



ALYN MEETS SCOTLAND'S FARMING GROUPS

This month has seen Alyn meet several of Scotland's senior agricultural bodies, including NFU Scotland, Quality Meat Scotland and The Scottish Farmer.

The meetings have covered various subjects, although all touched on the controversial topic of sheep tagging. NFU Scotland and The Scottish Farmer both took the opportunity to outline to Alyn the key issues behind their petitions on sheep-tagging and called for his help to ensure that a sensible outcome is reached. Alyn, who has voiced his concerns regarding sheep tagging in the European Parliament, was only too pleased to add his name to the petition.

Also discussed was the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check, Brazilian beef, GM feed imports and the need for clearer food labelling.

Jim McLaren, President of NFU Scotland, said: "We really value the way in which Alyn keeps himself updated on agricultural issues and the meeting was very much a two way flow of information. Alyn is a real ally on the Agriculture Committee.

"The key thing that we discussed was sheep tagging. This has been worrying the sheep sector for some time now and so we outlined to Alyn just what needs to be done. We know that he will be representing our view in Brussels."

Alyn, commenting on his meetings, said: "Meetings such as these always prove to be particularly productive and helpful. The topics that have come up for discussion have given me a useful overview of the problems and concerns facing Scottish farmers, and I will take each one back for the Brussels agenda.

"While such meetings provide me with a concise brief on the state of Scotland's agriculture, they cannot replace the value of getting out and about and meeting farmers first-hand. That is why I am delighted to announce that I will be working in conjunction with NFU Scotland to arrange farmer surgeries in each of their nine regions. Farmers can come along and ask questions and have some input into what goes on in Brussels. We will issue details soon."

Call 0131 525 8926 or email Alyn.smith@europarl.europa.eu
107 McDonald Road Edinburgh, EH7 4NW. Highland Rail House, Station Square, Inverness, IV1 1LE.
Baltic Chambers, 50 Wellington Street, Glasgow, G2 6HJ.

TOWN-TWINNING BOOKLET LAUNCHED

Alyn has launched his booklet on town-twinning initiatives and EU funds. This has now been sent to all of Scotland's Councillors, as well as all SNP MSPs and MPs. The booklet provides a straight-forward guide to the EU budgets available for town-twinning initiatives and how to access them. EU funding was recently created by the European Parliament and Commission to encourage town twinning, yet in 2007 just five grants were awarded to Scots organizations.

Alyn said: "Town twinning is a fantastic way of encouraging people to get out there and make friends across Europe. We all have so much to gain from promoting links like these. There is inspiring work going on up and down Scotland to reach out to our neighbours, but we can do more, and I am committing myself to make that process easier and more financially attractive.

"I receive almost daily requests from Scots who are looking for EU funding for projects taking place the length and breadth of Scotland and here we have a budget that is sitting waiting to be plundered. It is crazy that only five Scottish twinning organizations accessed the EU cash available last year. This is an untapped resource which Scottish towns could really benefit from and I want 2008 to be a record year in terms of the number of Scottish applications.

"I'm particularly pleased that Liam O'Keefe from the Allan Macartney Internship Programme was able to head up the project. It was a great opportunity for him to see just how the EU actually works, and to make a real contribution to Scotland in Europe.

"Twinning associations, churches and any other Scots organisations that want a copy just need to get in touch with me on alyn.smith@snp.org and we will send a copy out."

ALYN CALLS TIME ON CALMAC CHAOS

Alyn has called on EU Transport Commissioner Jacques Barrot to commence formal legal infraction proceedings against the UK and Scottish governments over the continuing logjam on ferry policy inherited from the previous Scottish regime.

Barely a year after the SNP won power in Holyrood, Alyn, along with Stewart Stevenson and Jim Mather, has been attempting to cut through the years of inherited confusion, and has come to the view that formal legal proceedings are the only way to bring clarity to a still murky legal situation. Alyn and Jim Mather have also jointly invited Transport Commissioner Barrot to come and see the ferries for himself when he is in Scotland in late April.

Mr Smith said: "I'm not one for posturing, I do not make promises lightly and I undertook to cut through the years of guddle and confusion the SNP government inherited and I firmly believe that court action is the only way to do it.

"The SNP administration inherited a poisonous guddle on ferry policy, and the Gourock-Dunoon route in particular. Claim and counter claim over what the EU rules mean and selective misinterpretation of the EU rules by various vested interests have produced a status quo that leaves nobody happy and the community and government stuck together in the middle of a swamp not of our making.

"Were I a Yes Minister character I suspect Sir Humphrey would describe it as 'courageous' for an SNP Member to call in the European Commission on his own party colleagues, but I am firmly of the view we need to light a rocket under this. The European Commission administers policy on state aids, but the European Court of Justice is the ultimate authority and the SNP's robust approach has nothing to fear from formal proceedings being taken against us. Quite the reverse, I invite them, it will be just the laser beam of clarity this business has needed for nine years.

"While I'm confident that the SNP government is focussed on providing the service people want to see, it has been nine months and we remain mired in a swamp not of our making. Formal legal proceedings will oblige the Commission to formulate a case and to engage to resolve the matter. The proceedings happen on our watch so will be a bit uncomfortable for the government but we are where we are, and the status quo is intolerable."



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Alyn addressing the Althingi in Reykjavik

ALYN MADE HONORARY PRESIDENT

Alyn has been appointed Honorary Presidency of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG Scotland) in recognition of his work for Scotland's agriculture and environment. FWAG Scotland has been launched as a distinct Scottish organisation independent of the former UK parent body, is wholly owned by farmer members and employs some thirty people across Scotland advising farmers on various agricultural and environment schemes.

Speaking from Edinburgh Mr Smith said: "FWAG has always been a fantastic resource for farmers and others to go to for help on a huge variety of issues, from business management to interaction with local communities. The independence of FWAG Scotland from FWAG UK has been a sensible next step for the body and I see a glittering future for FWAG Scotland."

"I am thrilled that FWAG Scotland has chosen me to be their Honorary President. This is an honour and I look forward to working with the group to take forward the best interests of Scotland's farming and environmental sectors both within Scotland and in the broader sphere of the European Union."

Environment Minister Michael Russell congratulated Alyn on his appointment: "This is a real feather in Alyn's cap and underlines the common agenda the SNP, Agricultural and Environmental interests in Scotland share. Alyn has been working hard as an MEP representing the whole of Scotland and scoring real wins for Scotland as this endorsement shows. This appointment is good news and I'm delighted Alyn has been able to take it up."

ALYN ADDRESSES ICELAND'S PARLIAMENT

This month Alyn travelled to Iceland to take part in a meeting of the Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament, on how Iceland can better co-operate with the institutions and countries of the EU. He was invited due to his interest in Iceland and the Nordic countries and his membership of the Switzerland, Iceland and Norway Delegation of the European Parliament.

Alyn also held talks with the Icelandic Foreign Ministry officials and Icelandic Fisheries Minister Einar K. Gudfinnsson to discuss increased co-operation between Iceland and Scotland on fisheries management. He is particularly keen to work with Iceland in formulating practical alternatives to replace the disastrous EU Common Fisheries Policy, which he believes is the biggest single block to Icelandic membership of the EU.

Speaking before his visit Alyn said: "I'm always glad to be going to Iceland, it does feel a home from home and we Scots have so much to learn from the Icelandic way of doing things."

"This major conference indicates the scope of the debate in Iceland, another national conversation, on how to interact with the EU given that some 70% of Iceland's legislation stems from the EU but they have little opportunity to influence it, and they see the external borders of the EU becoming higher as the internal borders count for less."

"When I was last in Iceland I was struck by the fact that one of the big debates was whether to adopt the euro as currency, but still not join the EU. The biggest single block on membership is clearly the Alice in Wonderland way the EU manages fisheries, and if 70% plus of Scotland's income came from fisheries I would not want us to be members either."

"So one thing that I will be stressing is that Scotland's government is keen to work with Iceland on real projects, fisheries in particular given our massive common agenda. Scotland is proving that we can lead the way in fisheries management within the EU and Scots fishers are already shrugging off the dead hand of central control from late night secret meetings in Brussels each December where science goes out the window."

"Our pro-sustainability anti-CFP arguments in the Council of Ministers in Brussels will be immeasurably strengthened by working closely with likeminded friends, and I'm looking forward to my visit."

NEW ADDITION TO ALYN'S TEAM

March has seen a new recruit joining Alyn's team of staff. Grant Baskerville is going to be working for Alyn three days a week and for Aileen Campbell MSP in the Scottish Parliament two days a week. He will take up the role of Political Advisor to Alyn. He is a well-known face in Alyn's offices in Brussels and Edinburgh, having worked with the team as part of the Alan Macartney Internship programme last year.