

VISIT UNDER THE EU PRESIDENCY

A SAGA OF LAW, MONEY, GARDENS AND WOLVES



FMA Delegation with Tytti Tuppurainen, Minister for European Affairs

The inviolability of the rule of law as the cornerstone of democratic society was a principle repeatedly driven home to our FMA delegation during our visit to the Finnish Presidency in Helsinki.

We were a 26 strong group representing 8 member states led by Richard Balfe. We were fortunate to have an intense high quality programme assembled with help from former colleague Henrik Lax. Over the three days, discussions ranged over many topics - climate change, security, populism, migration, Russia, Brexit - but we kept returning to the rule of law as the top priority of the Finnish presidency.

State Secretary Matti Anttonen showed us how Finland's history illustrated the importance of the rule of law to the Finnish character. Other speakers emphasised how vital the rule of law is to small member states, enabling them to survive and thrive alongside the big powers. Europe Minister Tytti Tuppurainen evoked the image of the rule of law as a beautiful garden where many plants can bloom. The alternative being a jungle where chaos reigns. Just how do you enforce the rule

of law in the EU? The answer ultimately lies with money. During a wide ranging and enjoyable dinner debate with former Commissioner Erkki Liikanen, the importance of a conditionality clause in the future MFF was stressed. No politician wants to tell their constituents that they are responsible for their money tap being turned off.

This visit held particular significance for me as a former chair of the EP/Finland JPC and then rapporteur for Finland's accession. I enjoyed seeing old friends and revisiting old haunts. My former co-chair of the JPC, Matti Vanhanen is now the Speaker of the Parliament having been Prime Minister in the 2006 Finnish Presidency. It was he who mentioned wolves during a discussion on the rise of populism. He explained that during the hunting season, he gets complaints about too many wolves killing hunting dogs. As Finland is tied to EU directives on the protection of wolves, no action can be taken, but people think Finland is the best judge on how to manage the problem.

Populism in Finland finds expression primarily through the Finns Party, currently the most popular party

in the opinion polls. Unfortunately, we were not able to engage with them as their leader did not turn up to our meeting.

When I was rapporteur, I had to give evidence to the Grand Committee which scrutinises Minister's activities and in particular grills them on their work in the European Council. The current chair Satu Hassi, a former colleague, explained the committee's importance as well as setting out the Presidency's priority of tackling climate change.

One fascinating visit was to the Hybrid Centre of Excellence which is a joint EU/Nato body looking at how to combat the new threats to our society including IT sabotage, interference in elections and the impact of climate change.

The delegation also held a seminar with young Finns on the future of Europe. It was a wide ranging debate, but I was struck by how much the discussion reflected the same debates during the Finnish Accession referendum campaign in 1994. Perhaps politics just goes round the same circle!

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Gary Titley
PES, United Kingdom (1989-2009)
g.titley@ntlworld.com

BREXIT: EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

The future of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy was one of the issues discussed during the visit of the delegation of former Members of the European Parliament to Finland. The discussions during the visit to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats were of particular interest. The assessment of security issues from the point of view of Finland's neutrality proved equally interesting. A further topic of great pertinence was the issue of Brexit and its significance for the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy.

The current situation of uncertainty calls for a sober analysis of what Brexit will really mean in practice. Firstly, it means a reduction of nearly 20% in the EU's economic performance. Clearly, we will no longer be the biggest but only the second biggest market in the world. This will reduce our ability to negotiate with the United States on equal terms.

The English Channel will again become a customs border, as it used to be. The associated bureaucracy will be unpleasant for the European Union but all the more so for the

British. We are also facing very difficult negotiations concerning the free movement of workers and Britain's future relationship with the European single market. Yet these economic aspects are not the most important consideration. More significant in the long term is the fact that the balance of power within the EU is shifting. Germany will find itself in even more of a leading role: one which it has not asked for and which it cannot perform alone. Cooperation between Germany and France will as a result be even more important, but this should not, however, lead to them forming a kind of executive board — small and medium-sized countries must also be involved. The new voting system in the Council provides a good basis for this, as it takes into account large and small countries in an appropriate way. We must use the situation caused by the separation from England to reflect once again on what form this future Europe of 27 should take. More than ever before, we must focus on areas in which joint action brings clear advantages: the single market, the single currency and the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The Europe of 27 therefore needs to become a Europe of common security. The proposals of Michel Barnier and Federica Mogherini for the next steps in this direction are on the table. It should also be noted that Ursula von der Leyen has called for the Economic and Monetary Union to be further developed into a defence union.

What we need now is a concrete project that can also serve as a symbol. We should never underestimate the power of symbols. When the single market became reality, it was symbolised by the barriers at the borders, marking the open borders within the EU and the common borders around the periphery. The euro coins which everyone carries around are the symbol of the single currency, with a European symbol on one side and symbols of our European nations on the other.

At the moment I can think of no stronger symbol for the European Security and Defence Policy than Eurocorps. For this reason, I suggested placing Eurocorps at the centre of the European Security and Defence Policy. It should be our specific aim in the short term to make this an effective instrument of European defence.

A matter of concern is the fact that in recent years the importance of the European institutions has become weaker. A strong Europe, however, can only exist if it is underpinned by strong institutions.

Karl von Wogau
EPP, Germany (1979-2009)
kwogau@aol.com



A moment during the visit to the Hybrid Centre of Excellence