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Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON May 16, 2006 Senator John McCain

Last week I met Senator John McCain of Arizona, believed by many to be the front runner for the Republican Party's Presidential nomination for 2008. Senator McCain told me how his family left Scotland because of "a difference of opinion with the Campbells," settled in Ireland for one or two generations before coming to the United States. The Senator himself is the son and the grandson of US Navy admirals and is a decorated Navy pilot who was shot down in Vietnam and endured severe torture and prolonged imprisonment there. He is so cheerful and easy going when one meets him that one would have little sense either of the suffering he has endured or of the distinguished career he has pursued since he was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1982. He told me he was very appreciative of the European Union's role in promoting human rights particularly in Uzbekistan, Georgia and Belarus. We discussed his support for the proposed Open Skies Aviation Agreement between the EU and the US, the Middle East Peace Process and the Iranian nuclear issue.

He autographed a copy for me (shown above) of his recent book *Character is Destiny*, which is a series of essays about values in public and private life and deals with historical figures such as Maximilian Kolbe, Leonardo de Vinci, Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Senator John Kyl

Last week, I also met the other Senator from Arizona, John Kyl, who has become one of the most effective legislators in the Senate with a widely recognized mastery of both the procedure and the human dynamics of the Upper House. As he serves on the Judiciary Committee, I raised with him the wish of the EU that all Member States enjoy visa-free access for their citizens to the United States on an equal basis. A number of new Member States, like Poland and the Czech Republic, do not enjoy this privilege notwithstanding the successful work the EU has been doing to improve the security of all EU passports and to share intelligence with the United States. Senator Kyl spoke to me about his ambition for the development of alternative fuels to gasoline, such as ethanol based on sugar cane and cellulosic.

Congressman Rick Renzi

I also met a third legislator from Arizona last week, Rick Renzi, who represents the first District in the House of Representatives. Rick was first elected in 2002. Like Senator Kyl, he is deeply committed to promoting alternative fuels and renewable energy. He wants to see 10 million acres of sugar cane planted for ethanol production close to the Panama Canal from whence the fuel could be easily shipped to the United States, thereby providing alternative income sources for local farmers who may otherwise be attracted to cultivation of the coca plant. He also wants to see forest waste used to generate energy.

Drug Control

I met John Walters, the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. While 19.1 million Americans have used at least one illicit substance in the past month, overall use is falling, especially among teenagers. John Walters was particularly interested in how the EU and the US can work more closely together to monitor distribution of the legitimate medicines (pseudo-ephedrine and ephedrine used as cold remedies) that can be converted into methamphetamine, an addictive drug which causes very dangerous behaviour.

He told me of the introduction of optional drug testing in many US schools, which has helped reduce the social acceptability of, and peer pressure for, drug use by teenagers. The very existence of the tests gives students an "out" to say no to drugs. This is important because peer pressure, not pushers, is the main reason young people experiment with drugs for the first time.

The young people who encourage drug use by others are usually only in the early stages of addiction themselves and have yet to display the really bad side effects which come later.

Director Walters and I discussed an area where the addiction problem is on the increase – the non-medical use of prescription drugs, particularly narcotic painkillers. Countering this growing addition will require close cooperation among doctors, pharmacists and manufacturers to track use patterns and to detect the diversion of painkillers outside the medical field.

Europe and Family Life

Yesterday, the 15th May, was the United Nations International “Day of Families.”

To mark the day, the European Commission published some very interesting statistics about families in the European Union.

There were 2.2 million marriages in Europe in 2004 and 1 million divorces. The highest marriage rate was in Cyprus (7.2 per 1,000 inhabitants) and the lowest was in Greece (4 per 1,000).

Of the 1 million divorces in the EU in 2004, the highest divorce rate was found in the Czech Republic (3.2 per 1,000 people) and the lowest in Ireland (0.7 per 1,000 people). Ireland had the highest birth rate (15 per 1,000 people) and Germany the lowest (8.6 per 1,000).

European families spend an average 21% of their total budget on housing, ranging from a high of 28.5% of the budget in Sweden down to a low of just 12% in Cyprus. Transport absorbs 18.5% of the family budget in Luxembourg as against only 8.5% in Greece.

Full access to these very interesting statistics can be obtained by visiting the Eurostat website at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>.

By the way, the newly appointed Director of Eurostat, Hervé Carré, worked until very recently in the Washington Delegation of the European Commission! Please send me your comments about this or any of my weekly messages or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!