

eastern **A**genda



from Andrew Duff MEP
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Liberals in Amsterdam

Chris White reports from the ELDR Congress



Chris White, who was the East of England's representative at the recent ELDR Congress in Amsterdam.

I suppose one useful quiz night question might be: 'What is ELDR and how many members does it have?' Unsurprisingly this is likely to prove as difficult as the geography ones asking, for instance, how many land-locked countries border Uzbekistan.

The European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party comprises 49 Liberal parties from across Europe. Readers versed in matters European will have realised that some countries must have more than one Liberal party: Finland, Estonia, Belgium and the Netherlands all have two, as does the UK (the answer to the quiz night question is 'the Liberal Democrats and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland'). By contrast France, Spain and Greece have – sadly – no effective Liberal parties while Italy manages four.

One of the moving aspects of ELDR is seeing delegations from once benighted countries like Albania, Croatia, Slovakia, Bosnia, Serbia, as well as the party of the King-Prime Minister of Bulgaria, one of ELDR's newest members. This serves as a constant reminder that Europe has changed forever.

The most recent Congress was in Amsterdam in November, and the main topic was the debate on the manifesto for the European elections in 2004. Alongside the manifestos that the parties will issue locally – sometimes in competition with each other – there is to be a Europe wide document. It is questionable how useful the average Focus writer will find such a document. Its principal purpose in fact is to moderate the national manifestos and to be available for inspection by our opponents (we will naturally inspect theirs).

It is at this point that it became apparent why some countries have more than one Liberal party. There are two sharply contrasting strands in European liberalism, mainly centred on economics. The UK Liberal Democrats, the Alliance Party, D66 from the Netherlands and a number of others can loosely be described as Keynesian – hardly surprising in our case since Keynes was arguably the greatest British Liberal who ever lived. The German Free Democrats and the other Dutch Liberals are classical economists, horrified by high taxation and government intervention in the market place. They find it difficult to understand how we can square our social views with a lack of free market economics. They may have a point.

These arguments matter because the protagonists are large parties. The UK Liberal Democrats are entitled to send around 60 delegates because we perform so well in national elections (after all, with PR, we would have over 100 MPs at Westminster and can expect, with PR, to have more MEPs in Strasbourg next June). The FDP, although less successful electorally nevertheless do well enough to send a sizeable delegation. Meanwhile the ELDR Group holds the balance of power in the European Parliament.

Most important of all, however, is the fact that we are in government in twenty-four European countries. ELDR can boast the prime ministers of Belgium,



In this issue ...

P1. Liberals in Amsterdam

Chris White reports back from ELDR Congress.

P3. Labour opts out

Andrew Duff on Labour's regional policy.

P4. Brussels summit fiasco

Andrew Duff on the crisis now facing the enlarged EU.

P6. EEDA & the East of England

Sal Brinton on the workings of EEDA.

P7. A new President for the East

Tom McNally becomes President.

P8. Notices

Denmark, Finland and Slovenia, as well as Bulgaria and tiddly Andorra.

The crux of the argument in November was the growth and stability pact underlining the euro. The Liberal Democrats were advocating a more flexible interpretation in relation to tax and spending at the bottom of the economic cycle. The FDP and their Dutch allies found this abhorrent – and difficult to sell locally. In the end Congress managed a wording which was mutually satisfactory and which allows some local interpretation.

On so much else there was speedy agreement. We adopted a common line on Iraq, agriculture, trafficking in human beings, asylum, Gibraltar and a European defence policy.

Prospects for the future? ELDR is growing: a number of its members are new joiners because they are newly formed parties in parts of Europe where within recent memory the Communist Party was the only legal political apparatus.

The ELDR Group in the European Parliament has also been growing – there are now over fifty ELDR MEPs. There is no reason why that number should not increase to over seventy in June – with the UK Lib Dems forming by far the largest national contingent.

The full text of the ELDR Amsterdam programme can be found at www.eldr.org/congress03. Here is an extract...

“The European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party believes in a Europe based on the fundamental Liberal principles of liberty, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, tolerance and solidarity.

“We believe in a fair, free and open society which harnesses the abilities of each and every one of its citizens to participate fully in society, presenting them with the opportunities to fulfil their potential, free from poverty, ignorance, and discrimination.

“To achieve these goals, we are striving to complete the internal market as a truly common economic area without internal frontiers, and to reform Europe's economy to make it more prosperous and competitive, with more jobs and stable prices for consumers, based on the principle of globally inclusive international free trade. We are working to promote sustainable development and to protect our environment. We are campaigning for a safe and just society, ensuring a more peaceful and stable world.

“As the most consistent and long-standing advocates of an early and wide enlargement of the European Union, we are delighted to welcome into the Union our friends from the new member states. At the same time, we will continue to campaign for a more transparent, democratic and accountable Europe, taking decisions only on those matters which require European solutions.

“Subsidiarity should be the basis of EU decision-making. The systematic application of this principle should ensure that the Union acts only in those cases where a problem cannot be adequately settled by individual member states acting on their own. This principle connects with the principle of proportionality, which already guides all legislative measures taken by the EU, and according to which any action by the EU should not go

beyond what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaty. Application of the subsidiarity principle has the purpose of bringing decision-making within the Union as close to the citizen as possible.

“Last but not least, ELDR supports a constitutional settlement for Europe. Liberal Democrats all over Europe have always campaigned for a strong constitution as the basis of democracy. Therefore we welcome the efforts made by the European Convention as a strong conceptual basis for the Intergovernmental Conference.”



At the recent Regional Conference in Cambridge, (from l-r) Norman Lamb MP, Kathy Pollard, Andrew Duff MEP, Chris White and Bob Russell MP.

Labour opts out

Andrew Duff reports on the fight to save EU regional policy

The Labour government is trying to destroy the regional development policies of the European Union. Using the imminent enlargement of the EU as an excuse, Gordon Brown has proposed a re-nationalisation of the famous 'structural funds' whose purpose is to strengthen the economic and social cohesion of Europe. His beggar-my-neighbour approach undermines years of proven success at the EU level in helping Europe's poorer regions to catch up with its richest.



Andrew Duff and Guillaume McLaughlin at the Amsterdam Congress

Enlargement of the Union from 15 to 25 member states on 1 May 2004 will increase the EU's population by 20 per cent but lower the average GDP per head by 12 per cent. The gap between poor and rich will have widened at the very time that the need grows for painful economic reforms to cope with increased global competition and the quickening technology revolution heightens the need to re-educate and re-train our ageing population.

Faced with this situation, an EU wide cohesion policy has never been more needed. It gives a European dimension to the development activities of national, regional and local authorities. It shadows the EU's other policies, for instance in the fields of transport and the environment, and helps to implement them. It complements the EU's competition policy. It contributes to making a reality of the single market, and is a factor for macroeconomic stability over the medium term. EU structural funds are dedicated to sustaining investment even at times of economic downturn. Some are particularly focussed on cross-border projects.

EU cohesion policy, in short, is an important factor for stability, growth and integration. No wonder, then, that the UK government is seeking to put a stop to it. Mr Brown has proposed that EU money should be spent only on the new member states, leaving the existing members to fend for themselves on a national basis. Such an approach would scupper the Objective 2 funding which is proving such a boost to the local economies of many parts of the East of England, from rural North Norfolk to urban Luton. It would prevent the European Commission from criticising the lack of public investment in British transport infrastructure, and would lower our region's chances of attracting funding from the European Investment Bank. Who honestly believes the Treasury when they promise 'possible delivery mechanisms for increased domestic funding' to replace EU funding?

In the light of enlargement, the Commission, Council and Parliament are undertaking a review of the EU's existing structural funds. European Liberal Democrats are putting their weight behind a redirection of certain EU investment towards supporting enterprise and excellence, an approach which surely benefits the East of England. We will oppose the UK efforts to sabotage the collective Europe-wide approach.



Chris White, Luton Lib Dem Councillor Qurban Hussain and Andrew Duff. Luton benefits enormously from EU regional policy since the down-sizing of Vauxhall.

Brussels summit fiasco

Andrew Duff reports on the constitutional crisis now facing the enlarged European Union

Can the European Union enlarge and deepen at the same time? The answer appears to be 'not yet'. That is the obvious verdict to be drawn from the failure of the heads of government at their December meeting in Brussels to adopt the draft Constitution.

Those of us who were prowling the corridors outside the summit meeting witnessed first-hand a massive failure of Europe's collective leadership. The European Convention had produced a good text that could have been adopted by the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), with some relatively minor modifications. But the Brussels meeting was badly prepared and atrociously managed by the Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. The conference met in formal session for less than two hours. There was no opportunity for collective debate on the outstanding issues. Most of the participants had no chance to align themselves with one or other faction even if they had wished to do so. Those who had brought compromise proposals were unable to table them. Ignorant misunderstandings or wilful distortions about what the draft Constitution says were left unchallenged. Even the Italian presidency's own compromises were not subject to negotiation.



Liberal Democrats enjoy the sea air at Brighton (from left to right) Chris White, Rosalind Gill, Guillaume McLaughlin, Kathy Pollard and Andrew Duff.

Instead the conference became obsessed with one issue only, namely the size of the minority needed to block a decision of the Council. The Convention proposed that a qualified majority should be formed by half of the member states representing 60 per cent of the EU's population. But this clear, fair and simple proposal was opposed by Poland which prefers the deal it got in the notorious Treaty of Nice. Faced with the Polish veto, Berlusconi, in the chair, appeared more eager to talk about women and football, and made no further efforts to pursue the constitutional matters.

Few others wished to continue either. Germany and France were determined to teach the Poles a lesson. Tony Blair was only concerned to secure his dreary 'red lines'. His claim that he has 'banked' UK vetoes on all sorts of things seems to



Andrew Duff briefs Liberal Democrats from the region on the progress of the constitution during their recent visit to Brussels

have pulled the wool over the eyes of a compliant House of Commons. But he has annoyed everyone else. By the end of the meeting, there was much talk of 'enhanced cooperation' by a few European-minded member states. Core group politics has always been a feature of Europe's integration, but we can now expect it to be used as a threat by Germany and France, with others, to marginalise the awkward squad, of which the UK is the proudest member.

Blair clearly has no strategy to deal with the emergence of a two-tier Europe. He says he will consider the UK's participation in the inner core depending on the subject matter. The UK's involvement is highly unlikely, however. Indeed Blair's precious 'red lines' on social security for migrant workers, fiscal provisions to smooth the operation of the single market, and judicial cooperation in criminal matters has helped neatly to define where enhanced cooperation will now be attempted.

The incoming Irish presidency is in a difficult position. ELDR, backed by a large majority of the European Parliament, believes that the constitutional project must not be allowed to lose momentum. We want to get the IGC out of the way before two big arguments – over EU spending levels and Turkey's membership – get going later this year. We have always argued that the Constitution presents a brilliant opportunity to engage the public in a real political debate about the future of Europe during the European Parliamentary election campaign in June.

In fact, Poland notwithstanding, a solid agreement on the Constitution is closer than the Brussels summit performance would suggest. Clever brokerage can achieve a deal on the basis of the Convention's proposals. The fact that the IGC method has failed makes both the process of the Convention and its outcome even more attractive.

The Irish certainly need help in concluding the IGC successfully. In early January I flew to Dublin to meet with their foreign minister Brian Cowen and senior officials. I asked them to ensure that the momentum behind the IGC is not lost and that all pro-European forces pull together to beat off Blair's expected efforts to ditch completely the Convention's draft Constitution.

Europe's Liberals will fight to see that the Constitution is not put in the fridge. We hope that there can still be a satisfactory outcome in time for the June elections.



Andrew speaks in Norwich at the recent 'Get out the Vote' conference. The problems of low voter turnout in recent elections were addressed.



Andrew on a visit to the Norfolk Broads, an area that has attracted EU funding through the 'Leader+' project

EEDA and how it works for you in the East of England

Sal Brinton is on the EEDA board and writes about it in this issue of eastern Agenda



Sal Brinton with the Democrat Mayor of San Jose at the launch of EEDA's new office in California

The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) was formed five years ago. Its main responsibility is to improve economic prosperity for the 5m people living in the East of England. It is responsible for regeneration budgets (such as SRB), and for working for better social inclusion, but also for improving business performance.

The regional development agencies (RDAs) are business-led, but there is also political representation on the boards as well. I was appointed as the Lib Dem to the founding board, and am now the Deputy Chair, and I also have responsibility for learning and skills across the whole region.

EEDA's annual budget of £80m+ is considerably smaller than most county councils, and the bulk of it goes to support regeneration projects such as the redevelopment of the Great Yarmouth sea front, or major work in Thurrock and Luton, all of which have high levels of deprivation, and low performance in schools and economic terms. The East of England, however, also has rural deprivation, and we focus energy and funds on these areas too.

I really enjoy working for EEDA. My one day a week (as Deputy Chair) is mainly spent in meetings with key partners, or making speeches and presentations on our work, strategy and priorities, both in the East of England. EEDA works closely with colleagues in Europe (including MEPs like Andrew Duff), especially as so much of our business exports go across the North Sea into Europe. Last year I went to California to open our Silicon Valley office and spent time in San Jose, seeing the work of Democrat Mayor Gonzalez, and finding ways of being able to link our economies better.

The high technology sector is now acting as an economic stimulant across the region: most people know about Cambridge, but Ipswich, Stevenage, Norwich are also becoming strong in their own specialist areas. And where there is such a strong sector working, it attracts lots of other supporting businesses, such as accountants, solicitors, security firms, cleaners, and food outlets.

Skills are important to the economy as well. Although we seem to be doing well, in fact we have over 15,000 skills shortages (that is where employers can't find employees with the right skills), and our qualifications lag behind other UK regions. My role is to get the Learning and Skills Councils, Further and Higher Education, Local Education Authorities, Small Business Services and others to work together to help people get the qualifications they need so that they can find work (or get a higher level job). For example, we are now pooling our funding to address the problems in the constructions industry, getting teams from companies and colleges to set up taster days for young people aged 14 and 15 so that they consider construction as an option. That's beginning to work with more people wanting to become plumbers, but Rome (and Norwich!) weren't built in a day.

EEDA has a formidable task, but I believe in five years we have begun to improve the prosperity of the region, and, as a consequence, we've also started to improve the quality of life of the people who live here.

A new President for the East of England Regional Party

Tom McNally write about his political life

As my full title, Lord McNally of Blackpool, suggests my roots are in the North West of England and I sat in the Commons, for Stockport South from 1979 to 1983. However I came to London in 1962 as a student at University College London. I think I knew then that my life and work lay in the Capital. Dr Johnson's famous dictum that he who is tired of life in London is tired of life, certainly applies to me. I believe London is one of the most dynamic and exciting cities on earth. It is a massive and successful engine for the whole UK economy. There is certainly no advantage for the rest of Britain in weakening or undermining London.

However, London's greatest strengths do give problems to the regions in closest proximity to it. Most of those problems - housing, transport, the environment etc.- fall squarely on my region of adoption. This is why I find becoming president of the Liberal Democrats in the Eastern Region such a challenging and exciting prospect.

I only hope that in my new role I can match the indefatigable energy of my predecessor, Shirley Williams. She is a hard act to follow. I believe that my location in Hertfordshire is an advantage as we bring together the Chiltern and old Eastern region. I and my family (wife Juliet, sons John 13, James 10 and Imogen aged 8) have now lived in St Albans for more than a dozen years. We very much feel part of our local community.

Shirley Williams is, of course, no stranger to me. We have been friends and colleagues for over 30 years. Over the last three years, I have acted as her Deputy in the House of Lords. I was sent to the Lords in 1995 by Paddy Ashdown. In the nine years I have been a member I have served on three select committees (the Civil Service, Freedom of Information and Communications). I have been spokesman on Trade and Industry, Home Affairs and Communications. I have found the Lords stimulating and fulfilling as we act in our advisory and revisory role to promote better government and better legislation. The Lords has also become an important bulwark against infringements of civil liberties and individual liberties. That, of course, is a role which the Liberal Democrats take on at every level from the council chamber to the European Parliament with commitment and zeal.

My role as President of the East of England Region Liberal Democrats will be dedicated to ensuring that there will be more Liberal Democrats in representative positions at every level, that membership is increased and that, for the Party as a whole, the best is yet to come.



Tom McNally, who is the new President of the East of England Liberal Democrats Regional Party

Around the Region

ANDREW LISTENS TO A REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE RSPB AT THE LAUNCH OF THEIR NEW RESERVE IN LAKENHEATH



ANDREW TALKS TO THE PRESS DURING A VISIT TO BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SITES IN MID BEDFORDSHIRE

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**East of England Liberal Democrats
2004 Spring Conference**

at

City of Norwich School, Norwich

**Saturday 27th March
10.00-16.00**

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