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e-bulletin - Brian's letter from Brussels

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The Environmental Debate

As the debate over whether Heathrow should get a third runway rages on, its interesting to look at other areas in which the environmentalist and other clash.

There is no doubt that railways are the most environmentally friendly form of transport. But when a mere 25% of your network is electrified and most of your freight is hauled by diesel locomotives then things don't look so rosy.

Don't get me wrong, I support the building of a new High Speed Line, but not just to Birmingham.

What use would that be to the good citizens of Cumbria and the North West? Also, its improvements in the conventional railways that is needed, not just the High Speed Lines.

Getting back to the environmental point, it always seems to me that everybody is in favour of saving the planet, providing that they can drive their car, fly away on their holiday and turn up their gas central heating, which does seem to be a little inconsistent.

We know that environmentalists want to outlaw certain pesticides that farmers tell us are crucial in protecting crops from mildew and disease and delivering cheaper food.

We know that alternative forms of energy generation using wind, solar or wave power is needed, but we don't need wind farms. We now hear that coal and wood burning Aga's are to be targeted as "planet killers" so I am expecting the Ratty and other steam railways to appear on a hit list shortly. Of course we have to give serious consideration to protecting our environment, but we have to also balance that with provision of energy and heat, jobs and transport, food and clothing.

I just think that sometimes that balance is lost as one side or the other takes to their respective barricades.

We know in this part of the world, the argument against nuclear energy has been made for years, without taking into consideration our energy needs, the jobs and the fact that nuclear does not pump out CO2 into the atmosphere. But we do know nuclear energy does create a problem in regard to waste.

What we need now I believe, is a balanced debate on this whole issue in which the environment and climate change is at the forefront alongside the jobs and economic arguments, alongside people's wish to travel.

At a time of economic downturn it would be easy to drop our environmental commitments that would be wrong. However, environmentalists must also recognise that in the short term there has to be priorities.

A Strong Euro

As I write, we are faced with a strong euro and a weakening pound as many investors now see the euro as the "haven" currency when things get economically tough.

Personally I have never had a problem with Britain joining the euro but I am not going to enter that argument for fear of getting abusive email from anti-Europeans who believe you me, can get very personal in their vitriol.

Whilst a weak pound helps exporters and could be useful to industry generally, it does of course mean foreign holidays become very expensive. This is not just confined to paying for the holiday but of course affects your "spending money" when you are there.

I am afraid the cheap foreign holiday is a thing of the past, although I am sure there will be bargains out there for those prepared to look. However I would also advise shopping around to get the best rate on the pound-euro exchange rates. Check out all avenues, bank, post office, travel agent, before you buy as you will be amazed at the difference you can come up with. The worst rate is normally at the airport, so just bear that in mind.

Trouble is, in these volatile economic times, by the time you get to read this, the pound could have risen again, but then again,

it may have fallen. Once thing for sure, either way somebody will win and who knows, perhaps more Brits will stay at home for their holidays this year and boost our economy. If we have a cold winter we may get a hot summer, but don't bank on it! It looks like a case if you want guaranteed sun, you may have to pay for it.

Now if we were in the euro? - Just thought I'd ask!!

Airline Passengers Compensation

Just before Christmas, the European Parliament delivered an important verdict strengthening passenger rights for our travellers. In 2004, I piloted through the European Parliament legislation that gave passengers compensation if their flights were cancelled at short notice by airlines and ensured they were looked after if delayed. However, many airlines refused to pay if the cancellation or delay was caused by mechanical problems or crewing problems claiming that this could be designated as extenuating circumstances outside of their control

Now has somebody who helped write the legislation; extenuating circumstances as the Parliament saw to it was a cancellation caused by severe weather, civil war or terrorist attack, not because the crew had not arrived, or the engine wouldn't start.

The airlines have been taken to court has decided that mechanical or crewing problems are not extenuating circumstances and that passengers should be paid the compensation due them if flights are cancelled on this basis. Of course the airlines don't like it (they never do!) and no doubt they will try to find other loopholes to exploit, but remember the law is designed to help you the passenger, not the airlines.

Regulation 261/2004 gives you the right to re-routing and compensation if airlines cancel your flight and they must feed and refresh you if you are delayed. If this happens to you then demand your rights and don't be put off by the pathetic excuses that the airlines will come up with. The European Parliament has given you these rights make sure you use them if the situation arises.