



Germinal

THE BRUSSELS LABOUR INTERNATIONAL BRANCH NEWSLETTER

Challenging times – but no need to panic

David O'Leary

Hazel Blears, the new Chair of the Labour Party, cuts an enthusiastic figure. In the wake of funding scandals and the renaissance of the Tories, she looked on the bright side when she addressed Brussels Labour on 10 July: Labour is now in its third consecutive term in government, with a majority for which Harold Wilson “would have given his right arm”. This is not a crisis, she said; it is merely the return of “normal politics” following the extraordinary general elections of 1997 and 2001.

Despite the growth of the Tories in the polls, Hazel Blears saw little reason to panic: Labour is still only one percentage point behind David Cameron's party amongst those certain to vote. Furthermore, there are positive reforms that will become evident in due course: the NHS is improving, the pensions issue is being resolved, with the support of trade unions, and the government is tackling the long-term issue of energy supply.

Contrast this, said the Party Chair, with David Cameron's short-termist and ill-thought-out plans. His decision to pull Conservative MEPs out of the alliance with the EPP was rash: people want strong advocates in power, and Cameron's decision would deny him influence with other European centre-right leaders. The Tory leader's proposed 'Bill of Rights' was announced on Sunday, lambasted by Kenneth Clarke on Monday, and would no longer be discussed by Cameron by the middle



Hazel Blears met Brussels Labour members on 10 July

of that week. The same went for an announcement on voting rights for Scottish MPs.

Cameron has also shown himself to be inconsistent, argued Blears. He has the 'zeitgeist' touch, and has focused – almost counter-intuitively – on the environment and health - yet his voting record does not bear out his current views.

On European issues, Hazel Blears said that it was time to 'mainstream' Europe in all government policies, and to show the utility of the EU in managing globalisation. Policy officers and MEPs would hold teleconferences, and ministers would aim to be more willing to engage with their counterparts from other Member States.

Turning to the subject of the earlier Brussels Labour policy debate, Hazel Blears recognised the need to reform party funding, with the introduction of spending limits. The Tories are now awash with money, she said, and it was therefore

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Editorial



Welcome to this summer edition of *Germinal* which, conforming to its usual type, contains lively accounts of recent branch meetings and brings you right up-to-date with news of our latest branch activities.

Many thanks to all the contributors and a particular thanks to David

O'Leary for the formatting.

Articles, news snippets and political natter are always welcome and can be sent to the editor at rachel.buchanan@skynet.be by 30 September 2006 for inclusion in our autumn issue.

Have a nice summer.

Rachel Buchanan
Germinal Editor

Challenging times

1 > important that funding from the trade unions and local parties was maintained, and increased. State funding may be required, with caps on large individual donations.

Raising money from members would not be easy, as she acknowledged: people - including Party members - are becoming impatient, and frustrated, with the government. She advocated a new role for party members, acting as 'trailblazers' on issues such as the environment and the EU. Party membership should be about our future direction, and pushing the political agenda forwards, not simply about acting as 'cheerleaders' for the government.

Ms Blears acknowledged a certain 'disconnect' in the party, and the fall in membership since the mid-1990s, when many people joined in a desire to remove the Tories from power. In fact, she said that she was calling former members each day in order to find out why they left the party, and encourage them to re-join.

However, the problem of poorly-attended meetings and 'old-style' politics remains, which is why she called for meetings at workplaces and supermarkets, joint meetings between branches, an increased use of blogs, chatrooms and flexible membership 'networks', as well as a greater involvement of members on national and local policy forums. A one hundred-strong panel of 'influencers' would also be created, with the possible involvement of the EPLP and Brussels Labour, in order to help shape the future of the Party.

Nevertheless, this is not the time for naval-gazing, said Blears: internal debate is important, but a lack of discipline and open revolt only weakens the government. If this is avoided, she concluded, then a fourth term in government is well within reach.

COMMENT: ELECTIONS IN SLOVAKIA

JAN MARINUS WIERSMA MEP

VICE-PRESIDENT, SOCIALIST GROUP

'Co-operation with xenophobic parties is unacceptable'



Robert Fico is the leader and founder of SMER

The 2006 parliamentary elections in Slovakia took place on Saturday 17 June 2006. The voters selected 150 representatives for the National Council of the Slovak Republic with the highest number of seats, 50, won by left-wing party Direction - Social Democracy lead by Robert Fico. Slovak citizens living abroad could for the first time participate in the Slovak election by absentee ballots.

The decision to recommend the Party of European Socialists to consider suspension of the Slovak SMER party was certainly not an easy one. But our reasons were clear and the conclusion was inescapable. Cooperation with parties that propagate xenophobic or racist viewpoints is unacceptable. And the SMS, with which SMER decided to enter into a coalition, is

an example of such a party if ever there was one.

I know the country and its political scene very well, from my time as the European Parliament's rapporteur for the accession of Slovakia to the EU. From that point of view I regret that we had to take this decision. But after the decision of the SMER to enter into a coalition with the extreme right SMS, we were left no choice. Its leader, Jan Slota, is an incorrigible fanatic, whose statements on Roma and other minorities as well as gays run totally counter the principles we defend. His stance on neighbouring Hungary is hostile to say the least.

All parties in the PES have committed themselves to refraining from any form of political alliance with political parties that incite or attempt to stir up racial or ethnic prejudices. This cannot remain just a statement: any party that breaks this promise will inevitably face the consequences.



The nationalist leader, Jan Slota

The inside track on the Italian election

Anna Colombo

On 23 May, the Chamber of Deputies in Italy voted a motion of confidence in the new Prodi Government (344 votes in favour, 268 against). In Italy, such a motion is necessary to legitimate a new government before the Parliament and to start working. Some days before, a similar vote took place in the Senate (High Chamber) with a tighter majority (165 to 155).

The Centre Left coalition (L'Unione) led by Romano Prodi, former prime minister and former President of the European Commission, won the last general election on 9-10 April 2006.

Due to the new electoral system, changed by the Berlusconi's coalition (Casa delle Libertà- House of Freedoms (!)) just some months before the elections, the coalition led by Romano Prodi enjoys a wide margin in the Chamber of Deputies (348 members against 281), but a very narrow one in the Senate (158 against 156; to these



Giorgio Napolitano is the new President of Italy



After weeks of uncertainty, Romano Prodi finally became the Italian prime minister

numbers one has to add seven "longlife" senators – i.e. former Presidents of the Republic, or Nobel prize winners who, by the way, made a vote of confidence in the government).

Still, for the Senate, Italians living abroad, who voted for the first time by post, have been a determining factor in the Centre Left victory.

In Italy, the President of the Republic has to officially give the duty to form a new government to the election winner. This important institutional step took a little longer than usual as the election came very close to the end of President Ciampi mandate. For both institutional and technical reasons, the election of a new President of the Republic had to take place before the formation of a new government. L'Unione proposed Giorgio Napolitano, member of DS (Democratici di Sinistra, former Communist Party - by far the biggest partner in the winning coalition); born in 1925, he fought nazism and fascism during the second world war. He is a former president of the Chamber, former minister for Interior, former Chairman of the Committee for Constitutional Affairs in the EP and has a very high institutional profile.

He has been one of the major active supporters of strong relations between his Party and the European Socialists

until 1993 when, following the transformation of the PCI into the PDS (and DS after), the Party became a member of the SI and the PES. His election as a Head of State puts an end to the "veto" to former Communists in such a high post, and was highly welcomed by the European Socialists. Many amongst our MEPs have fond memories of working together with Giorgio in the Socialist Group in the European Parliament where he, as Chair of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, demonstrated his great authority, experience and enthusiasm for Europe. He will certainly be the President of all Italians irrespective to their political background; indeed, his first declarations have been towards the need to build a new political calmness and stop the high degree of confrontation between the two coalitions; the message was very much appreciated by the Centre Left and the more moderate components of the Centre Right coalition, led by a very aggressive Berlusconi.

The European Union is in a difficult and uncertain phase right now; from his background, the new President will continue the work of outgoing President Ciampi in making a fundamental contribution to the strengthening of political union, the European integration process and to peace and solidarity.

BRANCH MEETING **TERRY WYNN MEP**

A "voice of reason" in the Parliament

Stephen Kinsella

Between 1989 and 2006, Terry Wynn represented Merseyside East and then the North West of England in the European Parliament. Throughout his time as an MEP, Terry took a close interest in the EU budget and played a key role in reforming it. He also followed development issues, especially in relation to South Africa.

Terry was introduced by our Chair, Belinda Pyke, as a "voice of reason" in the Parliament. He swiftly proceeded to justify that moniker with a frank and entertaining account of his time in the Labour movement from his origins in the ship-building industry. This had involved surviving some "odd times", including the internecine warfare of the Militant era and the period when Labour was campaigning forcefully against membership of the European Union. Comrades had fallen out over real issues of principle but equally often had got bogged down in detailed debate on the finer points of standing orders (cue general nods of agreement from those who had had to wrestle with our own Constitution).

Terry confessed that he had no early ambitions to be an MEP but had gradually come to appreciate the importance of the EU and its impact in domestic politics. He gave

generous credit to Neil Kinnock for helping to steer Labour to a more pro-European agenda. Terry's main satisfaction came from his role in helping to change the relationship between the European Commission and the European Parliament during his time in the Parliament since 1989. One particularly telling anecdote involved Commissioner Flynn, belatedly recognising the importance of the EP Budget Committee, running through the Parliament corridors to track him down. More serious was Terry's scepticism concerning the value of the British budget rebate. Though often trumpeted as a great victory, one pernicious effect was that the UK would never claim funds that were available, for instance to assist farmers during the BSE crisis, because that money would come off the rebate (another instance of Treasury v. Regions).

Finally Terry had to acknowledge some regret at the gradual loss of characters and eccentrics within the Parliament. He had very much enjoyed his time there but now wanted to try to use his experience to have a real impact in the UK. There was still a lot of work to be done on demythologizing issues such as the budget, the rebate system and in general the true impact of the EU.



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BELGIAN

LOCAL ELECTIONS

SUNDAY 8 OCTOBER

The Communal elections take place in October: we hope you have all registered to vote. The deadline was the end of July. Brussels Labour plans to hold a meeting about the elections before polling day.

See the PS site for details about the campaign: www.ps.be/index.cfm.

And for more about the election campaign in Woluwe St Pierre, where Brussels Labour Chair Belinda Pyke is a candidate, see:

www.ps1150.be/elections2006.htm.



BRUSSELS LABOUR PUB QUIZ

RAISING MONEY FOR THE WOMEN'S REFUGE

Brussels Labour is fast developing a firm reputation for holding fun and lively pub quizzes. This year's quiz was held in April at The Staff and was a great success, raising over 500€ for Le Centre de Prévention des violences conjugales et familiales (details below).

Brussels Labour would like to extend a particular thanks to Michael Cashman MEP for his great performance as quizmaster and to Hywel Jones for compiling the fiendish music round. Thank you to Emma Eatwell and Stephen Kinsella who arranged the event and set the questions, and thanks go to Frazer Clarke as well for organising the FIFA World Cup sweepstake which also raised money for the women's refuge.

Look out for details of the next pub quiz in future mailings!

Le Centre de Prévention des violences conjugales et familiales in Brussels began as the Collective for Battered Women in 1977. The organisation was originally run on a voluntary basis, gradually becoming professionalised and then constituted up as a not-for-profit organization. In the early 1990s, alongside the support work for women suffering violence, a reception service was set up to help men tackle their violent behaviour. The Centre is now funded from the public and private sectors, and has maintained a campaigning role throughout its life, raising awareness about domestic violence and spreading information about sources of help.

The refuge is a safe haven and has around 20 beds for women and children fleeing from domestic violence. Staff there provide counselling and support, allowing the women time and space to take stock in safety, while specialist staff help their children to overcome the

traumas they too have faced.

When a friend of mine who had been involved from the outset left Brussels a few years ago, I decided to find out how I could help support the work of the centre.

The staff who run the centre and its refuge tell me that second hand clothes, in good condition, are welcome for women who've often left a violent home with nothing more than their handbag and their children. As well as furniture, more than ever, the centre needs financial donations to meet the setting up costs for new households for things like rent deposits etc., so any funds raised through tombolas or quizzes are most welcome.

Finally, for those of you who plan ahead for Christmas, what they really need at that time are presents for the women (cosmetics, make-up, perfume, scarves, jewellery - all the things which they didn't have time to take with them when they left home). Presents for the children tend to arrive anyway.

If, like me, you feel it's important to be involved and connected to life in Brussels through more than just work, then I'm sure that a contribution to the refuge would be welcome.

Maggie Coulthard

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Email

violences.familiales@misc.irisnet.be
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Website www.cpvf.org

Want to help out in the refuge in the Bourse / St Catherine area?

Long-standing Brussels Labour members Win and Hugh Burton are moving to the UK. Win has been helping out in another refuge in Brussels and wonders if any Brussels Labour members might want to replace her. The refuge is for women (plus their children) victims of domestic violence and is located between the Bourse and Ste Catherine.

There is a multidisciplinary team of professionals - social workers, marriage guidance counsellors, therapists, child psychologists etc - that accompanies the 20 or so residents and guides them through to the next stage - either finding independent accommodation or resolving some problems and moving back home - with a possibility of them staying there for up to 6 months. Every Wednesday and Friday morning the team has a staff meeting discussing the next best moves for each woman.

Win's job as volunteer was to manage the phone and open the door and respond to the women's needs (from 9 a.m. - 12 noon) so the team can meet without disturbances. Win says that it's not exactly exciting but the team is touchingly grateful for this service.

No qualifications required except some flexibility and basic listening skills, and at least French, with Flemish an advantage.

If you are interested, contact:

Ria Willem at Open Deur
(open.deur@pi.be)
or telephone 02 513 01 08 and mention Win Burton as the link.

Belinda Pyke

BRANCH MEETING

MEETING WITH MUSLIM LEADERS

Challenges of multi-cultural relations in Belgium, Sweden, and the UK

Gus Glover

On Monday 26 June, in a change from our usual venue, Brussels Labour held a meeting in conjunction with the EPLP in The Staff. Accompanying the EPLP was a delegation of Muslim leaders from the UK and Sweden, who had been invited to Brussels to take part in a variety of meetings and seminars. Earlier in the day they had already met with Commissioner Franco Frattini, and members of the Socialist Group.

Our first guest speaker was Anissa Tamsamani, a former member of the Belgium Federal Parliament and current member of the Flemish Parliament. Of



Charles Clarke spoke about the need to find core, common values

Moroccan descent, Anissa spoke of the challenges faced by immigrants when arriving in Belgium. Her speech highlighted two main issues. Firstly the need for those who had newly arrived in the country to find a balance between their culture and that of Belgium's, she stressed the importance of integration by learning Dutch so that immigrants did not become disenfranchised and marginalised in Belgium society. The second point focused on the relatively new uncomfortable climate for immigrants in Belgium especially after the Murder of Joe Van Holsbeeck and the Antwerp Murders. She warned that the racist agenda of the Vlams Belang was effectively dividing Belgium society. She stressed the need for SpA to challenge racism by promoting socialist policies that reduced the social disparities that she claimed were the root cause of the rise in racism. In the debate that followed Muslims delegations and Anissa compared the similarities and differences that immigrants faced in Belgium, the UK and Sweden.

Our second guest speaker was former Home Secretary Charles Clarke. As one of the more vocal pro-Europeans in the cabinet, Charles' prudent handling of the Justice and Home affairs portfolio proved to be one of the biggest successes of the British Presidency. He urged Brussels Labour to get its voice heard in the national Labour party and to continue to fight in favour of internationalism. In his contribution to the discussion, Charles explained that



Anissa Tamsamani, of Moroccan descent, is a member of the Flemish parliament

there was no one clear way to fight racism and each situation must be tackled individually; he highlighted this with the example of the north-south divide where young Muslim men from the north tend to face very different problems to those from the south. He recognised that the current climate was one of the most challenging that British society had ever had to face, due partly to the terror fear but also problems in the labour market and the new ease of international movement of people. He explained that in his view there was a need to find the core values that unite us all: democracy, respect of faiths, respect of women, and freedom of expression. By effectively rallying people round these values we can try to address some of the key problems that we currently face in society. In response to questions from the floor, he defended police raids on suspected terrorist houses, and warned that by blindly defending all Muslims no matter what, British Muslims ran the risk of being falsely

There is no one clear way to fight terrorism—each situation must be tackled individually

Charles Clarke

associated with terrorism. He also stressed that on the international front there was no quick fix solution that the West could provide for some of the world's long standing disputes. In his final remarks he further encouraged the work of Brussels Labour and called upon us to champion the European approach, especially in light of the recent move by David Cameron to try and undermine the European Court of Human Rights by calling for a British Bill of Rights.



EPLP leader Gary Titley also addressed the meeting

PES ACTIVISTS

A CHANCE TO GET INVOLVED

PES @ctivists

Individual members of Europe's Socialist, Social Democratic and Labour Parties are all members of the PES through their national party membership. However, they can now become directly involved in the PES by becoming a PES activist.

Being PES activist is a new level of involvement for our members, and complements involvement at local, regional or national level.

Activists can ask questions directly to politicians, take part in discussions with other European socialists and social democrats on a variety of topics, give input to PES policy

discussions, establish political links with local individuals and branches in other PES member parties, and receive information on what other European socialists and social democrats are up.

In addition, there will also be opportunities to attend events such as the PES Congress in December 2006 and the Summer University in 2007.

More details can be found at: http://www.pes.org/component/option,com_phpshop/Itemid,170/lang,en/

Emma Reynolds

LABOUR PARTY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

MANCHESTER 2006

The Labour Party will break with tradition in 2006 and hold its annual conference in Manchester. It will take place from 24-28 September 2006. For

application forms, please contact the Labour Party, telephone number: + 44 08705 900 200.

DIARY DATES: AUTUMN 2006

WED
20
SEPT

Branch meeting with the SPD and PvdA (to be confirmed): 'Understanding local election lists'
Venue and time to be confirmed

SU-TH
24-28
SEPT

Labour Party Annual Conference
Manchester

TUES
26
SEPT

Brussels Labour breakfast with David Miliband on the theme of Climate Change
Labour Party Annual Conference, Manchester
Unison marquee, room 2 (inside the security zone) at 8.30 a.m.

OCT/
NOV

John Fitzmaurice Memorial Lecture
Details to be confirmed

FoBYES

CREATING A COMMON IDENTITY OF YOUNG EUROPEAN SOCIALISTS IN BRUSSELS

This spring, young activists from the German SPD and the French PS took the initiative to create a Forum of Brussels Young European Socialists (FoBYES) which brings together Brussels young socialists from all EU countries. With meetings and discussions on up-to-date EU policies and a regulars' table FoBYES' target is to create a common identity of young European socialists living in Brussels.

As a lot of socialist parties and their youth organisations have local branches in Brussels, FoBYES could already welcome at its very first meeting, activists from 8 different countries. In addition to the meetings which provide a space to debate European subjects, FoBYES wants to create room to get engaged into Brussels local life, for example by becoming active during the Brussels

local elections in October 2006.

After the launch meeting, FoBYES met again on 1 May to celebrate Labour Day, and then again in June for a city tour in collaboration with the Flemish Belgian young socialists, ANIMO, who explained the evolution of the European quarter.

After the summer break FoBYES will continue its' meetings and the Forum would like to welcome many young Labour activists. Anyone interested can send an e-mail to nilswoerner@pes.org asking to be added on to the mailing list.

Anyone interested in participating can also subscribe to the FoBYES mailing list at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/youngsocialists/>.

*Tilman Schwenke
SPD Brussels*

LABOUR PARTY

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

BRUSSELS LABOUR BREAKFAST MEETING

Brussels Labour will once again be holding an event at the forthcoming Party conference in September following the success of our fringe event at Blackpool in the Spring.

We will be co-hosting the international breakfast with the EPLP on Tuesday 26 September. The theme of the meeting will be international and European aspects of the climate change challenge and David Miliband is confirmed as our keynote speaker. More details will be circulated soon.

Sarah Millar



BRUSSELS LABOUR ON THE INTERNET

AN OPPORTUNITY TO DESIGN AND CONTRIBUTE

Brussels Labour's website is intended to be a resource for all party members. It is a place to advertise what's going on, but also to access policy documents, meeting minutes and other information. The current site is not ideal - in particular it is difficult to add pictures or files to it, and the colour scheme is not as user-friendly as we would like - so we are

trying to improve on this. We'd be very grateful for help with this from anyone who has experience of website design.

We also now have a .eu registration, so the site should soon be available at www.brusselslabour.eu too.

Keir Fitch



BRUSSELS LABOUR SUMMER SOCIAL

The Brussels Labour Summer Social was hosted by Maggie Coulthard and Peter Wragg and we were pleased to welcome members of the branch, both old and new. Held on a balmy July evening, members soaked up the sun from Maggie and Peter's back garden and enjoyed this customary opportunity for informal political chitchat. Many thanks to Maggie and Peter for their hospitality. We look forward to seeing you all at the next social!