

eastern Agenda



Newsletter from Andrew Duff MEP

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Fighting for the Alternative: Changing the Way We Vote



Andrew Duff speaks to the annual congress of the European Liberals (ELDR) in Helsinki in October. He argued for the electoral reform of the European Parliament.

The coalition government is winning a reputation for being radical, not least in the matter of austerity cuts. As the junior partner of the coalition, we Liberal Democrats must work hard to extend the radical zeal across other areas – particularly into constitutional reform.

The big test is the referendum on introducing the Alternative Vote (AV) which is to be held on the same day as the local elections next year, Thursday 5 May. This will be the one and only shot we get at electoral reform in the life of this parliament. Never mind that AV is not truly proportional, there is a good case to be made for it on its own terms. The argument for AV is:

- AV maintains the direct link between an MP and his or her constituency;
- AV reduces the need for tactical voting as electors can vote for their first choice without fear of wasting their vote;
- AV is more inclusive, letting more voters influence the outcome;



Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
Alliance des Démocrates et des Libéraux pour l'Europe

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- AV will encourage political parties to campaign more positively in order to attract the lower preferences of voters whose top choice is another party;
- AV will also go some way to restoring the credibility of the House of Commons: each MP will enjoy an equal and responsible democratic mandate.

Winning this referendum across the East of England is my top priority. I am encouraging pro-reformers in the Labour party to join us in this campaign. Many will do so. We can also expect that liberal Tories will not campaign actively against the change to AV - which leaves the reactionary core of the Conservative party as the main opponent of a Yes vote.

Canvassing on the doorstep, few people are interested in the mechanics of a change in the voting system. But almost everyone wants to clean up the House of Commons by reducing the number of safe seats. And a large majority approves of the current experiment in coalition politics where two opposing parties are working to agree with each other for the public good. AV will make coalition politics the norm.

'How often do you go to Europe, then?'

Answering the most common question put to MEPs, Andrew Duff describes his recent life.

Back to work in Brussels on 30 August, I spoke to a summer school organised by the European Liberal Democrat and Reform party (ELDR). Summer schools are a notable feature of French-style politics. They're like a cross between our party conferences and a book festival, and they succeed in keeping political thought fairly lively.

The rest of the week was spent in meetings of my parliamentary group, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). (To avoid confusion, ALDE combines the MEPs from the ELDR party and those from France and Italy who call themselves 'Democrats' rather than 'Liberals'.) We prepare the ground for the first plenary session in Strasbourg after the brief summer break.

I host a crowded reception in the garden of the new offices of the Union of European Federalists, which I chair. Around the corner from the Parliament, the UEF team is happily ensconced in a pretty cottage - apparently built in the garden of a larger house by a previous owner for his mistress.

Back in Cambridge on Saturday, we throw a reception at the Science Park for the party's many new members from the East of England. I am impressed at the relative youth of the good turnout, and by how many people have joined the party because of national and international affairs rather than the usual local politics.

On Tuesday in Strasbourg the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso makes his annual 'state of the Union' speech. Not quite Obama, but still a spirited defence of the Commission's action to square up to the financial and economic crisis.

As I take a keen interest in EU-Turkey relations, I have several meetings about the important constitutional referendum in Turkey which took place on 12 September. (Encouragingly, it worked.)

On my way back home, I drop in on *Notre Europe*, the Paris think-tank set up by Jacques Delors, to discuss a new pamphlet on the electoral reform of the European Parliament. I am the Parliament's rapporteur (draftsman) on the matter, and must use all the tools in the box to carry the campaign.

I even have the courage to raise the matter in front of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, when they came to Brussels on 15 September to take evidence from MEPs. Their new chairman, Richard Ottaway MP, otherwise rational, winces.

I make it to Liverpool for the Lib Dem federal party conference on Saturday in time for the East of England reception, which I host. I do a book signing with Shirley Williams of the new book I have edited in honour of her eightieth birthday. Her stamina is amazing: I leave her still chatting at the *Guardian* reception well after midnight.

EU issues have been carefully excluded from the official conference agenda but the fringe is as lively as ever, and I get to speak at five events before leaving at the crack of dawn on the Tuesday to hot-foot it to Strasbourg via Manchester and Frankfurt.

In September, annoyingly, we have to go to Strasbourg twice, and the second session is devoted mostly to budgetary matters. On Thursday I go to Turin to speak at a conference on the EU's common security and defence policy.

The chief of the Italian defence staff is a bit miffed when I raise doubts about the Afghan campaign. It rains heavily in Turin, but the food is wonderful and I buy a snazzy new leather briefcase to replace one stolen.

Back in Brussels I take part in one of the last of many 'trialogue' meetings between Parliament, Commission and Council of Ministers devoted to the setting up of the new External Action Service. This is the new diplomatic arm of the EU which will work for UK Commissioner Catherine Ashton who doubles as the Union's High Representative for foreign affairs. Poland makes a nuisance about getting as many Poles as possible appointed to the EAS, blunting what should be a meritocratic organisation. But the work is eventually concluded and the EAS will be up and running on 1 December: one of the most effective reforms introduced by the Lisbon treaty in the bag.

As well as a meeting with national MPs on foreign and security policy, I arrange to meet with the presidents of the European People's Party and European Socialist Party about electoral reform. The first, former Belgian prime minister Wilfried Martens is much more supportive than the second, former Danish prime minister Poul-Nyrup Rasmussen.

I chair a meeting of the Federalist Intergroup which brings together pro-European forces from across the House. I explain how a new initiative, the Spinelli Group, will help our work in combating resurgent nationalism.

At a *Financial Times* reception (I have a monthly column on FT.com) I get to speak at length to the new President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. He's far more colourful than he looks, and is nicely expectant of my electoral reform proposals.

A weekend trip to Sherborne in Dorset to try to sell the house of my Mother (who died in June) is doubly depressing. The bottom appears to have fallen out of the property market. I get back to Brussels in time to greet a large number of local government and business representatives from the East of England who have collected for 'Open Days' of networking and briefings.

Nick Clegg makes his first visit to the British Lib Dem MEPs on 5 October. He tells us about the austerity cuts and we discuss business. He remains to be convinced of my argument that the EU treaties will have to be amended in order to save the euro.



Shirley Williams and Andrew Duff sell a book to Dick Roche, Irish Minister of Europe, at the Liverpool conference.

Tomorrow's World: Brussels Learns from Cambridge



Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission, (3rd from right) with scientists and Andrew (right) at the Hauser Forum in Cambridge.

Neelie Kroes is the Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the digital agenda. A Dutch Liberal, Neelie has been a successful businesswoman and earned a formidable reputation in the previous Commission when she was in charge of Europe's competition policy.

On a recent trip to Cambridge, organised by Andrew Duff, Neelie Kroes met leading members of the University's IT community as well as making a visit to ARM, the very successful electronic chip producer which started life with the help of a crucial EU grant.

"Europe faces major challenges to recover from the economic crisis, a changing demographic profile and increasing global competition", says Neelie. "Without smarter technology none of these pressing challenges of the next decade will be solved. From domains as diverse as mobile communications to health, the development of innovative information and communications technology is of strategic importance to Europe. For instance, rolling out new broadband networks for all Europeans could create one million jobs."

Liberal policy

Liberals in the European Commission and Parliament are striving to put science and science-based innovation at the top of the economic agenda. They argue that how we educate tomorrow's scientists and engineers at school and university is a key political question, especially at a time of severe budgetary constraint. Fortunately, spending on science remains well supported in both the EU and UK budgets, although many cost efficiencies and economies of scale can be made by pooling spending at the European level.

Commenting on the successful visit, Andrew Duff said: "Neelie Kroes has the marvellous knack of asking people she meets 'What would you do in my position?'. Would that all Commissioners were so open to new ideas. During the day we saw how the scientific insight can be brought to good use in so many fields outside the physical and social sciences, such as law, philosophy, management and economics.

“Much of the comment from practitioners suggested that Britain’s relatively liberal approach to university education had profited the expansion of scientific research and the commercialisation of science and technology in the East of England. We also learned how a less bureaucratic approach to R&D funding by the European Union would help young entrepreneurs. The system of grant applications, filing for patents and intellectual copyright law adds up to a huge hurdle especially for small business. The EU has a big responsibility in setting the right regulatory environment in which successful businesses can grow. ARM demonstrates it can be done: now selling 6 billion chips a year it aims to sell 20 billion by 2015.”

“It was striking that of the many scientists we met during the visit, many were working in the field of climate change, such as carbon capture and storage, solar energy, tidal turbines and cleaner engines. This chimes in well with the Liberal programme in Europe which puts green technology at the centre of our programme for economic recovery. It is heartening, in these gloomy times, that the message from Commissioner Kroes was clear: where Cambridge leads, others should follow.”

‘Two months in the life of an MEP’: continued from page 3

A Friday in London allows me to meet with John Sharkey, the director of the pro-AV campaign. We discuss tactics and money. I then speak to a conference of my old outfit, the Federal Trust, on the new European policy of the coalition government. I hope I avoid being too hostile.

11 October, and our publishers Biteback, run by Iain Dale, throw a reception in Westminster for Shirley’s new book. Lots of our old friends turn up, including many peers. The books sell out.

Two days of group meetings in Brussels are followed by the ELDR annual congress in Helsinki. I get to give a presentation of my electoral reform plans in front of a lively but fairly sceptical audience, not least the British delegation. I go for a beer which costs me an arm and a leg.

I leave the October Strasbourg session early to be back in Cambridge in time to greet Vice-President of the Commission Neelie Kroes who is responsible for the EU’s digital agenda. We have a great day, and learn a lot. On Friday I go to Norwich to support a campaign on energy efficient buildings. Next day is a student debate in Cambridge, and on Monday a lecture at UCL.

On 26 October, Turkish MPs come to Brussels and behave quite well, but we MEPs fight among themselves. My Greek Cypriot colleagues barely conceal their Turcophobia. I leave for Berlin to meetings in the Bundestag and with the government on electoral reform, economic governance and much else besides. I love Berlin and have to be dragged to the airport from a cafe in the sunshine next to the Brandenburg Gate.

A big conference of the UEF in Brussels means I have to miss, for the first time in twenty years or so, the East of England Lib Dem conference in Huntingdon. A bad agenda clash – but the one thing this job teaches you is that you can’t be in two places at the same time.

And, yes, I do get to go ‘to Europe’!

In Liverpool, Andrew and Dick Roche encourage the FSB to become more pro-European.



Being Surprised by the European Parliament

Cambridge undergraduate and East of England constituent Nick King spent three weeks of work experience with Andrew in the European Parliament in Brussels and Strasbourg. Here are some of his thoughts on the time he spent there:

When many of us think of 'Europe' we often think of complicated bureaucracy, distant legislation and unelected politicians. In fact, the truth could not be more different! Compared to the scandals and disillusionment which has surrounded British politics in the last year or so, my visit to Brussels and Strasbourg was actually a breath of fresh air.

It is ironic that whilst Britain agonises over the merits of the Alternative Vote, in the European Parliament Members have been elected by Proportional Representation for over ten years now and are currently preparing to discuss further improvements to the electoral system proposed by our very own Andrew Duff. The advantage of the European system over Britain's First Past the Post is clear when the results of both elections are compared. The Liberal Democrats gained just under 14 per cent of the vote in the 2009 European elections and just over 15 per cent of the seats – a considerably fairer ratio than in the 2010 General Election where the Liberal Democrats achieved 23 per cent of the vote but less than 9 per cent of the seats.

The existence of a proportional voting system also forces MEPs to work together. In Europe coalitions are not the exception but the rule. This means that MEPs must work with each other rather than against each other and as a result more balanced policy is produced. This cooperative approach is reflected in the layout of the parliamentary rooms which all have circular designs, in contrast to the confrontational set-up in Westminster where one side is pitted against the other. What's more, the buildings of the European Parliament are much more up-to-date than those in London which means that the casting of a vote takes a matter of seconds where in the antiquated House of Commons it could take as long as twenty minutes! Finally, the necessity of translating speeches on the spot means that substance takes precedence over style and rhetoric and spin take a backseat.

Another refreshing sight at the European Parliament was seeing MEPs doing what they are paid to do: that is, not feathering their own nests or that of their political parties, but making and enacting laws. While I was there, the European Parliament discussed such major issues as animal welfare, civil partnerships, financial regulation and funding for scientific research. All these discussions were conducted in a positive and constructive way and without the adversarial kind of political point-scoring which so often characterises Westminster politics. The parliamentary parties discuss draft bills individually and decide a position for the group which MEPs may or may not follow – the office of the whip being considerably weaker than at home. Members then vote on these bills at the monthly plenary session at Strasbourg.

Defending the Roma

One topic I was able to follow from the group meetings in Brussels to the plenary session at Strasbourg was the Parliament's response to France's mass expulsion of the Roma (gypsy) people. Within the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) – the pan-European party of which the British Liberal Democrats are a part – there was universal condemnation of this policy and the Group's Leader,



Nick King learns the ropes.

Guy Verhofstadt, conveyed this opinion to the Commission President. He was joined by the leaders of all but one of the major parliamentary parties and consequently the European Commissioner for Justice, Viviane Reding, strongly denounced the French government's actions and threatened to take them to court if it continued. It was encouraging to see European democracy functioning so efficiently and to observe such a tangible outcome to something that had begun as a movement among MEPs, many from the ALDE group.

Indeed, the more I witnessed in Brussels and Strasbourg, the more I realised that the 'new politics' desired by so many of us in Britain is well on the way to being realised at the European level. It seems to me that while in the past the European Parliament has undoubtedly learnt lessons from its British forbear, now it might be time for the 'Mother of Parliaments' to take heed of its precocious European child.

I had a great time at the European Parliament and I would like to thank Andrew for all his support and kindness during my stay there. It is impossible to know without seeing it first-hand quite how much work and energy Andrew puts into representing the Liberal cause and the concerns of his East of England constituents on the European stage.

He is a greatly liked and respected MEP and a man worthy of holding office in such an important and sophisticated institution. I can only hope that persons of his stature continue to work hard in developing this exciting and ever-evolving European project and sending its message back to the member states where, certainly in the case of Britain, I think its open, fair and cooperative approach in tackling the major issues of today will find much resonance with the British people.



European federalists open their new offices in Brussels.

Stephen Robinson to head up AV 'Yes' Campaign

Congratulations to Chelmsford Lib Dem activist Stephen Robinson who has been appointed East of England regional director of the 'Yes to fairer votes' campaign. Stephen will be responsible for developing the coalition of civil society organisations, business, trades unions and political parties which is uniting to fight for electoral reform for the House of Commons.

Andrew Duff commented: "Stephen is an experienced campaigner and a committed believer in political reform. I can think of nobody better to organise a winning team."

Stephen said: "AV is a small change that makes a big difference. Voters will have a stronger voice; MPs will have to work harder for you to get elected and stay elected; AV means less chance of jobs for life.

It is time for change, and AV addresses the problems at the heart of our system.



Shaping the Agenda

Andrew Duff has published two new books this year.

Making the Difference: Essays in Honour of Shirley Williams, is published by Biteback, and celebrates Shirley's eightieth birthday.

Post-National Democracy and the Reform of the European Parliament, published by Notre Europe, makes the case for electoral reform at the EU level.

For more information about Andrew's work as an MEP see: www.andrewduff.eu and www.federaleurope.org and find me on **facebook** as Andrew Duff MEP



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Booking Now for the AV Campaign!

The referendum campaign to change Britain's unjust and antiquated electoral system begins now.

The 5 May referendum will only be won if Liberal Democrats are engaged from early on.

Invite Andrew Duff to help in your local party effort by fund-raising, public meetings, literature and canvassing.

Contact Tim Huggan at the Cambridge office.

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