



# Johanna Baxter

National Executive Committee

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## Putting Members First

### NEC Visit to the European Parliament 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> July 2012

On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of July Labour's NEC joined 300,000 others who have visited the European Parliament over the past year. A morning Eurostar out of Kings Cross meant we were in Brussels by lunchtime and as soon as we had dropped off our luggage we headed straight for the Parliament building, currently the workplace of MEPs from across 27 countries.

After a brief introduction by the Parliamentary Visitors Service our first meeting was with French MEP, Harlem Désir, to discuss the structure of Parti Socialiste and their recent success in the Presidential election. Harlem was Chair of the steering group which coordinated the primaries process for the party so was ideally placed to give us an insight into how it worked. He admitted that despite being a skeptic of the processes he now believed that it can be a tremendous experience 'when it works'. He stressed the importance of the process commanding the support of the entire party – in France once the decision was taken to go down the primary route everyone, including all of the candidates, got behind it and he is convinced that it helped the party go on to win the Presidential election because more of the electorate saw Hollande as 'their' candidate. But the logistics involved clearly present challenges of immense proportions – the party had to reconstitute the electoral register (which is an incredibly difficult task if you're in opposition), party activists had to be trained as polling agents and they had to set up polling stations across the country in more or less the same way as they would be for a normal election, all staffed by party activists. The initial financial cost to the party was also large – primarily because of the amount they had to spend on publicity to raise awareness amongst the electorate. Voters were however required to pay 2 Euros to vote in the first round of the election and were asked, although not required, to pay another 2 Euros to vote in the second round. Most paid the additional 2 Euros in the second round and over 3 million people voted in total so in the end the party actually ended up making money! In addition the party dominated over 70% of the TV media for months leading up to the election and over 30,000 voters went on to join the party. As a skeptic myself those facts certainly gave me much to think about.

Next up was a joint meeting of European Parliamentary Labour Party and the NEC. It's sobering to think that over the 754 MEPs in the parliament we have only 13 representatives of UK Labour. But whilst small in number it's clear they are punching above their weight. Positions in Parliament are distributed according to the weighting of the 7 main political groups – our MEPs are aligned to the second largest parliamentary group, the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats which brings together 190 MEPs, and hold 12 positions. The UK Conservatives, who are larger in number, have broken off from the main Conservative group in the parliament - the European People's Party - to join the minority European Conservatives & Reformists Group which brings together 57 MEPs. That group is smaller than the Greens, with whom the SNP and Plaid are aligned.

As well as discussing the selection process for the next European elections we also talked about our strategy for those elections and for building better engagement on European issues across the party. Whilst we won't be fighting those on the basis of an in/out referendum we will have to be clear that repatriation of powers is Conservative code for right wing, regressive politics. It was clear to all that we have to stop thinking of Europe as an international issue but rather part of our domestic policy – Europe does after all influence much of our domestic legislation so it's important we're engaged in policy development right the way through the process.

After that was a really fascinating meeting with Swedish MEP Marita Ulvskog, Greek MEP, Kriton Arsenis and Italian MEP Roberto Gualtieri to discuss the Eurozone crises. Marita talked about the difficulties

Sweden faces in getting voters to engage in European issues but how that has shifted as the economic crisis has deepened.

Kriton talked about his recent visit to Sheffield and how knowledgeable he thought voters in the UK were about European issues. But the majority of his time was devoted to passionately describing the very harsh realities of the economic crises in his country. Kriton was clear that Greece had made some mistakes but his belief is that the Socialist government had taken measures to reign back any excesses in spending and this strategy would have worked had they had time to see the results of it. His concern now is that the new Conservative government are reigning back so far they are going way beyond what Thatcher could have ever imagined. He described how, as part of the fiscal compact, Greece have been told they must privatise any form of utility left in public control, without condition. That will include their rail network, roads, ports and water and means that private companies are under no obligations whatsoever about protecting workers who might currently be employed there or about service levels once they've taken them over. He spoke of the 52% of young people unemployed, 42% of adults, and the fact that wages are now 30% of what they were previously and he talked of the guilt his friends felt when they visited home, had dinner in the town square on a Friday night only to realise that everyone around them sat with only water. Eating out, a normal Greek custom, now only a privileged few can afford.

Roberto talked about his experience of being at the centre of the negotiations on the new fiscal compact. He talked about the fact that what we're facing is the consequence of contradiction – monetary union versus political economic policy decided at a national level. He talked of the stability mechanism that the EU had tried to put in place but thinks there are 3 reasons why it is not working: cuts being made without any counteracting investment in other areas; market instability which will not allow bond yields to decrease and a democratic deficit. He was very clear that for the economy to recover there was an urgent need for growth and increase in democratic legitimacy. He favoured a financial transactions tax and increased powers for the European Parliament within the current institutional framework.

Our discussions continued that evening with dinner with our UK Labour MEPs and the Executive of the Socialists and Democrats Group of MEPs before a working breakfast the following morning with the ETUCs Judith Kirton Darling and the GMB's Katherine Walker Shaw. Judith spoke of the 25 million unemployed across Europe and the development of the ETUCs ['Social Compact for Europe'](#) which they will be promoting in the run up to the next elections. Katherine was clear that any 'sense' being spoken in Parliament was coming from the Social and Democrat group but they have not had the numbers to be able to swing key decisions on the handling of the economic crises. She spoke of how many in the parliament are concerned that the UK government is cutting harder than many others who have economies in a worse position. She was clear that there was more of a consensus between the trade unions across Europe than there were amongst the different political parties.

After that we visited some of the parliamentary committees that were in session – the Employment and Social Affairs committee, which seemed to be engaged in an endless round of voting, the Economic and Monetary Affairs, which we had to leave very shortly after we arrived as they held a session in camera, and then the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs committee, where we saw the BNP's Andrew Henry William Brons give a chilling 'speech' on immigration – he truly is an embarrassment to the UK.

After lunch we met with staff from the Socialist and Democrats Group followed by a meeting with the Leader of the Socialist and Democrats Group, Hannes Swoboda MEP before heading back home.