

LETTERS

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Decisive EU action on gender equality?

As Hilde Bjørkhaug and Siri Øyslebø Sørensen commented in their opinion piece last week ("Why gender quotas are necessary", 8-14 March), there is only one way forward if the European Commission is serious about reaching 40% of women on boards of European companies by 2020: binding legislation.

Norway's experience is corroborated by the findings of European Women's Lobby's progress report on women on boards, published on 29 February, and by the Commission's latest analysis. (Most progress towards parity over the past year has been made in France, where quota legislation accompanied by sanctions was introduced last year.)

The commitments made by Viviane Reding, the



European Voice, 8-14 March 2012

European commissioner for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, to a more equal representation of women and men on the boards of European compa-

nies have attracted more media attention than any other gender-equality issue in recent years.

Given that publicity and the evidence, it will be diffi-

cult for the Commission to back down without losing face. A failure to take action would also result in a loss of credibility in the eyes not just of women, but of men: 75% of Europeans favour quotas, according to a Eurobarometer survey.

Introducing EU legislation for more equality in the highest sphere of economic decision-making would have both a concrete and a symbolic impact. However, it is only one part of the equation, and action to promote equality between women and men is even more important in times of crisis, both points made in your editorial ("Growth requires more women in EU's workforce", 8-14 March). The EU's now much-expected move to bring a better gender balance to boardrooms is not an

excuse for doing nothing else for equality.

The Commission must show that it is equally determined to address the problems faced by the many women who are not in the position to be nominated on boards – even if solving their problems will attract less media attention and require complex strategies and resources.

At the moment, such determination is not evident. Despite promises and persistent calls by the European Parliament, a strong EU initiative to combat violence against women is nowhere in sight.

If the Commission's proposals for the EU funding programmes for the next seven-year period are approved, less attention and less money would be devoted to gender-equality poli-

cies. Under these proposals, there would be neither predictable, earmarked funding for activities such as projects, studies and campaigns to promote equality between women and men, nor an independent EU programme to combat violence against women.

Finally, the EU institutions are making no progress with revisions to the maternity-leave directive, which, according to the position of the European Parliament, should be extended from 14 to 20 weeks with full pay guaranteed. This is legislation that would have an immediate impact on the daily lives of millions of women.

Brigitte Triems
President
European Women's Lobby
Brussels

Manufacturing more than aircraft

There is something very, very wrong with the claim being made by Airbus, along with six airlines and two engine manufacturers, that some A330 orders from Chinese airlines are "not being finalised" because of fears that the EU's emissions-trading scheme (ETS) will have an adverse impact on ticket prices ("Aviation firms warn of ETS dangers," [EuropeanVoice.com](http://europeanvoice.com), 12 March).

Firstly, in January this year, Cathay Pacific's chief executive estimated that a one-way ticket from Hong Kong to Europe could go up by HK\$50 (€4.92). That will have absolutely zero impact on traffic and will be passed on to passengers in any event. The ETS costs will clearly not mean the

end of air travel between Europe and China.

Secondly, there are 854 A330s currently in service, with a production backlog of 335; they are built at a rate of nine per month. Just like Boeing, Airbus requires a 5% deposit, often with further staged payments, as aircraft are built. Airlines order new aircraft to fit their acquisition/fleet commonality and replacement plans, alongside route development and growth forecasts. Production line slots will not easily be given up on a whim, particularly when switching to a rival manufacturer could be hugely problematic and very costly. More importantly, the 5% deposits are also non-refundable. An A330 has a variant-

dependent list price of between \$200 million and \$225m (€153m-€172m).

Are we seriously meant to believe that Chinese airlines are prepared to throw away millions of dollars in forfeited deposits over an ETS surcharge amounting to a few euros per ticket? I don't think so.

So what is going on? It's simple really: airlines and aerospace manufacturers despise the EU's ETS and will go to any lengths to collapse the scheme, hence this kind of PR-inspired political pressure. It seems that Airbus does not only make aircraft; it can also manufacture stories.

Jeffrey Gazzard
Aviation Environment Federation
London

Far right increasingly acceptable, even within European Parliament

The European Parliament's decision to award a grant to a far-right European Alliance, confirming "it satisfied the general conditions for being eligible" ("Taking a right turn", 23-29 February 2012), is an extremely worrying sign that the far right is becoming increasingly 'acceptable' in Europe.

All political parties have a right to funding, but they need to abide by certain rules set out by the European Parliament to acquire funding as European political parties, including abiding by the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

and the rule of law.

We question whether the Parliament has really done its verification work properly. Indeed, the programmes of some of the parties in the European Alliance of National Movements include clear breaches to this rule. For instance, the British National Party states in its programme that it will repeal the UK's Human Rights Act and withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights – a dramatic move away from established universal human-rights principles. France's Front National proposes to reintroduce the death penalty in France.

The Parliament needs to take its role as the voice of democracy in Europe more seriously and needs to stay vigilant. All the more so in a context of growing popularity of far-right ideologies and discourses in Europe, which are also increasingly adopted and legitimised by mainstream political leaders. Messages undermining EU values of respect for human rights cannot be allowed to become a legitimate political voice supported by taxpayers' money.

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