



Europe on the eve of the European Parliament elections

**John Fitzmaurice
Memorial Lecture 2008**

On Tuesday, 14th October, some fifty BLG members and friends attended the fifth John Fitzmaurice Memorial Lecture, delivered by European Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström at the Centre. Her chosen theme was 'Europe on the eve of the 2009 European Parliament elections'.

Wallström began and ended her upbeat lecture with two Chinese curses, transforming them into blessings of a sort. The first, 'may you live in interesting times', certainly described well the present tumultuous state of the world. But she argued that the policies required to deal with the situation played to core social democratic values; being 'among those who think that the market is a good servant but a lousy master,' she thought that the crisis could provide a golden opportunity to make the case for 'a fairer and less market-centred Europe.'

Wallström first considered the current European political situation in terms of public attitudes to the elections. The results of a May Eurobarometer poll had revealed alarmingly low levels of interest and strengthening scepticism. Turn-out was forecast to be extremely low. There was a clear risk of populist campaigns run on the slogan 'your government didn't let you vote on the Lisbon Treaty; now here's your chance.' Trusting in the common sense of voters, Wallström remained optimistic. When armed with the facts, Europeans understand that Europe is necessary. Interest is low, she argued, because of the way in which European politics is communicated. But



Margot Wallström takes questions after delivering her lecture

a series of major policy issues, from the financial crisis to climate change, would have an increasingly pedagogic effect in demonstrating why coordinated action at European level was both necessary and desirable. Moreover, citing a forthcoming inter-institutional agreement on communication priorities, Wallström felt that there was increasing acknowledgement of the need for all actors to pull together. And the first of the institutions' agreed 2009 communication priorities was, precisely, the European elections.

But elections catch the imagination of voters only when they are presented with opposing visions of the future and when real policy choices affecting their daily

lives are at stake. This was where political parties came into their own. The 2009 elections, Wallström argued, offer enormous potential for a clash of visions over Europe, and in that context she believed that social democrats could present a genuinely distinct vision and policy agenda. She spoke about reaching out to those who had lost faith and turned to more populist politicians. Looking across the Atlantic (Wallström was fresh back from a trip to the US), she spoke of the appetite for a politics of hope. She had been in America as the bailout package had coalesced. Noting that the solutions had been coming from Europe, Wallström speculated that maybe

Editorial

Happy New Year to all Brussels Labour Members!

2009 will be a big year for political activists, with at least one election taking place.

Brussels Labour will be organising campaigning for the European elections later in the year. Please do let us know if you are interested in participating.

The European elections take centre stage in this issue of *Germinal*: our front-page report is on Margot Wallström's lecture on the forthcoming elections, and on this page, we also have information about how to make sure that you are registered to vote, either in Belgium or in the UK.

Thank you to all of you who contributed articles to this edition of *Germinal*. If any members would like to write articles for future editions, please do let me know.

Emma Eatwell
Editor

ELECTIONS 2009

Registering and voting

The European Parliamentary elections take place on 4th June this year and you are entitled to vote. Even if you think you are registered, we recommend that you double-check.

European citizens living in Belgium can vote in the European Parliament elections as long as they satisfy the following criteria:

- They must be a citizen of one of the following member states of the European Union: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.
- They must be resident in a Belgian municipality. You have to be registered in the population register or register of aliens in your municipality of residence.
- They must be 18 years or older. You must be at least 18 years old on the polling date.
- They must be entered in the voting register before 1 April 2009. You just have to fill in a simple form to put

your name on the voting register. It only takes a few minutes to do.



Important information

European citizens can only cast one vote in each election. You therefore have to choose whether to vote in Belgium or in your country of origin.

If you choose to vote in Belgium, you must choose a candidate on a Belgian list. You cannot choose a candidate on a list in another member state. You have to register separately to vote in municipal elections and European Parliament elections.

For further information about voting in Belgium, visit the website of the Brussels Europe Liaison Office (<http://is.gd/hfPa>).

For information about UK registrations, go to www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.

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we were living through 'the psychological moment when we in Europe stop assuming that the US approach is always the superior one.'

The social democratic family was, she argued, best placed to make the case for rebalancing the relationship between the state and the markets; markets must serve people, not the other way around. Similarly, on the social agenda, the social democratic family was best placed to make the case that people's rights should come first. On climate change, the social democratic family had made the case for a balanced approach between jobs, sustainable growth and social rights. There was, in other words, great potential for a distinctive social democratic platform and a clear policy choice for the European electorate.

This brought Wallström onto one more important issue, dear to her heart, particularly in the electoral context; the serious

under-representation of women in the EU's decision-making institutions: 'How,' she asked, 'could the European decision-making system be expected to deliver policies that truly reflect the concerns and interests of all citizens if half the population is under-represented?' This was not just a woman's issue but, rather, a fundamental issue of democracy. Wallström was actively engaged in a campaign led by the European Women's Lobby, '50-50 democracy', to promote equality in European political structures. She urged social democratic parties to renew their efforts to push for greater equality as they nominated their candidates for the 2009 elections.

Wallström's closing Chinese curse was 'May you come to the attention of those in authority.' Far from being a curse, though, this is precisely what she wished for the citizens of Europe; 'that better communication will bring their concerns and aspira-

tions to the attention of Europe's politicians and policy-makers.'

In the ensuing question-and-answer session, expertly chaired by Belinda Pyke, topics ranged over issues from gender equality to the possibility of the political families presenting candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission to the role of Declan Ganley in the Irish referendum campaign to the stimulating effect the existence of Euro-sceptic lists might have for pro-Europeans. Margot Wallström had not known John Fitzmaurice personally. She expressed the hope that he would have approved of her sentiments. As the enthusiastic applause from your audience demonstrated, Margot, he surely would have done!

Martin Westlake (who, like many in the audience, counted John Fitzmaurice as a close friend and colleague of many years' standing)

BRANCH MEETING

Mark Major

A month in the Twin Oaks Community

Mark Major told a fascinated joint meeting of Brussels Labour and Co-op Parties about his experience visiting the "Twin Oaks" Community in the US.

Twin Oaks was set up 40 years ago, following the model suggested by Skinner in a 1948 book "Walden 2". This was originally a theoretical work, looking at how to create a secular, rather than religious, community. However, in the 1960s a group of people decided to try and make it work and the community of 100 has been in Charlottesville, Virginia ever since. It operates on the basis of income (but not asset) sharing, in return for which community members get \$60 per month spending money, with housing, food, medical insurance and other necessities all provided according to need.

The community provides for many of its own needs via its attached farm, while raising cash via hammock-making, book-indexing and tofu-production. Although some of these activities have been hit by low-cost imports from China, the community is still reasonably financially

secure, with \$1m in the bank.

The core of the community system is a commitment by adult members to do 42 hours' work per week. It should be noted that since the Community meets all domestic needs (cooking, cleaning etc), all time beyond the 42 hours is genuinely free. Parents of pre-school children get a 40 hour per week child care allocation - so they could essentially just look after the children, but in fact often trade hours with others. The schedule is fairly flexible - you work when and how you want - and there is a choice of work, except that every one must do a kitchen shift and tofu-making. Beyond 60, the work quota is reduced by 2 hours per year.

Children are either home-schooled in the community, or sent to local public schools: the community is paying for expensive private education for one girl with special needs. Teenagers are given space to grow up, with bad behaviour generally being tolerated.

Private space in the community is limited but there are no common meetings: the only large gatherings are for funerals. De-



isions are instead taken by written procedure, with three people specifically charged with thinking about the future and sharing their ideas via a notice board to be discussed at dinner. However, the community is not consensual - in fact they agree on nothing, and there have been big battles over food (vegan vs meat based, etc.).

Neither is there consensus on the optimal size of the Community - Skinner's original idea was that the communities should spawn colonies, but this has not happened. Instead, the population is stable, though there is a concern that it is aging, so they have tried not to recruit new members aged over 60. People wanting to join the community must visit for a month, then go away while the community decide whether they would fit in - people with serious problems would be refused - and there is then a 6 month probation period.

The population was diverse - many were certainly anti-Bush and anti-government - indeed participating in anti-Bush demos counts as work time - but even here there are a variety of views.

Overall, Mark found the experience very positive - while the quality of life was limited in material terms, this was amply compensated by a low stress environment and a very positive verbal culture, where giving compliments was the norm. However, he noted that to live there, you had to be able to fit in - to get on with a group of 100 diverse people.

Keir Fitch

For more on the Twin Oaks community, go to www.twinoaks.org



The view from Seat AF1



Brussels Labour at Conference 2008

Labour was on its knees, the right-wing press said. Splits and plotting would dominate, and Conference could spell the end for Gordon Brown's premiership. So you could have been forgiven for seeing clouds of dejection lowering over the conference centre as delegates met.

In reality, Labour's 2008 Conference (in sunny Manchester) was businesslike, but upbeat, and we came out of it stronger and more united than we went in.

It was good to see a noted pro-European, Dianne Hayter, opening proceedings as Chair and set the tone that this is a party that is ready for a fight.

As Labour International delegate, my highlights were:

- Voting: after our efforts to have LI taken seriously by the Party, it was great to be able to take part in the democratic process. Some issues, like the emergency resolution on working time, had an impact as far as back home in Brussels.
- The emphasis on policy, and the insistence on how policy is shaped by personal experience.
- Having a dedicated seat in the hall. Those of you who have attended as a visitor will know how frustrating it can be not to be able to get in to the main hall, and to be seatless if you do. Labour International's seat AF1 was just fine.
- Gordon Brown's speech, that stirred delegates and brought them together, and the *frisson* that ran round the hall as people realised that yes, that was Sarah Brown standing at the podium to introduce him.
- Philip Gould, who spent most of the last year fighting cancer, accepting an award and arguing that Labour can win if it fights for what it believes in.



- Harriet Harman's "How many Tories does it take to manage a global economic crisis? - None! Why would they! Leave it to the market of course."
- The emotion and warmth at the leaving reception for Gary Titley and Glenys Kinnock, MEPs who are standing down at the 2009 elections.
- Paul Kenny, General Secretary, and Ruth Turner, President of the GMB Union, agreeing to meet Brussels members to discuss their concerns.
- Meeting with members of the Labour International Coordinating Committee, as it looks forward to a new constitution and the election of a new committee.

The fringe, *toujours le fringe*. All of human life really is there. This year we had everything from the EU role in climate change and energy policy, to Feargal Sharkey and Jazzy B on protecting performers' rights in the digital age.

A few handy hints for our next delegate (or anyone else attending):

- Book your hotel room as soon as possible - it's in Brighton in 2009, and you don't want to end up commuting from Gatwick, or worse.
- Get the Conference Arrangements Committee report every day. You have hundreds of pieces of paper thrust at you at Conference, but the CAC report is the one thing you need if you want

to know what's going on.

- Wear comfortable shoes. If you don't, you will start to suffer after a few hours traipsing from room to room.
- Don't try to do too much, and leave yourself some time to eat properly. Delegate shall not live by sandwich alone.
- Don't leave the secure area unless you have to: the queues are the last thing you want to be stuck in.

Conference 2008 was never going to be easy, but the party and its leadership came through it heartened and strengthened. Conference may not have the role it once had, but it remains key to making and developing policy.

The LI delegate is not part of a region so we do not receive the policy briefings that regional delegates do. It did strike me that in a hall of thousands, I was representing a huge geographical area with only a few hundred members. If LI is to be given greater representation at Conference and elsewhere in the Party, it would help if we could increase our membership. That's where you come in. Can you help Labour International, by signing up at least one new member during the next year? Go on, you know it makes sense.

Frazer Clarke

Social democracy in the globalised 21st century

There was a big turn out to hear Commission Vice President Gunter Verheugen speak to a combined meeting with our SDP colleagues.

He opened by asking whether the financial crisis presented an opportunity to revive social democracy – and suggested there may be an opportunity, but also a risk. While traditional social democratic solutions might become attractive given the failures of the market, so could the mantras of the far left and right.

Global markets certainly called for global governance – otherwise we would suffer from Helmut Schmidt's "casino capitalism". Not even the largest states could now bear the risk of their financial institutions alone – Deutsche Bank for example had risks equal to 80% of German GDP, and Barclays ones in excess

of the total size of the UK economy. Bailing out the banks was certainly creating problems of moral hazard, but the effect on the real economy was simply too big to do anything else.

Turning to the problems of social democracy, the VP noted that in Europe, only the UK had enjoyed a centre left-led government for all the last 12 years. Today, we have 8 EU prime ministers, and are junior partners in 5 other coalitions – though he doubted whether such junior roles really help the parties concerned. Nor was the modernising agenda a panacea – it had not led to victory in The Netherlands, Denmark or Italy. So clearly we haven't communicated a vision for the 21st century yet. We are squeezed between populist parties on the right, and anti-globalisation ones on the far left - indeed John Monks

had recently pointed out that few issues were of more concern to union members.

Yet the EU share of world exports had increased over the last 10 years – from 48% to 52%, and we have also attracted huge amounts of Foreign Direct Investment – investment in Belgium alone exceeds that in China. The full benefits of globalisation amounted to €5000 per household – and of course globalisation is lifting millions out of poverty in the developing world, and has created twice as many jobs in Europe as have moved elsewhere.

But we have not communicated this, in part since these benefits were not equally shared. The failures of the left have also been linked to the decline in union membership.

Here, Gunter Verheugen challenged the oft prevailing view in the UK and claimed that to build our economy for a social democratic globalised future, we needed world class manufacture as well as services – services alone would eventually follow industry. We must compete on excellence and skills, so focus on education, training, research and innovation. For the left, modern industrial policy should be innovation plus environmental protection – and we should also stress the need for a social Europe, with a key public sector role. Since in the EU, governments spend between 35% and 55% of GDP, we must ensure that is used well.

Much had been made of the Nordic flexicurity model, but he felt there was too much focus on flexibility and not enough on security – it does not export as well as many hope! Instead, social democrats must focus on the particular problems of the young: low skills and high unemployment, making priorities of high quality child care and life long learning. We should unambiguously work for a high quality social safety net.

While some of these issues are mostly for Member States, the Commission should lead where it has clear competence – and certainly not delegate responsibility to a now over-active Court to fill the gaps.

Keir Fitch



LICC elections

The establishment of Labour International in 1997 was a great victory for the campaigning efforts of Brussels Labour for the recognition of the groups and branches of Labour Party members living outside the UK. LI is now established in the Party's rule book (with the same rights as a UK Constituency Labour Party at conference) and its Coordinating Committee has the task, inter alia, of building LI membership and encouraging the formation of LI groups and branches.

However, the renewal of the Committee planned for early 2008 has been delayed and key Committee members resigned at the end of last year. The outgoing Committee Chair, Tim Clapham, informed Brussels Labour that the Party's Organisation Committee was reviewing LI's rules, including the changes which the Committee had planned for the election procedure and committee membership.

Brussels Labour hopes that valid elections for LICC will be organised and concluded as quickly as possible and, in a letter to the Party's new General Secretary telling him about Brussels Labour, we have asked for confirmation that the elections will be held soon. We also hope that as part of the rules revision Labour International will be given the same general rights as a Constituency Labour Party, and not only recognition at party conference.

Belinda Pyke
Chair, Brussels Labour

Campaign fund

We would like to thank all of you who made a contribution to the Campaign Fund in 2008. Brussels Labour established this Campaign Fund specifically to fund Conference fringe events, speaking engagements at local party meetings, campaigning materials etc.

It is kept entirely separate from Brussels Labour subscriptions and Labour Party membership fees and provides a separate resource to support campaigning events focused on European issues. The Fund has allowed us to cap the current levels of Brussels Labour subscriptions at a maximum 25 euro per annum, whilst still being able to fund events.

If you would like to make a contribution, you can do so through a one-off donation or, preferably, through an annual, quarterly or monthly standing order.

*For further details please contact the Treasurer, David O'Leary at :
**Rue Godefroid Devreese 42
1030 Schaerbeek***

*or by email at
dave.oleary@gmail.com*

Subscriptions 2009

Please do remember to pay your subscriptions for 2009 (25 EUR waged, 5 EUR stagiaire/unwaged). We will be in touch with those who haven't but it would be a great help if you could check that you have done so. Bank details are below.

*If you have recently changed your postal contact details, please let us know:
secretary@brusselslabour.org*

BL online

The Brussels Labour website is available at www.brusselslabour.org.

The website contains news of forthcoming branch meetings, current and past issues of *Germinal*, minutes from Executive Committee meetings, information on joining Brussels Labour, and a history of our branch.

Brussels Labour is now on Facebook as well – just go to <http://is.gd/huT0> and sign up if you are a Facebook member.

On our Facebook site, we publish details of our forthcoming events, but feel free to post messages on the wall about other events of interest in and around Brussels!



Next meetings

Wed 28 January – 19.30

Joint Brussels Labour and Democrats Abroad meeting with Dr Stephan Singer, Director Global Energy Policy, WWF, and Democrats Abroad Speaker Sandrine Dixon-Declève, Executive Director, International Sustainable Energy Exchange

at Arthur's 26 Rue de Treves, 1050 Ixelles.

Wed 11 February (change from 18th) – 19.30

Robert Evans MEP & Eluned Morgan MEP (tbc)

at Arthur's 26 Rue de Treves, 1050 Ixelles.

Wed 18 March – 19.30

AGM followed by Gary Tittley MEP's reflections on 20 years in the European Parliament

at Arthur's, 26 Rue de Treves, 1050 Ixelles.

Executive committee

Chair: Belinda Pyke

Vice-chair: David Earnshaw

Secretary: Sarah Millar

Treasurer: David O'Leary

Committee members: Frazer Clarke, Emma Eatwell, Keir Fitch, Jacqui Hale, Stephen Kinsella, Tessa Ryan

Bank account:

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