

UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS ö AN EU AGREEMENT FOR TOUGHER MEASURES ON THE AVIATION INDUSTRY

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Like many others, Iâm sure, I often lie awake at night worrying about work ö and in my case, Iâm constantly turning over in my mind how to make the most of being one of just two Green MEPs in the UK. The election of Jean Lambert and I to the European Parliament in June 1999 was a breakthrough for the Green Party, which ö owing to an archaic voting system in this country ö had never happened before at national level. The switch of voting system to a form of more proportional representation brought the UK into line with other European countries where PR has meant Greens have been elected within a couple of years of forming. Here in the UK, we were elected as soon as PR was introduced ö but more than a quarter of a century after the party was founded!

It was an unbelievably wonderful moment when the last results were in and we finally discovered that I had won a seat in the South East, by the skin of my teeth, with just 251 votes to spare.

The euphoria lasted many weeks, but before long it began to be tinged with another emotion ö the question of how to make the most of this opportunity, how to be most effective in building green politics in the UK? Which issues to focus on? And the eternal question of how to get the balance right between parliamentary work, and work in my vast constituency, covering over 80 Westminster constituencies and 11 million people?

From the start I was absolutely clear that the greatest impact I could have would not be simply by dotting ãlãs and crossing ãtãs in the debating chamber in Strasbourg. While some of that is clearly important, I came to feel that, far more important, was the opportunity my position could give me to get greater media coverage about green politics in the UK, and ö through talks to all kinds of groups, from schools and community groups to business and industry - to try to inspire more people to see the importance and urgency of green politics.

I also strongly believe that the best chance for change occurs as a result of the creative interface between inter and extra parliamentary activity. To me, one of the strengths of green politics is in combining citizensâ actions with the parliamentary process, and in my work, I have looked for ways of achieving that. My arrest at the Faslane nuclear submarine base during a mass protest against nuclear weapons is one example ö my experiences at the now infamous World Trade Organisationâs Ministerial Meeting in Seattle, another. As a member of the Parliamentâs Trade Committee, I was able to attend the WTO talks as part of the Parliamentâs official delegation. It was a fascinating, and perhaps unique, experience ö at one moment, to be part of the demonstrations on the streets, at the next, to pass through into some of the official meetings, taking the politics of the street into the parliamentary process.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution which the Greens made in the discussions and debates at Seattle was the fact that we were almost alone in talking about the need to reduce the overall volume of international trade, and to shift away from trying to achieve ever greater competitiveness, focusing instead on building local and regional economies and communities. The need for an urgent debate on this subject, which many still regard as heresy, was recently demonstrated by the publication of the governmentâs White Paper on Globalisation, which wholeheartedly and uncritically embraces globalisation as a positive force for poverty eradication, and illustrates Clare Shortâs blind faith in the drive to open up markets in poor countries. She brands anyone who disagrees as ãintolerableã green protestors and ãself-indulgentã anti-globalisation demonstrators (Short, *The Observer*, December 2000). Yet if Shortâs alternative vision for the population of Africa is seriously that they devote more land to exporting mangetout and cut flowers to the North, as the White Paper suggests, rather than being able to rebuild their own local and regional economies, then Iâll settle for being ãintolerable.ã

Certainly I believe my role is to continue to ask uncomfortable questions inside the corridors of power. At the recent EU Summit in Nice, which was to pave the way for enlargement of the EU, I was there asking just who was driving this enlargement process, and in whose interests? For while the principle of enlargement is clearly important, it must mean more than the narrowly focused free trade agenda at the heart of the current enlargement process, whose beneficiaries are the business conglomerates, licking their lips at the thought of vast new markets on their doorsteps. Zygmunt Tyszkiewicz, former Director General of UNICE (Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe), sums up this approach: "In the West we are already consuming everything that we are able to consume. You cannot drive two cars at the same time. So we have a slow growth economy. To the East of us, we have around a hundred million people with sophisticated tastes who lack all the items we are already consuming. They need those items."

My own contact with business and industry in the EU has come through my role as author of a report for the Parliament's Transport Committee on the impact of the aviation industry on the environment. Aviation is the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions, partly because aviation fuel is currently exempt from tax and from the obligations of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce CO2 emissions.

The report was the target of intense lobbying by airlines, aircraft manufacturers, airport operators and freight companies. Given that this report marked the very beginning of a much longer legislative process, and at this stage was simply setting out the broad areas where legislation might be forthcoming, I found this level of attention extraordinary. Not only was I approached innumerable times for meetings, my report was painstakingly analysed, line by line, by a number of industry groups, one of which – the Association of European Airlines – helpfully compiled its own list of amendments to it – which members of the UK Conservative party obligingly submitted en bloc.

The arguments from these lobbyists were broadly the same: their part of the aviation industry really cared about the environment. They recycled their paper or put aside a corner of an airport as a nature reserve, so why should we pick on them? We should target other industries, like railways, for example, which use damaging herbicides to keep weeds down on the track beds! However, perhaps one ray of hope is that the lobbyists didn't try to argue that the environment doesn't matter: they all started from the standpoint that it was indeed important – and that's unlikely to have been the approach had the discussions taken place ten years ago.

One of the dilemmas in drafting the report was how ambitious to be in our proposals – to simply cut and paste the relevant section of the Green Party's manifesto, or to settle for something much less progressive, but with a more realistic chance of success? In fact, on this occasion, we were able to maintain a strong report and, in spite of the corporate lobbying onslaught, succeeded in convincing enough of our parliamentary colleagues about aviation's growing contribution to climate change. As a result, tougher measures than we expected were agreed, including:

- A 5% greenhouse gas emission reduction target for aviation – the same as other industries under the Kyoto Agreement, but from which aviation has until now been exempt
- Support for a worldwide kerosene tax – to end the anomaly whereby aviation pays no tax on its fuel
- Environmental charges on flights using EU airports
- New initiatives to reduce noise from aircraft based on World Health Organisation guidelines, and the designation of "noise sensitive" airports.

We are now waiting for the directives and regulations from the European Commission in response to this decision. I'm hopeful that Commission will be tough when they draft these, as their officials were being very encouraging throughout the process.

At the same time, I have also been involved in a number of campaigns against airport expansion in the South East of England. The government's own figures suggest that the numbers of passengers

passing through UK airports is likely to more than double in the next 20 years – that would require the equivalent of 4 new Heathrows, or 8 new Gatwicks simply to cope with the increase. Finding ways to reduce these numbers is therefore urgent and essential – and also very difficult, particularly since communicating a subject like this is prone to attract tabloid headlines along the lines of “Greens want to ban foreign holidays”

While this whole exercise was a fascinating lesson in corporate lobbying, it is also a microcosm of the dilemmas we face in shifting towards a very different kind of economy – one not based on fossil fuels. In the light of the recommendation from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for cuts of 60% by 2050, we need to be making dramatic changes now - and because the North bears the overwhelming responsibility for global warming and, in the interests of equity, should take on the greater burden of adjustment, the scale of the cuts we need to make are more likely in the order of 80%.

The mountain we still have to climb in persuading people of this was demonstrated during last year’s fuel protests. When the hauliers and farmers gathered in Hyde Park at the end of their 60 day deadline, a group of us from the Green Party and Transport 2000 blockaded the trucks as they drove along Park Lane. Perhaps surprisingly, the fuel protestors let me address them to put the case for maintaining high taxes. Feeling a little like Daniel in the Lion’s Den, I explained that the real fuel crisis is that motorists still expect to drive as much as ever, despite the climate now changing - scientists finding water at the North Pole where there’s been ice for 50 million years, and Britain suffering the worst floods for 50 years. While the drivers mostly listened courteously, it’s fair to say that I didn’t convince many.

Yet it seems to me that governments will be afraid of making the enormous changes that are needed to respond to the challenge of climate change (a massive investment in renewable energies, for example, with compensation and retraining for those currently in unsustainable industries) unless they believe public opinion is behind them. And in order to build that public opinion, we badly need some creative ideas - perhaps we need a mass Campaign on Climate Change, learning from the success of the Jubilee 2000 Campaign on debt?

In terms of challenges ahead, certainly one of them will be how to make the EU less distant and irrelevant to most people’s lives, and how best to achieve the enormous reforms which the EU desperately needs – to the Common Agricultural Policy, to fisheries policy, to trade policy, and to issues of peace and defence.

An important question is for how long will working for reform from within continue to be a credible and legitimate objective? One significant change at Nice was that protestors are now putting the EU in the same category as the World Bank, IMF and the WTO – as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. While I share that analysis, on balance, I believe that the case for green politics is probably still best put by being within the EU – but that position is in a state of constant renegotiation.

We are elected for 5 years – that means new elections will be held in June 2004. My biggest fear, on re-standing for election, would be that some people would say: “Where were you? We never even knew we had a Green MEP?” Given the size of the constituency, it will be impossible for me to visit every single town and village, even in 5 years. There could be some legitimacy in their complaint. What to do? Any thoughts anyone else has on how I can sleep more restfully at night would be gratefully received!