

Richard Corbett MEP

Labour Member of the European Parliament
for Yorkshire & Humber

Quarterly Report
Autumn 2014

1. Reflections on the European elections

It seems like an age since the May European elections, but they were only a few short months ago.

On the positive side, we beat the Tories for the first time in 20 years in a European election. Our vote went up significantly, and we saw an increase in our number of MEPs, from 13 to 20. Unlike the Conservatives, Labour now has MEPs from every region in Britain. Half of our MEPs are new, and the majority are women. The same day's local election saw Labour make 338 gains and make significant progress in the target seats that we need to win in 2015.

Although I'm delighted to have won my seat back from the BNP, it was disappointing that we so narrowly failed to take a third seat in the region — by about 1%! Eleanor Tunnicliffe, who was third on Labour's team, would have made a fantastic MEP. Our other candidates (Asghar Khan, Helen Mirfin-Boukouris, Darren Hughes) also worked tirelessly. The team of 6 candidates spread out over the 54 constituencies in the region, each joining a different local team of campaigners every day. I was asked to pay particular attention to Calder Valley, Colne Valley and Keighley but in all I campaigned in a total

of 30 constituencies. I also did six hustings debates with candidates from other parties, including the ITV Calendar debate. But the biggest thanks go to our hardworking party members — and, of course, our voters!

Of course, a strong result for UKIP had been expected. But talk of a sudden surge to right-wing eurosceptic parties is exaggerated. It's worth reflecting that the previous vote share for UKIP plus the BNP in the European elections five years ago was 25%. If you add just 5% from disgruntled Tories (of which there are now plenty!), then UKIP's starting point this time should have been a minimum of 30%, even before taking a single vote from Labour. That they only got 26.6% of the vote means that they're actually going backwards, as they also did in the local elections compared to last year.

But even so, that figure is far too high, and we must work hard to drive them down further.

I think it's a mistake to focus exclusively on UKIP's racism. That unsavoury side of UKIP has been adequately exposed by others. Those who still vote for them are either unconvinced, or don't mind

or don't care whether they are racist. We need to expose them on their policies: flat rate taxation, NHS privatisation, ending parental leave and so on. Most people I met on the doorstep during the campaign were blissfully unaware of these policies, and quite shocked to learn of them.

We also needed to point out repeatedly that UKIP tells lies about Europe, and that their policy of walking out of the EU is extremely risky when so many jobs depend on our close relationship with our neighbouring countries. Far better to stay in and improve, change and reform the EU than to walk out, slamming the door.

UKIP and the Tories outspent us with seven-figure sums, in UKIP's case thanks to some massive donations from millionaires like Yorkshire property magnate Paul Sykes. At the end of the day, it came down to UKIP's expensive billboards (plus favourable media) versus Labour's volunteer campaigners knocking on doors. Labour had more activists out on polling day than all the other parties combined. We knocked on 7 million doors in this campaign. Our party is reconnecting with voters conversation by conversation,

doorstep by doorstep, street by street.

David Cameron spent the campaign showing his weakness by talking about an EU referendum in which he can't even tell us which way he'll vote. Rather than tackling the problems in our economy, the Tories look set to make them worse by making departure from the EU a real threat, damaging inward investment and jeopardising jobs in our country. How long until the Tories split asunder on Europe?

As for the Lib Dems, theirs was a disastrous result. They lost all but one of their MEPs (admittedly making it harder for them to continue to face two ways on the same issue!).

So, despite improved showing by Labour, the overall results were a mixed bag — not least because of extraordinarily skewed media coverage across the board. The big challenges for Labour on Europe are clear: we must redouble our efforts to communicate the benefits of our EU membership, and we must continue to work with our allies from across Europe to steer the EU in a direction that makes a positive contribution to people's lives.

2. New Parliament...

Looking at political balance, the effects of the European Parliament election results will be important, but not in the way that many casual observers suppose.

The significant number of MEPs from 'anti-system' parties is much commented upon, with suggestions that this could render the European Parliament incapable of adopting any new legislation, let alone major reforms, paralyzing the EU. This is incorrect, for a number of reasons.

The European Parliament has always had 'anti-system' parties. Every election since 1979 has produced at least 10% of Members who would like to end the Union as we know it or see their country leave it. This is not new, even if the magnitude has now reached 18%. Such parties have in the past not succeeded in disrupting Parliament, and many of their members do not engage in committee work or even attend — the new crop are shaping up to be no different in this regard.

Hardline eurosceptic parties diverge widely in their critique of the Union, from an ultra-nationalist perspective to the libertarian right, ultra left, or those harbouring a particular grievance against the EU. A united force they are not.

Even those sharing a right/far-right perspective find it difficult to work together. UKIP barely managed to cobble together enough 'allies' to form a fringe parliamentary group, and then only through forming alliances of convenience with some even more unsavoury characters elected in other countries. How long the fragile coalition will stay together remains to be seen, especially if UKIP suffers the same rate of attrition as it did in the last Parliament, with some 50% of its members being lost to defections, criminal convictions, infighting, resignations and so on.

What the anti-system parties' presence does — and an increased presence makes almost inevitable — is to cement the 'grand coalition' style of the EP, at least when it comes to the adoption of legislation or the budget. Securing the necessary majorities requires making compromises and negotiating deals across the centre, with the centre-right EPP and the Socialists forced to find agreement (often with Liberals and Greens on board, though not usually the Conservatives).

But this consensual, rather than adversarial, way of doing politics has always been prominent in the

European Parliament. Indeed, it is unavoidable in a Union of 28 diverse countries with different political situations. Legislation is never rammed through the EU system by a narrow left-wing or right-wing majority — in the Council

of Ministers a qualified majority comprises 74% of the votes, so a broad majority of politically diverse governments is always required and a large majority of mainstream parties in Parliament is almost always sought.

3. ...new responsibilities...

One of the most significant early decisions MEPs have taken in the new Parliament is how to divide up the work of the important parliamentary committees. Of the six committee chairs allocated to the Socialist & Democrat Group, two have been won by Labour MEPs. Claude Moraes MEP has become chair of the committee that deals with security and crime issues, and my Yorkshire colleague Linda McAvan now chairs the one dealing with international development. This is quite an achievement for Labour, and a mark of respect from our colleagues from other countries as well as the negotiating skills of our leader, Glenis Willmott.

I was pleased with my own committee allocations (as a humble member, of course, not as chair):

constitutional affairs (which will deal with any systemic reform of the EU in the coming years), fishing (a vital interest for Yorkshire & Humber), and economic & monetary affairs (vital for all).

Moreover, I am delighted that my fellow Labour MEPs elected me as their **Deputy Leader**. I pledged to work hard to make the Labour MEPs an effective force in Parliament, continuing to punch above our weight, to help secure a Labour victory in the general election and vigorously to join in the debate about Europe in our country, where misinformation currently abounds.

I was also elected by my colleagues to represent them on the **Labour National Policy Forum**.

4. ...and a new team

I was lucky to be able to return to my old constituency office in Leeds, sharing the building with Hilary Benn MP. I advertised for staff and was taken aback by the high number of applications received. As I knew many applicants, to preserve objectivity, I arranged for the shortlisting to be done not by me but by independent evaluators, scoring candidates according to several criteria that I had defined. I then interviewed the shortlisted candidates who also undertook a written test.

The result of this process is that I now have a small but perfectly-formed team in place:

- **Jessica Watts** oversees the smooth running of both offices in Yorkshire and Parliament, including coordinating staff and ensuring compliance with Parliament's transparency and auditing requirements.
- **Toby Wardman** coordinates my communications, including

press and media activities, with a particular focus on improving the quality of the UK debate about Europe.

- **Nick Elles** works in Parliament as a political researcher, helping me with my work on the Constitutional Affairs and Economic Affairs committees.
- **Tomas Spragg** liaises with Brussels-based media and coordinates social media activities, as well as helping me with my work of the Fisheries committee.
- **Hannah Hannah** coordinates the Leeds office, arranges local events and liaises with constituents from Yorkshire & Humber.

My constituency office phone number is 0113 2430554. More details about my team, including other ways to contact them (or me), are on my rapidly growing website at www.richardcorbett.org.uk.

5. Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)

Although I have only been back in my office for a couple of months, I already have a very full postbag from constituents!

The biggest issue in the public eye at the moment seems to be the negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (the US-EU free trade deal).

Labour MEPs and our fellow members of the Socialist Group in the EP have made it clear that we are opposed to the agreement if it includes threats to the NHS (or indeed other public

services), or the proposed State-Investor dispute mechanism that would allow companies to sue governments for losses incurred because of policy changes. We seem to be winning this debate in the European Parliament, whose approval is necessary to ratify any agreement, and even among many governments. However, we are not against the principle of a trade deal if it's satisfactory in those respects.

So to sum up: no to a bad deal, yes to a good one. We're on the case, and confident of winning.

6. 'Clean coal' technology for Drax

The White Rose Project, centred on the Drax power station near Selby, will receive €300m of European funding for building a new power plant, with harmful gases captured and piped for storage under the North Sea.

This project kickstarts the wider carbon capture and storage process, one of the great hopes for

'clean coal' to cut carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Yorkshire has been chosen as Europe's first testbed for this new technology, which is also expected to support around 2000 jobs.

My fellow Labour MEP Linda McAvan played a key role in setting this up.

7. European Regional Policy Forum

Our annual regional policy forum on European issues will be held at Meadowhall, near Sheffield, on the morning of Saturday 8 November. These are always enjoyable and worthwhile events, open to all party members in the region, with a high-profile keynote speaker followed by plenty of opportunity for members to debate EU policy issues. It's also where Linda and I can report back to party members on our work.

Linda McAvan and I have agreed to take turns in organising these events, and Linda's office will be coordinating things this time around.

Details of the keynote speaker and how to book tickets will be announced soon, but if you would like to make sure of your place, email lindamcavan@lindamcavanmep.org.uk.

Find out more online

My new website, www.richardcorbett.org.uk, is updated daily with news, views and analysis on EU and Labour Party topics. If you subscribe to my newsletter online, you'll be sent an email (maximum once per day) whenever I add new content.

You can also follow me on Twitter [@rcorbettmep](https://twitter.com/rcorbettmep), or on Facebook by 'liking' **Richard Corbett MEP**.

As a group of Labour MEPs, we also have a shared website where you can read the latest press releases, download resources and browse all the UK's MEPs. www.eurolabour.org.uk

Meetings and events attended since election

(other than regular parliamentary meetings) * denotes events where I was a speaker

Yorkshire & Humber

ShIPLEY CLP*
Leeds Central CLP*
Leeds East CLP*
Leeds West CLP*
Bradford South CLP
Bradford East fundraiser*
Doncaster Central CLP*
Colne Valley campaign launch
Calder Valley office launch*
Elmet & Rothwell office launch
York CLP campaigning
ShIPLEY CLP social
Wakefield CLP social
Leeds NW CLP socials*
Morley & Outwood and Pontefract & Castleford social
Labour Party Regional Board
Grimsby fish market and ports authority
ICLS Conference, Ilkley*
Play (Theatre in the Mill): 'Orgreave or the Civil War'
Head of Development, Leeds Bradford Airport
Srebrenica anniversary commemoration, Bradford
Srebrenica anniversary commemoration, Leeds
Kashmiri martyrs' day, Bradford
Tour de France
Kirkwood Hospice, Huddersfield

Brussels, Strasbourg

FEPS conference*
Australia & New Zealand diplomats from across Europe*
Brussels Labour branch*
European Broadcasting Union*
CEPS*
LGBT event
Pro Europa event*
Various diplomats
Various candidate Commissioners
Thalidomide victims' campaign
Eli Lily
Gordon Brown
INMA
RSPB
RSPCA
Born Free
Simon Walker, Institute of Directors
EEF
BBA
ETUC
Nicky Morgan MP, Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Treasury economic team
Tyson Barker, Senior Advisor to the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs
House of Lords EU subcommittee*
Visit to Ypres
Lord Wallace of Saltaire

London

Open Europe debate*
Various MPs
Labour Party National Policy Forum (in Milton Keynes)
European Commission representation to the UK
European Movement event*
New Zealand High Commission
Waterloo 200th anniversary committee
DEFRA

Party conference

Many meetings with delegates and MPs
LME*
Policy Network*
Open Europe*
European Commission*
Gareth Thomas MP, Shadow Europe Minister

Media interviews

BBC 6 o'clock news
BBC News channel (2x)
BBC Panorama
BBC Radio 4
The Economist
The Observer
Euraktiv
Grimsby Telegraph
Sky News (2x)
Belgian (Flemish) radio
French radio

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