



Interview with **Mr Phil Wynn OWEN**,
new ECA Member from the United Kingdom

By **Rosmarie Carotti**

Mr Phil Wynn Owen, ECA Member

R. C.: Sir, you are the new Member from the UK. What will your responsibilities be here in the ECA? Will there be tasks which are similar to those you had in your previous positions?

Phil Wynn Owen: I am excited and delighted to be here. I have worked widely across the government in the UK, and I think there are a number of areas where my experience will hopefully be able to add value to the work of the Court. The allocation of responsibilities for the new Members has just been decided in the last Court's meeting. I have been assigned to Chamber II, which covers Structural Funds, Transport and Energy.

R. C.: You were Director General of the Department of Energy & Climate Change of the UK government most recently. Earlier in your career you were Director General of Strategy, Information and Pensions at the Department for Work and Pensions. What other experience do you bring to the ECA?

Phil Wynn Owen: I also have wide-ranging general management experience. I have been on the management board of major government departments and I also served as deputy chairman of a regional hospital.

As regards the job here, I am still learning exactly what it entails, but I can see that it will be a fascinating mix of being the best possible collegiate Member that I can, working closely with my fellow Court Members, adding value to the leadership of the reports that I am assigned to work on, but also helping with other reports or working across Chambers.

And I think that for Court Members there is also a very important external representational role. As a Court Member, I should be facing outwards and dealing with stakeholders across the Union and with the other key institutions.

R. C.: How will you face the problem of the many languages in the EU?

Phil Wynn Owen: I am using the opportunities in place here at the Court to improve my French. German is my second language, which I will also work on. One of my ambitions is to make sure that I improve three of my languages, that is including English, to a much better level.

R. C.: Will you also take part in audit missions and performance audits?

Phil Wynn Owen: My understanding is that Members do go on missions associated with the studies that they are working on. When I appeared before the Committee on Budgetary Control of European Parliament (CONT), I said that I have been involved in the commissioning and receiving of many independent reports to a national Member State government. So I have some experience of designing and managing independent reports of a similar nature to performance reports, although

I am not a qualified auditor. I have also been audited, sat on various audit committees and I was trained in financial and management accountancy when I was at the London Business School.

R. C.: You also were involved in building a consensus on impact assessment procedures which are part of the Commission's better regulation reforms. What is the difference between impact assessment and performance audit? Can the ECA contribute with its advice to the Commission's impact procedures?

Phil Wynn Owen: One material difference is that impact assessments, if done well, are ex ante. They are prepared by responsible officials in the Commission or the Member State as they are developing policy to inform their own and the political decision-makers judgements about what is best to do. They also serve as a platform for consultation.

The Commission has made great progress in the past twelve years in developing its impact assessment methodology. Before, there was little or nothing. I am proud of having taken part in a collaborative Member States' exercise called the "Mandelkern report", which was independent from normal Union structures and contributed to persuading the Commission to adopt impact assessments twelve years ago.

As ever with such mechanisms there is still a long way to go. I think the ECA made an interesting and important contribution a few years ago when it published a report on how impact assessments could be improved. We are undertaking a follow-up, which is often a good thing.

Performance audit is usually not ex-ante but ex-post. There is an interesting debate about whether more could be done alongside the early implementation of a policy, but I think we need to take great care that audit does not intrude into political matters.

I am glad you have made the connection between impact assessment and performance audit. If you have a fully established impact assessment process to inform policy-making, when an auditor comes to conduct a performance report, one of the first things he or she should look for is the impact assessment, so as to assess how the policy has performed against it.

If the Commission improves impact assessments, so they become a live policy-making tool, that will further contribute to good governance. There are people both in the Commission and in the European Parliament who share that vision of a cycle of improved policy-making, supported by impact assessments and independent performance audits.

R. C.: Earlier in your career, you were a Director General at the Department for Work and Pensions. Which are the greatest structural dangers for the pension schemes of the Member States?

Phil Wynn Owen: My work on pensions' reform, as well as my work on the board of a regional hospital, showed me what a huge public policy challenge the ageing society is. I am always fascinated, in an apolitical way, by the big challenges of public policy and by inter- and intra-generational challenges like ageing or climate change.

I think that public audit has a very important role on these big issues. It can help to take a long view, by helping to encourage transparency in the costs and the benefits, as well as the contingent liabilities that exist. There is also an issue for the auditor about identifying and highlighting best practice.

R. C.: The structural problems are not only linked to the ageing population. They are also linked to people losing their jobs.

Phil Wynn Owen: One of the biggest problems in the EU is youth unemployment. So I am delighted that the ECA is going to do a performance study on this. For young people in the EU, the chance of having, both individually and collectively, adequate pensions as they grow older is a very real problem. They naturally worry about today, but pensions will be a stored problem for them if they have not been able to make adequate contributions.

What I did in the Member State I know best was to help politicians legislate to encourage a behavioural change through so-called “auto-enrolment”. Through this legislation, people are automatically enrolled into a pension scheme when they start a job rather than having to opt in to a pension. They have to opt out. So more people should now start to save for a pension.

R. C.: The other big world issue you mentioned is climate change.

Phil Wynn Owen: I have been interested in climate change and environmental matters for many years, as a professional, apolitical civil servant. I first learnt about environmental impact assessment at the London Business School. When I was tax team leader at our Finance Ministry, I helped introduce so-called ‘green taxes’ and more recently I led, as a senior official, on climate change matters. I was lucky enough to play a small part in the international climate change negotiations in Durban and Doha.

These are issues that cross all generations and on which we need to do our best. I am pleased to have already seen a lot of relevant work at the Court, a number of reports in various stages of preparation that are looking at environmental issues and climate change.

R. C.: How did you experience the hearing in the European Parliament?

Phil Wynn Owen: I have been to many hearings in national parliaments, and I am used to discussing audit matters in challenging circumstances. This was the first time I had appeared before the European Parliament. It was different because eventually there was going to be a vote about me. It was an interesting experience, one from which I hope the ECA and I will benefit over time because I am very conscious that part of my role is to represent the ECA on the reports I will be leading on to the European Parliament.

R. C.: A last personal question, Mr Wynn Owen. You are Welsh, aren't you?

Phil Wynn Owen: My parents were from the western tip of Wales and they spoke Welsh. I was brought up in England and, unfortunately, I do not speak Welsh. But I have inherited a passion for Wales and for Welsh rugby.