



The new Environment Committee: what impact on food policy?

Many of the leading experts on food policy in the European Parliament will be missing when the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) gets back to work in July.

MEPs leaving the Parliament

Some of the committee's leading members stood down at the elections – including the coordinator for the centre-right EPP-ED group, John Bowis, Dutch Labour member Dorette Corbey, and Irish MEP Avril Doyle. Mojca Drnar Murko, a Slovenian Liberal, was closely involved in issues related to additives. All were key players on food issues and their presence and knowledge is likely to be missed.

A number of other MEPs with an interest in food issues were placed in lowly positions on their party lists and, not unexpectedly, lost their seats: Liberals Magor Imre Csibi (Romania) and Jules Maaten (the Netherlands), French Socialist Anne Ferreira, and German Green Hiltrud Breyer will not return to the Parliament. Mr Csibi was a key player on obesity issues and a prominent voice in the debate on food labelling. Mr Maaten had taken an increasing interest in health claims, notably on the impact of a restrictive system on research in the food industry. Ms Breyer was a notable critic of the use of trans-fats and nanotechnology in food.

Returning MEPs

However, some familiar faces will return: Kartika Liotard (GUE/NGL, Netherlands) was a key player in the last parliament on novel foods and on the ongoing issues at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Frédérique Ries (ALDE, Belgium), was responsible for a report on obesity in the last parliament and will continue to take an interest in the link between food and health. British Labour MEPs Linda McAvan and Glenis Willmott return, and it is thought that the latter may shadow Renate Sommer (EPP, Germany) on the controversial Commission proposal on food information to consumers.

Chair of the committee

Miroslav Ouzky – whose ODS party leaves the EPP-ED to form the new European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group with the British Conservatives – will not remain as Chair of the Committee. The Chair will depend on the way in which the political groups use their choices under the d'Hondt system – but with the ENVI Committee being the powerhouse of the Parliament in terms of



legislative (and scrutiny) work, it is likely to be a high priority for all political groups. It is possible that the Socialists and Democrats (PASD) will take the Chair of this Committee as their first choice. German MEP Dagmar Roth-Behrendt is likely to take the role should this happen.

However, questions of Group formation and the Committee Chair will not be formally decided until the Parliament meets in its constituent session on 14-16 July.

Key issues: food labelling and implementation of claims and nutrient profiles

Mrs Sommer will take up the reins again on food labelling and continue her intense scrutiny of the implementation of the Regulation on nutrition and health claims.

A centre-right alliance between the EPP, a more economically-liberal ALDE group (with twelve German members) and the new UEN / Conservative group could also have a major impact on the food labelling proposal. Such an alliance would be likely to oppose the imposition of traffic-light front-of-pack labelling, supported by many on the Left (including Mrs Willmott) and a more light-touch piece of legislation could result. The food industry is therefore likely to be cheered somewhat by the election results.

Mrs Sommer is also likely to pursue her stated aim of deleting nutrient profiles from the Claims Regulation: with this measure delayed long past the January 2009 deadline, Mrs Sommer will hope that a centre-right alliance will bolster support for what is perceived by many as a paternalistic measure.

The Parliament will also have important scrutiny powers in the new session, with a number of Commission decisions on health claims expected to pass through parliamentary scrutiny in the coming months and years. It remains to be seen how seriously the scrutiny will be, although it is unlikely that all claims will pass without comment. While the threshold for rejecting Commission decisions is high, claims relating to children's health and development and the reduction of the risk of disease could be controversial and attract debate, if perhaps not defeat.

In any case, the growing disquiet in the food industry about the Claims Regulation is likely to filter through to MEPs and have an impact on the work of the Parliament. It could well be a big source of debate in the early part of this parliament.

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