

Toby Wardman

Writing sample

Article in The Sprout

November 2004

The Sprout was the Brussels-based equivalent of Private Eye magazine, in which I wrote a monthly tongue-in-cheek diary column for Richard Corbett MEP in 2004 and 2005.

At first, I almost felt sorry for UKIP's Tom Wise. We all know how the press delight in making unfounded allegations against MEPs, going out of their way to avoid checking facts in search of a good story.

I say I 'almost' felt sorry; let's not forget that this is exactly the sort of mud-slinging that UKIP itself has indulged in for many years, usually on the flimsiest of evidence. How, I wondered, is Mr Wise enjoying a taste of his own medicine?

According to the Sunday Telegraph, Mr Wise had been claiming £36,000 (!) from Parliament to pay a researcher whose salary was in fact only £6,000. In looking charitably on the poor chap's dilemma, I mused on the possibility that it was all completely innocent; perhaps the missing £30,000 was not intentionally pocketed by Mr Wise, on top of his salary of £59K, but could perhaps be accounted for by miscellaneous employment expenses for said researcher? Maybe travel expenses? Presumably nothing less than first class would do. Hotel accommodation? Ditto. It would be pretty hard work to rack up thirty grand that way, but I daresay the sort of person who gravitates to UKIP could manage it.

But just as I was thinking of giving Mr Wise the benefit of the doubt, along came UKIP's wonderful press office and merrily chucked a barrel of boiling oil onto the blaze. In a press release circulated to all and sundry, the unctuous Nigel Farage, their almost-leader in the European Parliament, went to great lengths to point out that Mr Wise was acting as his own paying agent (which I suppose he imagined explained everything). There's only one problem: acting as your own paying agent is clearly and specifically prohibited by Parliament's rules.

Perhaps we can rescue poor Mr Wise's integrity by supposing that he simply didn't know the rules when he made that arrangement? Sadly not, because in his next breath Monsieur Farage tells us that Mr Wise had in fact also been the paying agent for another UKIP MEP in the previous parliamentary term! So he can hardly argue ignorance of the system, can he?

The thing is, these rules are supposed to make sure taxpayers' money goes where it should, as well as to protect MEPs from allegations of corruption. Members are required to name an independent paying agent, such as an accountant, to manage the monies, calculate pay, social security and travel costs, and answer any queries from Parliament. So why would Mr Wise have deliberately refrained from following anti-corruption rules, and why would he want to manage these sums himself through his own bank account? Answers on a postcard to the Court of Auditors, please.

Meanwhile, Lib Dem MEPs are back from their conference aglow with the victory they scored over their party leadership when the latter tried to shift the party into a more eurosceptic position. It was sad to see Nick Clegg, until recently an MEP but now a Yorkshire MP, opportunistically aligning himself with the leadership to prove he hadn't 'gone native' during his stint in Brussels. But the grassroots delegates voted for the line taken by the MEPs rather than that of the party leadership... not something that happens in every party!

Toby Wardman

Writing sample

Finally, lest I be accused of mild obsession in my exposés of other parties' absurdities, allow me to conclude with a little example of good old-fashioned Socialist solidarity. We Labour MEPs have heaped sympathy on our German colleagues this month following their discovery that the SPD party conference in Karlsruhe clashes with Parliament's November session. After much wailing and gnashing of teeth, the Germans decided to ask if we could please rearrange Parliament's agenda to help them cope.

Now, politically aware readers will recall that Labour had the same problem in September. But, while the extreme proximity of Brighton to Strasbourg meant that it was dead easy for us all to pop back and forth as we liked (I mean, you can practically see Brighton pier from the top of the Louise Weiss building), the vast distance and nigh-on impossibility of having to drive from western Baden-Württemberg to eastern Alsace is giving the Germans genuine grief. It's nearly a whole hour by car, I'm told. Believe me, we have nothing but sympathy. Poor darlings.