+Contact+Forms&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_32a2b13f85-870a102f01-128662225](http://www.europeansabroadvote2014.eu/?utm_source=Members+of+European+Parliament&utm_campaign=870a102f01-Email%231+Contact+Forms&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_32a2b13f85-870a102f01-128662225)

### ***If the UK voted to quit the EU***

As well as Nissan, banks in the City, the CBI, and the EEF all warning against a British exit - plus similar advice from the governments of USA, Japan, Australia, and Norway - Ford has warned that it could reassess its business in the UK if we were to leave the EU. Speaking to the Daily Telegraph, Stephen Odell, Chief Executive of Ford Europe, said that by quitting the EU Britain would be "cutting its nose off to spite its face." He added: "I would strongly advise against leaving the EU for business purposes, and for employment purposes in the UK."

Mr Odell said that while there was understandable concern about some of the rules and regulations coming from Brussels, the UK would still have to comply with many of these outside of the EU and that it was therefore better to push for reform from within.

Ford, which employs almost 15,000 people across the UK, is one of Britain's largest foreign investors and manufacturers. A third of the world's Ford engines are assembled at its plants in Bridgend and Dagenham.

See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/10572731/Ford-warns-it-would-reassess-UK-presence-if-country-left-EU.html>

## **Finally**

The Times newspaper printed an article across five columns last week about Roger Helmer MEP. It reported that, despite being UKIP Energy spokesman and his having denounced "green energy", he has installed solar panels at his home in Leicestershire and is claiming the government subsidy for generating solar electricity. The words "greedy" and "hypocrite" may spring to some people's minds.

All the best

**Bill Newton Dunn**