

Annual Report 2010

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Welcome to my Annual Review for 2010, I hope this report gives you a useful insight into some of the work I've been doing over the last twelve months. I strive to represent your interests on the European stage and believe it is important to build a strong channel of communication. This review provides one way of finding out about what I do in Brussels but if you would like to find out more, please contact me using the details at the end of this review.

See inside for news on . . .

- the appointment of Cathy Ashton as EU High Representative, p. 2
- my blog, the honeyballbuzz, p. 3-4
- Culture and Education Committee work, p. 5-6
- osteoporosis awareness raising, p. 7
- campaigning across London, p. 8
- the fight against human trafficking, p. 9
- progress towards gender equality, p. 10
- London casework, p. 11
- *Daily Mail* apology, p. 12

. . . and more!

Cathy Ashton proves to be a good choice for European High Representative



The appointment of Cathy Ashton in November last year means that we now have a Briton in one of the EU's highest posts. At last, we will be at the heart of Europe, holding a top post and therefore having to fully engage with the EU agenda. Catherine Ashton was a brave choice for the new EU high representative for foreign affairs. A former leader of Britain's House of Lords, she won her spurs steering the Lisbon treaty through the upper house. Ashton has had major hurdles to overcome. A socialist and a woman to boot, she has endured ritual humiliation at the hands of the eurosceptic British press and, sadly, also from some of my non-socialist colleagues in parliament.

Yet she has come through all of this. Her Parliamentary committee hearings went well and she was endorsed as enthusiastically as any of her fellow commissioners. Her background is not in foreign affairs, so this was no mean achievement. Ashton had to hit the ground running. Setting up the external action service is just about the hardest task any of the commissioners has had to undertake. I have always been impressed both by Ashton's obvious intelligence and her innate ability to get on with people. She persuades and is an able negotiator – both essential skills standing her in very good stead.

Plans agreed for the new European External Action Service

From the blog . . .

Today the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of plans to establish the new European External Action Service (EEAS). I am very pleased to see that there will be a strong commitment to gender balance in recruiting staff to the new body, which will effectively act as the EU diplomatic service. This is due in no small part to our very own Baroness Cathy Ashton who as High Representative (HR) for external affairs will head up the EEAS. Cathy is, and always has been, a strong advocate on behalf of women, and I was heartened to hear her say earlier this week that there are good women candidates applying for posts at all levels in the EEAS.

Based in Brussels, the EEAS will also have an important human rights remit, something which Labour MEPs have worked hard to encourage. In another welcome move, we now know that the Service's budgetary accountability to Parliament is guaranteed, and that the European Parliament will have full budget discharge rights.

Posted 18.22, 8th July 2010



As many of you will know, I am an avid blogger. I believe social media is a powerful tool, able to facilitate genuine engagement between the electorate and elected. Meeting your MEP online may not be quite the same as doing it in person, but it does enable real interaction.

Blogging also allows me to communicate news and views on what happens in the European Parliament and the EU in general. This is crucial, given the press's tendency to oscillate between distaste and indifference towards much of what happens in Brussels. If you'd like to find out more, visit: <http://thehoneyballbuzz.com/>

While I am always keen to encourage interest in the Honeyball Buzz, I am also eager to promote wider involvement in the bigger world of political blogging. However, with so many sites out there, it can sometimes be a little disorientating. So, to help those new to the 'blogosphere' (and offer some fresh suggestions to the more-initiated), I'll outline my top five here:

And another thing...

1. Tom Harris MP's blog, ***And another thing***, interweaves lively political commentary and personal anecdote to produce an unfailingly entertaining read. www.tomharris.org.uk

LabourList

2. ***LabourList*** fosters lively debate, drawing together bloggers from across the centre-left. If you fancy dipping your toes in the blogging world, this is a great place to get started. www.labourlist.org

Hopi Sen

3. Unafraid to challenge convention and prompt debate, ***Hopi Sen*** is eloquently outspoken. Whilst I don't always agree with Hopi's perspectives, he's undeniably engaging. hopisen.wordpress.com

Next Left

4. Thoughtful and incisive, the Fabian Society's ***Next Left*** blog delves deep into important policy debates. www.nextleft.org

the f word
CONTEMPORARY UK FEMINISM

5. Seeking to articulate the voice of modern British feminism, ***the F word*** is a refreshing read, exploring issues that are all-too-often neglected in mainstream political blogging. www.thefword.org.uk/blog

The power of social media

Fringe meeting: How social media can drive a wedge into the Coalition.

This year I hosted a fringe event at Labour Party Conference to discuss how the left's blogosphere has strengthened Labour solidarity and invigorated debate. Almost 100 people attended, even without the prospect of a free meal! This indicates the strength of the tool and the potential it offers.

Many thanks to all the panel members, each of whom made insightful contributions. John Gray, Unison activist and Newham councillor, offered a look into the perils of libel actions and the need for more guidance on legal issues. Meanwhile, Jessica Asato, acting director of Progress, talked about how Twitter had brought more activists into the leadership campaign.

Mark Ferguson, discussed the advantages of sites like Labour List (the site he edits), which fuel constructive debate among supporters. Finally, Kerry McCarthy MP explained how she interacts with members of the public through twitter, engaging in debate and answering questions.



Fringe meeting panel (from left): John Gray, Jessica Asato, me, Mark Ferguson and Kerry McCarthy.

Blogging Awards

I was pleased to see a big rise in my placing in the Total Politics blog awards: the jump from 80th to 14th most popular Labour blog shows that my online efforts are paying off and encouraging interest in European politics.

My blog continues to attract new readers, now getting almost 100,000 visits each year, so I hope to see another leap in next year's rankings!



News from the Culture and Education Committee

Following the European elections in June 2009, I was elected as the Socialist and Democrat (S&D) Group lead on the Culture and Education (CULT) Committee. Since gaining this position, I have been involved in numerous important policy debates and legislative proposals.



Early Years Development

I am currently writing a report about Early Years Development, in which will take a broad look at the provision of care and education for children aged 0-6 across the EU. Many recent studies point to the importance of this period in a child's development, and demonstrate that it can have a huge effect on their future within the education system. I hope that I will be able to offer both a constructive overview of existing provision and some useful recommendations for the future. I want to base my report on as comprehensive research as is possible so, if you have specialist knowledge of the issue, I would welcome your input.



According to the latest figures, five million young Europeans are looking for a job. Many of them will miss opportunities because they lack the right qualifications or experience. In response, the European Commission has recently launched 'Youth on the Move', a flagship initiative aimed at helping young people gain the knowledge, skills and experience they need to secure their place in the job market.

By strengthening the performance and attractiveness of higher education and encouraging inclusiveness, mobility and innovation in the European education system, this scheme hopes to drastically boost the prospects of Europe's younger generation.

Of course, though these are all positive steps, education for the most part remains a member state competence, and we have seen recently that education budgets across Europe are being cut in the economic downturn. We in Europe must put pressure on governments to ensure that education remains protected so that future generations aren't left unemployable in a crumbling economy.

Written Declaration on Sport

Along with four other MEPs, I have put forward a written declaration to support sports at grassroots level. Funding for sport that everybody can enjoy is under threat in the crisis, yet it provides so much in terms of community and health. We want to make sure that member states maintain their funding for sports facilities and local teams so that everyone can use them to have fun, meet people and stay healthy.



Working with the British Culture Trade Unions

I have regular meetings with London representatives from various unions, including Equity, the Musicians' Union, the UK Film Council, and BECTU (the media and entertainment union). This consultation is important, allowing me to learn from the expertise of union representatives and enabling unions to stay informed of any EU developments that may affect their work.



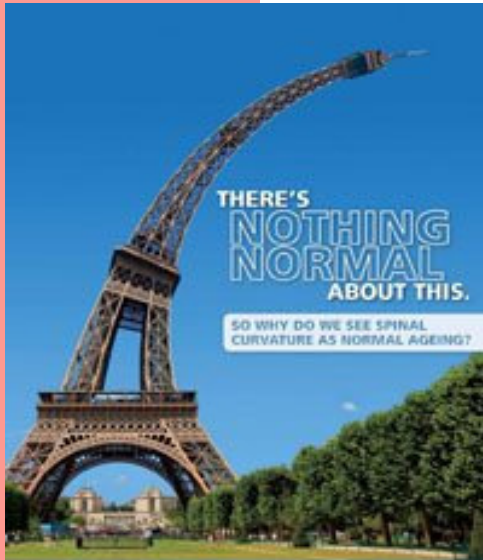
European Prize for Journalism

As coordinator of the Socialist and Democrat group, I had the pleasure of judging the European Prize for Journalism, which assessed entries from across the EU in the categories of print, internet, radio and television. It was fascinating to read, watch and listen to these elucidating examples of journalism, and I was especially pleased to see the UK's own James Clive-Mathews given the award for best internet journalism. His article on *"What percentage of laws come from the EU?"* successfully debunked many of the widely accepted myths surrounding the European Union, particularly its alleged propensity for handing down laws.

You can read the article here:

<http://www.jcm.org.uk/blog/2009/06/what-percentage-of-laws-come-from-the-eu/>

Action against osteoporosis



What can you do to cut the risk of osteoporosis?

- Childhood and adolescence are particularly valuable times to improve bone mass through exercise, so it is important to take steps early in life.
- Maintain an adequate supply of vitamin D through sufficient exposure to the sun and through diet
- Participate in regular physical activity, even very gentle exercise will help.
- Avoid smoking
- Be educated about the risk of high alcohol consumption

I have Co-Chaired the European Parliament's Osteoporosis Interest Group for six years now. The aim of this group is to develop policy at both national and European level by raising awareness and supporting relevant legislation.

Each year, millions are debilitated by this chronic disease, mangled by severe pain or rendered disabled by fractures resulting from diminished bone density. Osteoporosis affects an estimated 75 million people across the developed world and, in women over 45 years of age, accounts for more days spent in hospital than diabetes, breast cancer and heart attacks. Widespread under-diagnosis and lack of treatment means that the number affected is escalating.

It is therefore crucial that EU nations recognise osteoporosis as a national healthcare priority and take serious action. Over the course of the year I have been involved in several events aimed at achieving this goal, which included co-hosting an awareness-raising lunch in March in conjunction with the International Osteoporosis Foundation (IOF) and speaking on prevention of chronic diseases at the World Osteoporosis Day Conference in October.

For more information about risk factors and the preventative measures we should be taking, visit the International Osteoporosis Foundation website at www.iofbonehealth.org

Elections and campaigning

The General Election, as usual, provided a great opportunity to meet with constituents and engage with grassroots activists. I canvassed a wide area of London over the course of the election period, campaigning in numerous areas, including Hammersmith, Hounslow Heath, Kensington, South Croydon and Barking.



Whilst the election may have produced no clear winner, one striking success was the defeat of all twelve BNP councillors in Barking and Dagenham. I spent a number of days campaigning in Barking during the election and was impressed by the organisation and enthusiasm with which Margaret Hodge (pictured) and her team of activists approached the campaign. Their tireless work in speaking to an incredibly high number of local residents about their concerns on a range of issues, including immigration and housing, ensured a fantastic result. Labour won every seat on the Council and Margaret gained 55% of the vote.

I would also like to congratulate all those local council candidates who worked hard to secure Labour gains in Brent, Camden, Ealing, Enfield, Harrow, Hounslow, Islington and Waltham Forest. Having met many of these councillors on the campaign trail, I can testify to their dedication and enthusiasm.

Goodbye and good riddance to Griffin

From the blog . . .

I was delighted today to see that Nick Griffin has announced his plans to step down as leader of the BNP. Any development that lessens the exposure of this man and his odious party should be welcomed. The election results earlier this month clearly showed that Mr Griffin and his party are on the wane. Despite putting up hundreds of candidates, the BNP failed to win any seats. In the context of this electoral wipe-out, Griffin's position was always going to come under pressure. It is, however, regrettable that his announcement states that he will stand down in three years' time. In my view, the sooner he exits the political arena, the better. Let's hope that this is the first step in the long-overdue demise of the BNP as a party in British public life. Speaking as a British MEP, I would be especially delighted if at the next European elections the electorate gives the BNP a similar kicking, so that Griffin and his fellow BNP MEP Andrew Brons are no longer able to sour debates in the European Parliament.

Posted 8.37, 25th May 2010

Campaign prevents closure of the Metropolitan Police's Anti-Trafficking Unit

I have long argued that we must do more to tackle the serious problem of human trafficking, so I was dismayed when it was announced in October last year that the Metropolitan Police's dedicated anti-trafficking unit was to be disbanded. This move seemed to represent disregard for the seriousness of the crime and a renunciation of responsibility on the part of the authorities. Aware of the grave implications of inaction, I launched a campaign to reverse the decision. The campaign found a responsive and enthusiastic support-base, and after much lobbying the Met relented and the unit was saved. I am extremely grateful to everyone who backed the campaign, including all 2000 who signed the petition.

I have continued to follow the issue since, and have been pleased to see a surge of legislative action at EU level. A Parliamentary resolution in February stressed that victims of human trafficking should receive protection and unconditional assistance, and in July further action was taken, with a new Directive introduced to oblige member states to prosecute nationals who have committed trafficking crimes in another country. The legislation also allows for a higher standard of assistance to victims, including free legal counseling and representation. Unfortunately, the new UK Government has been less proactive, as you can read in the blog excerpt below.

Coalition government says no to EU anti-trafficking measures.

From the blog . . .

I have written before about the EU's new human trafficking directive and also ran a campaign against the Metropolitan Police Authorities' proposed closure of their specialised unit dealing with this matter. This issue has never seemed to me to be particularly partisan, so I could not believe it when I heard about the coalition government's plan to 'opt-out' of the new directive specifically designed to help combat trafficking.

The most important aspect of the directive is its focus on protecting the victims of trafficking. Such protection would mean that people who are trafficked into criminal enterprises in the UK could not be charged over false immigration papers forced on them by traffickers.

It is deeply depressing to think that the Conservatives would make a decision that could have a huge impact on the effectiveness of our police force in combating human trafficking on the basis of an irrational anti-European stance. David Cameron and William Hague have said that they will not cede powers to the EU without a referendum, so I can't help but feel that the rejection of a powerful and necessary tool in the fight against such an egregious crime is all part of some pathetic political posturing.

Posted 17.31, 31st August 2010

Progress towards gender equality

The European Parliament has sought to promote and develop women's rights over the last year. In January, I was asked to host a seminar on social norms harmful to girls and women, focusing in particular on Female Genital Mutilation. Organised in partnership with UNICEF, this event brought together speakers from all over the world. I opened the seminar with a few words about how the problem of FGM has been addressed at the European level, before UNICEF representatives offered an account of how the practice impacts upon women's everyday lives.

This seminar paved the way for a special hearing to commemorate International Women's Day 2010. Eva-Britt Svensson, Chair of the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee, hosted the event, and the opening address was given by the President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek. Later in the year, Svensson will be presenting her report on developing a new European strategy to tackle the phenomenon and, in the meantime, the EU will continue to allocate significant funding to special projects aimed at eradicating violence against women and children.



In addition to tackling violence against women, the women's committee seeks to further gender equality more broadly. In February we voted to adopt a report which outlined the current state of affairs along with challenges and priorities for the future. Fortunately the strong opposition mounted by many Conservative MEPs was overwhelmed by the majority keen to demonstrate their commitment to improved rights for women in the spheres of employment, decision-making and reproduction.

I am currently working on my contribution to a report on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. The resulting document, it is hoped, will lay the foundations for a new approach to tackling child safety online, incorporating provisions for the blocking of internet sites that display abusive images of children and proposals for better tackling those who 'groom' children online. I am also drafting the Socialist contribution to an upcoming report on Women and Entrepreneurship. Women remain grossly underrepresented in the business world and, unless we address this, women's opportunities will remain unfairly constrained, whilst society as a whole will miss out on the ideas and skills women have to offer.

Casework Report

There have been a steady flow of people writing to me over the last year with a range of concerns ranging from food labelling to human rights and the degradation of the environment. Interest in the issue of food labelling was intense but, despite Labour efforts to secure its implementation, the very popular solution of a traffic light system was not supported by the majority of right-wing parties.

One issue that has proved persistent has been ownership and planning tensions in Spain. People have built perfectly legal properties near a beach - having received local planning permission - only to find some years later that another level of regional or national government claims that they are unlawful and must be demolished. British property owners in Cyprus are also facing difficulties, often struggling to obtain the title deeds for properties they have bought from developers. As a result, many risk becoming liable for property developers' debts. This is a totally unacceptable situation which I have worked to raise awareness of.

Hardly a month goes by without some business complaining about the European city guide scam where innocent advertisers are bombarded with legal letters demanding large sums of money. European parliamentarians have advised businesses to avoid this extortion and report it to local police dealing with fraud.



Meeting a group of Lewisham women taking part in an advocacy training programme for older people. It was an enjoyable day and I was impressed by the knowledge and interest evident in the questions I was asked.



In March I met with London Higher, a group which represents over 40 higher education institutions. I am always pleased to have the opportunity to report on my work in Europe and equip myself with more information to advocate on London's behalf.

The *Daily Mail* apologises

I was pleased to secure an apology from the *Daily Mail* after a long-running dispute instigated by their misreporting of my voting record. After much correspondence and a referral to the Press Complaints Commission, the paper finally conceded that they had given a misleading account, publishing an apology on page four. The media plays an important role in shaping (mis)understandings of the EU, so I believe that it is crucial that we challenge skewed and inaccurate reporting. In doing this, we can prevent the perpetuation of damaging myths.



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