

LETTER FROM EUROPE January 2012

Giles Chichester Conservative MEP for South West England and Gibraltar

To Strasbourg for the mid-terms

The Plenary session in Strasbourg this January was an unusual one. It marked the halfway point between the last election in 2009 and the next one in 2014 and is the occasion for a reshuffling of the pack of posts in the Parliament. So we had to vote for a new President first, followed by 14 Vice-Presidents and 5 Quaestors. I say vote but most of the key decisions are taken out of sight under the d'Hondt system of proportionality between the major political groups and the votes are more like a rubber stamp than a genuine election. Nevertheless, surprises can happen.

A new President of the Parliament

The deal struck between the EPP, the centre right European People's Party, and the S&D, the Socialists and Democrats who are the main group of the left, at the beginning of this Parliament was for an EPP nominee in the first half and a Socialist in the second half. Mr Buzek, a thoroughly nice Pole, has just handed over to Mr Schultz, a German Social Democrat who is not quite as popular and rather more bossy. But...

Good result for the ECR Candidate

There were two other candidates; my colleague Nirj Deva MEP as the official ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) nominee and an independent Lib Dem Diana Wallis who couldn't get her group to make her an official candidate. Nirj ran a splendid campaign which culminated in The Independent confidently predicting he would only get the ECR vote (55) and come third behind Wallis. In the event, Schultz did achieve the absolute majority required to win at the first ballot but with 40-50 fewer votes than he might have expected if the big group MEPs had kept to the deal. They didn't, and that is why Nirj came second with 142 (or nearly three times the ECR membership) and Wallis got 141 (she had evidently actually believed she could win based on the promises she had received).

Rattled cages

So what, you may well say, when we ended up with the predicted result. Well, I think a few cages were rattled and notice served that MEPs may no longer be counted on to accept their leaders' deals unquestioningly. One outcome was that Diana Wallis demonstrated the complete insincerity of all she said about her sense of duty to the Members by promptly announcing her resignation as an MEP with effect from the end of January. A case of sour grapes perhaps, or just clearing the way for the next on the list to take her place. Who happens to be her husband. That's Lib Dems for you.

Vice-Presidents and Quaestors

After this, we had three votes for Vice-Presidents because there were 15 candidates for 14 places and in addition to needing a majority of those voting to get elected, we had to eliminate one and vote to rank the 14 in order of precedence.

More evidence that people were not sticking to pre-arranged deals came when no-one passed the majority threshold and then in the final votes after the extra candidate withdrew (having made his point about internet freedom and transparency) the top three slots were filled by Socialists candidates. This happened despite the EPP having many more members than the Socialists, Three votes did seem excessive in the circumstances and something similar happened with the Quaestor votes.

A little background.

Vice-Presidents are like deputy speakers and they form the Bureau of the Parliament which deals with administrative, financial and organisational matters. The Quaestors are like shop stewards for MEPs dealing with their personal concerns. Political decisions are taken by the Conference of Presidents which comprises all the political group leaders. Just to complete the picture, there are Conferences of Committee Chairs and Delegation Chairs. We Brits are not the only ones who set up Committees!

A mountain of debt

And now, after all that organisation guff (well it only happens every 2 ½ years), for something completely different. I was fascinated to read an article in the Sunday Times business section about our UK indebtedness. This is relevant in the context of our retaining triple A credit rating, when many other countries have been marked down. It seems that the sum of our indebtedness is 507% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and the breakdown of that is government debt 81%, corporate debt 99%, household debt 98% and financial sector 219%. These are fairly eye-watering numbers and the financial sector figures in particular look like a reason for the problems of liquidity in the markets.

Confidence is all

And yet, if you consider the fact that some people have mortgages geared at up to 6 times their income and are currently able to meet their payments, one can view 507% in a different perspective. Namely, that even such high levels of debt can be managed and eventually paid off over time provided the lenders have confidence in our ability to do it and that is the crucial factor behind what George Osborne is doing to tackle our public sector deficit. Confidence is all, without it we could go bust very quickly. That is why we have to endure all these painful cuts so we get back to living within our means and can then start to reduce overall debt. It will take some time and in the meantime a little humility and restraint by interest groups like bankers, doctors, civil servants and so on, will not go amiss.

Giles Chichester