

April 25, 2006

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Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON April 25, 2006 I am in Europe at the moment for a meeting between Members of Congress and Members of the European Parliament in Vienna and for briefings in Brussels with the European Commission and the Council of Ministers. At the Vienna meeting the American side was led by Congresswoman Jo Ann Davis of Virginia and the European side by Jonathan Evans, the MEP (Member of the European Parliament) representing Wales.

The Members of Congress and the MEPs discussed how the European Union and the United States can work together to solve the world's big problems. Between us we are only 12% of the world's population, but we enjoy almost half of the world's income and wealth. We must welcome the growth of other economies, like India and China, but recognize that this will put additional pressure on the world's limited resources. For example, over the next 15 years, the number of cars in China is expected to increase five fold and most of the fuel for those cars will have to be bought from the same suppliers as we use. In the last 10 years, China's oil usage grew by 2.8 million barrels a day, but oil use in the United States grew by an even larger amount – 3.9 million barrels a day. One of the alternatives to oil is nuclear power but an American Congresswoman pointed out that we have not yet discovered a fully safe way to dispose of the nuclear waste. A British MEP said that the up-front investment required to install nuclear generating capacity is enormous, and must be undertaken before the station delivers a single kilowatt of electricity. Another American Congressman advised us that, whatever our problems with increasing oil prices, the least developed countries are being hit even harder. The oil price increase may be painful for us, but for some poorer countries it is an unmitigated disaster.

All of this points out the necessity for the United States and the European Union to work together to reduce our dependence on oil. A European Parliament resolution, authored by MEP Erika Mann, called for cooperation in research between the EU and the US on:

- High-speed mass transit;
- Synthetic and bio-fuels;
- New technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One possibility being discussed is the compulsory incorporation of bio-fuels in gasoline. Bio-diesel is already competitive with oil at \$60 a barrel and bio-ethanol is competitive at \$80 a barrel.

There is also a place for a degree of compulsion to bring about greater fuel efficiency in the vehicles we use on our roads. For example when democracies faced an existential threat during the Second World War they did not hesitate to introduce compulsory rationing. It could be argued that we face an existential threat in the event of oil prices continuing to escalate, and it may be necessary to supplement the market by measures that require greater equity between people in the matter of oil use. Another issue discussed by the legislators was terrorism. Here there seems to be a difference as to how we should describe what we are doing. Are we engaged in a war on terror, or are we treating terrorism as a crime which must be tackled through the criminal law? If we are engaged in a war on terror, should the human rights protections of the Geneva Conventions apply, and if not what international rules should apply? A Spanish MEP pointed out that the criminal law had been successfully used to bring most of the surviving perpetrators of the Madrid bombing to justice. But an American Congressman felt that you cannot treat terrorists as normal criminals. Certainly the fact that some terrorists are prepared to commit suicide in order to kill others makes the practice in which they are engaged completely different from anything with which the normal criminal law is familiar.

Another topic discussed by the legislators was the risk of a flu pandemic. One American Congressman said that it was not so much a questions of if we would have a pandemic, but of when. Global society had become so interdependent that the flu would spread very quickly indeed. The panic could be such that there would be threats to law and order. The development of a vaccine for the particular strain of flu in question would take 3 – 6 months. The question was whether the medical services would be able to cope in the meantime. Detailed contingency planning was vital. So also was help to poorer countries that might not have the existing veterinary and public health infrastructure necessary to contain the spread of the disease in its initial phase. This was a problem which would require the world to unite in a way that it has rarely done, and to do so very quickly.

Finally, I had the opportunity, in Brussels, to discuss the prospects for the world trade talks. There was a strong feeling that a deal could be done. But the deal needed to be a balanced one. It could not be all about agriculture. The gains in services and non-agricultural products needed to be made visible and the possibility of agricultural concessions should not be exaggerated. In short, one should not make the mistake of expecting others to do what one would not do oneself in similar circumstances. Please send me your comments about this or any of my weekly messages or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!