

LETTER FROM EUROPE JULY 2010

Giles Chichester Conservative MEP for South West England and Gibraltar

All hot and bothered

The July session of the European Parliament was hot and fraught with hazards being the last one before the summer break. Fraught because on top of the usual Rumsfeld known unknowns there is always something that can catch you out because you are tired. Plus, in my case, my Brussels assistant was not in the office so it was all hands to the pumps. My hands that is. She has left me for another man. I can't really complain as she is marrying him and returning to England!

World Cup fever

In addition to the hot weather there were the closing stages of the world cup. On the Tuesday night there was the Holland – Uruguay match and I have to admit that I thought the South Americans had won because Strasbourg was so quiet and without hooting cars. On the Wednesday night it was the big contest between Germany and Spain. I didn't get to watch that match either because I was chairing one of my European Energy Forum dinner debates. Attendance, it must be admitted, was lower than usual but the debate about nuclear energy policy was definitely up-to-scratch.

All my own work!?

After our event I went off to look in at the tail end of the match in the big meeting room where the EPP hold their group meetings and which I remember from when we Conservatives were members of the centre right group. The room was dark and in cinema mode so I couldn't see anyone but at that moment the Spanish scored their goal so I feel sure I played a crucial role. I left smartly in case the Germans came to the same conclusion! The joyous sounds of celebratory car horns hooting reverberated around Strasbourg into the early hours.

Over-egging it?

The week before, one of those euromyth stories came out of the woodwork. Shock horror Brussels is telling us we can't sell eggs in dozens or by size anymore according to the great British press. Understandable outrage at the story but on closer inspection the truth turned out to be rather different. The requirement is to show the weight of food in addition to any other information. Only the tabloids in thrall to Ukip could misinterpret this as saying we cannot sell eggs in sixes or in small, medium and large but, hey, never let an opportunity to bad mouth the EU pass by. And, of course, if you read it in the newspaper it must be true, mustn't it?!

Compensation culture

This week a similar story surfaced following a vote on two Regulations concerning the rights of passengers in bus and coach transport and passengers travelling by sea and inland waterway. These are intended to offer comparable redress for cancellations to excessive delays to the rights afforded to air and rail travel. Understandably this gave rise to great concern among small and local operators about the implications for their business viability.

It turned out that the left, including the Liberal Group had voted for these measures whereas we had voted against them applying to services which do not cross borders, ie local services. The Member States in the Council disagreed with the Parliament and wish to retain the power to decide what levels of compensation are reasonable at a national or local level. So on this occasion we put our trust in the member states to stick to their guns and get a sensible outcome.

Photo opportunity challenge

Turning to other matters your three Conservative MEPs for South West of England and Gibraltar are working on a couple of joint initiatives. One is to produce a newsletter leaflet giving a flavour of things we have done during the first year of this Parliament. So there has been a flurry of activity to gather photos, captions and text for our own page and the common one. As part of this we set about getting a photo of the three of us together in Strasbourg in the Parliament. This proved to be a logistical challenge because everyone was so busy that it was difficult to arrange to be in the same place at the same time. At the time of writing I don't know whether the breakfast meeting one or the one of us sitting in our seats in the hemicycle or chamber at voting time has been chosen so watch this space but I hope to put the one I like on my website.

Bring back the CPC

The other project is even more ambitious. It is to organise a CPC style residential conference in the late autumn. The CPC or Conservative Political Centre was the fore-runner of the CPF or Conservative Policy Forum. It was abolished along with all the other changes wrought by the Archie Norman so-called reforms in the late nineties. Anyway the conference will, I hope, run from Friday afternoon to the Saturday lunchtime with outside speaker-led sessions on a range of topics including energy and agriculture plus a session where we will break into discussion groups to debate topical issues of the moment. And there will be a break for a cream tea if I have anything to do with it! Formal notices inviting participation will go out in due course.

Those magnificent men in their flying machines

Finally at the end of the week I went to Bristol Cathedral to attend a Service commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company later to become the Bristol Aeroplane Company or BAC. I was guest of the successor company, Airbus. The Service was an impressive, moving and fascinating account of the past 100 years with a very positive message about the future and the importance of innovation. I was naturally reminded of my father and his exploits as an aviator eighty years ago and also of an unfulfilled ambition of mine to fly in Concorde. What a beautiful plane she was.

Giles Chichester