

# **Richard Corbett MEP**

Labour Member of the European Parliament  
for Yorkshire & Humber

Quarterly Report

Spring 2015

Welcome to my second quarterly report since I was re-elected last year.

As always, I try to give a flavour of the kinds of battles Labour MEPs are fighting at European level.

I have also been active in the UK, trying to improve the quality of discussion on European issues. I've been elected as Vice-Chair of the European Movement UK and joined the executive of the Labour Movement for Europe.

I hope both these organisations can play an important role in our national debate over the coming months and years.



Richard

## 1. Charlie Hebdo massacre

MEPs were as horrified as the rest of the world by the series of terrorist attacks in Paris this January. Parliament held two minutes' silence to commemorate the attacks, and many Labour MEPs (including me) attended a spontaneous gathering in Brussels on the evening of the attacks.

Reflecting on the tragic events of those few days, what strikes me most clearly is the nature of the massive worldwide reaction to the atrocity. It's not just recognising that the affected people are like us — it's that they literally *are* us. An attack on freedom of the press is literally an attack on all of us. An

attack on fellow European citizens is literally an attack on all of us. An attack on part of our community of allies and friends is literally an attack on all of us. If you assault one of us, you assault all of us, from all backgrounds.

It's telling that the slogan and hashtag that emerged within minutes of the news breaking, spread like wildfire across the internet, and was prominent on the spectacular photos of spontaneous mass public gatherings around the world was not just an expression of solidarity. It was an expression of identity and unity: Je suis Charlie.

## 2. Regional funding hiatus

The government's abolition of the UK's Regional Development Agencies have left the EU bereft of a regional partner to administer European regional and social funding.

The government's replacement option of channelling the funding through Whitehall departments to Local Enterprise Partnerships

has not yet been accepted by the European Commission, as the government has not answered questions about accountability for decisions and spending.

Meetings are now underway to resolve the issues, but it has led to a disastrous delay in funding at a time when regional investment is most needed.

## 3. Commission investment plan

Levels of public and private investment across Europe are still well below pre-crisis levels. Under pressure from the Socialist group in the European Parliament, the Commission has put forward a plan to use matched money from

the EU budget and the European Investment Bank to leverage large-scale low-interest loans totalling €300billion over the next few years aimed at infrastructure investments which target growth and jobs.

## 4. Palestinian recognition

The European Parliament voted in late December to encourage member states in recognising Palestine as a state.

Recognition of states is not something Parliament can do directly, but it was still hailed as an important step towards a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

## 5. Small businesses and VAT

Changes to the way businesses charge VAT on services to consumers in other EU countries were introduced at the start of the year. The intention of these changes (agreed back in 2008 and supported by Labour) was to prevent multinational corporations from avoiding tax and gaining an unfair advantage by moving to the EU country with the lowest rate of VAT and charging that to everyone — an option not available to smaller businesses.

However, the way it has been implemented in Britain leaves a lot to be desired, with woefully inadequate help and advice from HMRC, as there are significant challenges for small businesses and sole traders in administering VAT sales under the new system. Among the concerns were three big worries.

First, many small businesses feel that these changes have been forced upon them at short notice, and without any transitional help so that they can adapt. The

changes required to e-commerce and administrative systems seem prohibitively complex.

Second, communication from the UK government about the rule changes has come very late, and been of poor quality. Many small businesses have not had access to good advice about what services are covered, how they are supposed to apply the rules, how to collect the customer information that the rules seem to imply, and how to register for the one-stop shop set up by HMRC supposedly to simplify the process.

Third, the lack of a threshold for charging VAT means that many businesses who previously did not charge VAT at all now have to implement systems to do so when selling to other EU countries (although the existing threshold still applies to UK sales).

Labour MEPs are now applying pressure to both the European Commission and the UK government to address the impact on small businesses.

## 6. Climate change deal

The EU has agreed new climate change targets for 2030, including a 40% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions across Europe by then.

## 7. Fisheries reform

In 2013, the EU agreed the biggest ever reform of its Common Fisheries Policy — hailed as a breakthrough even by Greenpeace.

One of the most important new measures is the landing obligation, which aims to eliminate the wasteful practice of discarding fish caught over quota. Measures to implement this overdue change are under threat of being watered down by an alliance of centre-right MEPs trying to delay or derail them.

The European Parliament's fisheries committee voted in December on measures to bring existing laws in line with the reform, but some in the committee who were unhappy with the reform tried to use the vote to throw the core principles of the reform overboard.

I was the representative of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament for the final negotiations on the legislation with the Council of Ministers, and fortunately the attempted rearguard action was thwarted.

## 8. Migration debate

The debate about migration rumbles on in the UK, and I have contributed to several media broadcast debates and panels.

Cameron continues to allow UKIP to set the tone of the debate. Both UKIP and the Tories have adopted the strategy of blaming our EU membership for the UK's migration issues and using this to justify their demands for EU changes. In fact, the vast majority of migrants in the UK are from outside the EU and so it's completely up to us how to deal with this.

Among EU migrants, there's an almost equal balance between other EU citizens living here, and UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU — and EU migrants make a significant contribution to our economy, paying far more in taxes than they take out in benefits and services.

Migration is certainly an important issue, but the debate should be fact-based and not manipulated as another excuse to bash Europe.

## 9. EU reform

I have continued to write articles and give interviews on Cameron's plans for EU 'reform'.

As the election approaches, he is being forced to hint at what reforms he actually wants to see. He has delayed doing so as long as possible, knowing that no achievable reform will meet the demands of the Tory eurosceptic right wing — their impossibilist demands are calculated to drive Britain towards a disastrous EU exit. Cameron's hints remain vague, but have all the hallmarks of being designed to play well to the eurosceptic gallery without actually achieving anything.

His plan, of course, is one of double blackmail: first to force EU allies to make concessions by threatening that the UK might leave, and then to offer the British people a referendum choice only between his Conservative style of Europe (perhaps with a weakened social chapter and workers' rights, as well as various reactionary changes on the subject of migration) or no Europe (which would be economic suicide).

The risk is obvious. The first blackmail depends on him making British exit seem plausible, but in the second he will argue the opposite. It could all end in tears.

## 10. Regional Policy Forum

At the end of last year, Linda McAvan MEP and I hosted a very successful Regional Policy Forum in Sheffield for party members. The subject under discussion was the proposed Transatlantic Trade

and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the USA. Presentations from my colleagues John Healey MP and Jude Kirton-Darling MEP were followed by lively debate among some 90 delegates.

## 11. Visit to European Parliament

Councillor Liz Nash is arranging a visit to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 27 October 2015. Please contact Liz for further details, on [elizabeth.nash@leeds.gov.uk](mailto:elizabeth.nash@leeds.gov.uk) or 0113 275 8594.

## Meetings and events attended since November 2014

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

### Yorkshire & Humber

Doorstep campaigning in Bradford, Shipley, Leeds, Keighley, Elmet & Rothwell, Grimsby  
Skipton & Ripon CLP\*  
Morley & Outwood CLP\*  
East Yorkshire CLP\*  
Harrogate & Knaresborough CLP\*  
Selby & Ainsty CLP\*  
Leeds Central CLP  
Haltemprice & Howden CLP\*  
York Fabians AGM\*  
Beverley & Holderness CLP\*  
Wakefield CLP\*  
Shipley CLP\*  
Fundraising event with Pat McFadden MP  
Brussels Labour  
Remembrance Sunday ceremony, Hull  
Co-operative Party dinner  
TTIP rally, Hull  
European Movement AGM, York\*  
UN Association conference, Sheffield\*  
GMB, Wakefield  
Tesco Neighbourhood Food Collection, Leeds  
Michael Green, Leeds United supporters  
British Youth Council Regional Convention, Wakefield  
Local businesses with Hugh Bayley MP, York  
Ralph Thoresby School\*  
Kashmir solidarity day\*

### Brussels, Strasbourg

Fisheries NGOs  
Leeds journalism students  
Seas at Risk  
Andrea Leadsom MP, Economic Secretary to the Treasury  
Bradford & Keighley magistrates\*  
Pro Europa\*  
Greenpeace  
National Farmers' Union  
Premiere of film on Altiero Spinelli  
Centre for European Policy Studies\*  
Irish journalists' seminar\*  
No Tax Havens  
S&D roundtable\*  
Ambassador of Pakistan  
Ambassador of Netherlands  
FIIA-TEPSA seminar on next steps re EMU\*  
British Chambers of Commerce\*  
Higher Education Academy  
Policy Network\*  
Turkish Business & Industry Association  
Danish School of Journalism  
George Eustice MP, UK fisheries minister  
Cllr Kevin Peel, Committee of the Regions  
Liverpool Labour visitors group\*  
Public Affairs event on transparency\*  
Jammu & Kashmir delegation  
Martin Schulz, President of Parliament  
European conference of Sikh remembrance

EP-EUI policy roundtable  
Trade union intergroup  
Animal welfare intergroup  
Henry Murison YBS  
Vince Cable MP  
Treasury Head of Economic Affairs  
Norwegian MPs\*  
Economic attaches of UK embassies across Europe\*  
Royal Mail CEO  
Labour MEPs/City of London meeting  
Waterloo 200 operating committee  
Drax power station  
European Anglers' Alliance  
American Chamber of Commerce  
British Retail Consortium  
Professor Richard Rose

### London & others

European Movement\*  
Labour Movement for Europe\*  
Finnish Institute of International Affairs\*

### Media interviews

ITV news  
BBC TV news  
BBC Jeremy Vine show  
Sky News  
BBC World  
BBC radio  
various local radio  
LBC radio  
French radio  
Euronews debate  
Various newspapers and online publications

## Constituency mailbag

I received about **10,000** emails and letters in total since November. The top three issues of concern from my mailbag are:

TTIP

Cosmetic testing on animals

Conflict minerals

## Website traffic

Since November, about **11,800** different people have visited my website. Most popular content:

Blog post on Cameron's reforms

Blog post on Greek elections

Blog post on small businesses and VAT reform

## Find out more online

My website, [www.richardcorbett.org.uk](http://www.richardcorbett.org.uk), is updated regularly 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 have a shared website where you can read press releases, download resources and browse all Labour representatives in the European Parliament. [www.eurolabour.org.uk](http://www.eurolabour.org.uk)

You can download a copy of this report in electronic format from [www.richardcorbett.org.uk](http://www.richardcorbett.org.uk), where you can also view my previous quarterly reports and read regular updates from my blog.

To request printed copies, including in an alternate format or in large print, please email [richard@richardcorbett.org.uk](mailto:richard@richardcorbett.org.uk).