



# Alyn Smith

**MEP** for Scotland

## General News February 2016

Hello, and welcome to my February newsletter! I have to say, we really hit the ground running this year. It feels like we haven't had time to recover from the IndyRef and Westminster, but here we are, straight into the Holyrood campaign and the forthcoming EU referendum. We just need to keep our spirits up and avoid voter fatigue – easier said than done but a story in a broadsheet paper this month reminded me of just how easy it could be to sleepwalk out of the EU.

According to the story, the EU is planning to criminalise tourists in Greece who help drowning migrants.

No. There is, categorically, no intention to criminalise the many decent people who have been modern-day Good Samaritans on the beaches of Greece – including my own colleague Humza Yousaf.

Draft Council documents, released by the voluntary civil rights group Statewatch, discuss the high number of migrant casualties on European shores and the need for coordination between services to prevent and counter migrant smuggling. This includes investigations between Member States and involving border guards and NGOs where appropriate. Statewatch has expressed concern that NGOs and charities have not been explicitly exempted, and says that the decision whether to use criminal sanctions will therefore be left to the Member State.

This is a complex and sensitive package that hasn't even been released yet, and some reportage has been quite startlingly misleading.

Yes, the Council Conclusions should acknowledge that some actions have a humanitarian reason and should

never be prosecuted or treated as smuggling. However, the package is a work in progress, and acknowledges that trafficking is a growing problem. That's why it calls for Member States to share knowledge and raise awareness on mapping criminal organisations.

Migrant smuggling is a serious form of organised crime, and we cannot simply accept that shoving families on an overloaded boat and leaving it to Fate is a viable option.

I would add that there is a difference between migrants and refugees, and to suggest that the EU – which has provided millions of euros in humanitarian assistance, including funding the aid convoy to Madaya, the Syrian city starving and under siege by President Assad – would put people in a position where they must stand on a beach and watch people drown, is completely inaccurate and utterly disrespectful to the hard work of so many brave, compassionate people.

I've written to the papers – both local and national – to clarify this, and I'm responding to your emails as quickly as I can, but the story is out there and the damage has been done. Whether through mischief or misunderstanding, the media very often provides a distorted view of what's going on in the EU. Misreported stories like that do us no favours. So if you hear something and think "wait a minute, that can't be right" then let me know and I'll put you right. The EU is a tricky beast but it's essentially a force for good, and we would be much weaker out of it.

Yours aye,



# Google tax investigation

A fine Team SNP story this month, as Ian Hudghton MEP and I wrote to European Commissioner Margrethe Vestager repeating calls for a full EU investigation into the tax payment settlement between HMRC and Google UK.

Shortly before we did this, the SNP in Westminster raised concerns about the settlement deal, as the discussions have taken place in private with little detail revealed by the Treasury. I wouldn't sniff at £130 million but for an organisation like Google... well, I'd expect them to be paying more than that in tax. It's unclear whether the settlement represents a fair deal for UK taxpayers and whether it was within the boundaries of state aid regulations and European Commission rules on the use of complex methodologies by Member States' tax authorities.



Alyn and Ian Hudghton MEP, your SNP team in Europe

The European Commission is in the best position to provide independent verification of whether the tax deal that Google has negotiated with HMRC is fair and represents good value for the UK taxpayer and so we have called on the Commissioner to begin this investigation.

Last year, the Commission ruled that tax deals in Luxembourg and the Netherlands were illegal under EU state aid rules. Ireland's tax arrangements with Apple, and Luxembourg's treatment of McDonald's are also under investigation. [www.alynsmith.eu/snp\\_meps\\_push\\_european\\_commission\\_for\\_investigation\\_into\\_google\\_tax\\_deal](http://www.alynsmith.eu/snp_meps_push_european_commission_for_investigation_into_google_tax_deal)



@AlynSmithMEP

Delighted #EU to probe #UK #SaudiArabia arms trade in #Yemen after @theSNP campaign. From @ScotNational: [www.thenational.scot/news/eu-to-probe-saudi-arms-trade](http://www.thenational.scot/news/eu-to-probe-saudi-arms-trade)

# MEPs on the case with TTIP



Scotland and the EU will not accept chemically treated chicken

I'm not anti-free trade but I have some serious reservations around TTIP, which is why I voted against the Lange Report back in 2015 and have been keeping you all up to date with TTIP developments as and when they occur.

Even though it's likely to be a few years until we can vote on TTIP, I've been keeping a close watch on it. MEPs were furious when we heard reports that leaked documents had suggested the European Commission wanted all chicken carcasses to be cleaned with a chemical solution of peracetic acid, as already takes place in the USA.

Although my amendment to exempt all agricultural products from TTIP was rejected by the Agriculture Committee, our report demanded that EU standards be maintained.

I've said it all along: I have no problem with streamlining and harmonising genuinely technical procedures which put unnecessary barriers in the way of trade, but our food safety standards must not be sacrificed.

You have made it clear to me that you do not want chemical-rinsed chicken on your plates. I have no doubt that you will share my fury at this latest bit of news, and it doesn't bode well for the Commission winning MEPs over in time for the final TTIP vote.

I've heard people saying the way to avoid TTIP would be to jump out of the EU completely. To which I reply, would you rather be in a position to negotiate terms and reform the treaty in a positive direction, or would you rather have the terms dictated to you? By remaining in the EU, your MEPs can influence the treaty (we already threw out ISDS) and Nicola Sturgeon has already asked the Prime Minister to use his veto if our public services aren't exempted explicitly.

# Parliament condemns death penalty in Bahrain



Parliament heard Mohammed Ramadan was tortured into a confession

Earlier this month, I led an urgency resolution on political detainee, Mohammed Ramadan, who is facing imminent execution in Bahrain.

Mohammed Ramadan, a 32-year-old airport security guard, was arrested by the Bahraini authorities for allegedly taking part in a bombing in Al Dair in February

2014 and was sentenced to death after a trial during which he was tortured and forced to confess a crime he insists he did not commit.

We will not stay silent while nine Bahraini citizens are on death row, awaiting execution. We know that their sentences are based on dubious charges, following their engagement in peaceful protests against their Government. We are calling for their immediate release and the end of torture in Bahrain.

As author of this resolution it is comforting to know that the clear majority of the European Parliament supported our message. At the same time, I regret that the Tories refused to take part in the joint motion, although Europe's Conservatives have mostly endorsed our resolution. Torture and capital punishment are unacceptable in any case, let alone for political prisoners. Human rights defenders must be protected and allowed to conduct their work without hindrance, intimidation or harassment.

# Tesco guilty verdict good for farmers

Supermarket giant Tesco was found guilty of breaching the Groceries Supply Code by intentionally delaying payments to suppliers.

Regular readers will remember my role in the Report on Unfair Trading Practices (UTPs) in the food chain. UTPs have been strangling our farmers, from retrospective deductions to the threat of de-listing, and farmers are struggling. So it's no surprise that Tesco was found to have "knowingly delayed paying money to suppliers in order to improve its own financial position".

I'm pleased that the GCA has finally recognised the seriousness of the situation regarding breaches of the Groceries Supply Code, but the lack of significant consequences for Tesco – specifically the absence of a financial penalty for unfair practices which have cost suppliers real money – underlines what I have been saying for some time, that the UK Government has been far too slow in giving the GCA real teeth that will make retailers think twice about abusing their relationship with their suppliers.

As it is, the fact that a fine cannot be levied as the Government did not give the GCA powers to do so until last year is disappointing. Mere recommendations provide no guarantees to farmers that further abuses will not occur in future.



Farmers need protection from unfair trade practices

Some of the findings of the report are disgraceful: some Tesco buyers took advantage of outstanding payments to use as leverage with suppliers for other items of negotiation; there was a lack of interest in correcting administrative errors promptly; payments were deducted without proper discussion with suppliers; and respectful relations with suppliers were sacrificed to a cult of margin maximisation to meet arbitrary quarterly targets.

There is plenty of evidence of a problematic culture in the food supply chain which recommendations on their own may not necessarily solve.

It's time for the GCA to be given real resources and powers to tackle unfair food supply chain practices; otherwise it should be shut down.



# Special status for islands highlighted!

Our islands are some of the bonniest spots in Scotland, but they face some of the toughest conditions in the country too, and not just thanks to the weather!

A successful resolution was passed by the European Parliament recognising the specific features and handicaps faced by island regions, and calling for an increase in digital connectivity for islands, better transport, and better education opportunities, if necessary through distance learning.

One size does not always fit all, and this is especially the case with Europe's islands: even just in Scotland our islands face many different challenges and are extremely diverse places, let alone if you start to consider the differences with Greek, Italian or Danish islands. This is why it is so vital that European laws reflect this diversity and make appropriate allowances for it.



Always great to be out and about in Scotland

That the European Parliament so resoundingly passed this Resolution is commendable, but now it is over to the European Commission to act on some of the very sensible suggestions that it incorporated in order to better help our island communities face the future and the challenges it will bring.

On that note, I'll be in Shetland and Orkney next month, so say hello if you're around! Otherwise, you can get in touch at the usual address.

# Victory against obesity



MEPs stand up for children against sugar-packed babyfood

We struck a blow against childhood obesity by voting down draft rules on baby food that would have allowed a whopping 30% of the energy to come from sugar.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends limiting intake of free sugars to less than 10% - quite a difference!

We have a responsibility to our children to give them the best possible start in life, and that includes not packing them full of sugar from a young age.

Infants and children are the most vulnerable consumers, and the health risks of both excessive sugar consumption and childhood obesity have been well documented.

Added sugar levels in baby food should be kept to a minimum. It's as simple as that.



**@AlynSmithMEP**

Neil MacCormick was a simply great guy, [@theSNP](#) MEP and so much more. [@EdinburghUni](#) are fundraising in his memory.

[www.law.ed.ac.uk/other\\_areas\\_of\\_interest/fundraising/neil\\_maccormick\\_sculpture\\_fund](http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/other_areas_of_interest/fundraising/neil_maccormick_sculpture_fund)

# Stay informed

It's easy to keep in touch about my work on your behalf and on developments in the European Parliament:



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