

Thank you for contacting me regarding the proposed revision to the EU Working Time Directive. I have had a number of similar communications from a variety of people and different organisations.

Conservatives consider the Working Time Directive in its current form to be bad law - which is why the UK under John Major negotiated an opt-out from it. The current Government, under both Tony Blair and now Gordon Brown, have officially supported our policy of keeping the opt-out, but in practice neither Labour Prime Minister chose to rein in their own MEPs who have consistently led the campaign in the European Parliament to ban it. We now have a problem.

The problem is that the European Parliament in December has now voted by a narrow majority to end the opt-out altogether. It has also voted to make tighter restrictions on the use of on-call time. On-call time not only affects the medical profession, who may need to be available for hospital or other emergencies, but also potentially affects retained fire-fighters and workers in care-homes amongst others. In our view the Parliament vote does not address this sufficiently.

The good news is that MEPs are only "co-legislators" regarding any final changes to this Directive. We cannot change the law on our own. Now that the Parliament has officially voted its own views, it is up to the European Council - made up of the responsible Ministers from the 27 EU Member States - to agree or disagree with the Parliament position during a conciliation process which formally begins on 17 March and runs for a maximum of 8 weeks. Conservative MEPs are strongly represented on that Committee, and will be leading the campaign for common sense to prevail: the concerns you highlight are very much on our agenda, and we are still hopeful of a positive outcome - as long as the Council holds firm.

So the real key to getting the result that Conservative MEPs are working for is to make sure that the UK Government holds firm on the opt-out and persuades colleagues in other countries to stand firm alongside.

It would therefore be very helpful to the cause if you could write direct to the Prime Minister, as well as to your nearest Labour Westminster MP, so that they can appreciate the strength and the seriousness of your concerns. You might also ask at the same time what action will be taken against those Labour MEPs who have so clearly abandoned the UK national interest in pursuit of a pan-European socialist agenda.