

Review of Antwerp Conference 2006

by

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PEOPIL's annual conference took place in the beautiful city of Antwerp in Belgium on 26 and 27 May 2006. On the eve of the conference the Antwerp Bar Association sponsored a fabulous drinks reception at the stunning Antwerp Town Hall which provided conference delegates with a wonderful opportunity to meet local lawyers as well as old friends and fellow PEOPIL members.

Despite many of the conference delegates having taken the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the bars and restaurants of Antwerp the night before, as usual the first day of the conference was very well attended. The focus of the programme that morning was very much tort reform, an important topic for every jurisdiction represented by the PEOPIL Membership. As well as a rousing keynote speech from our President John Pickering, we heard Antoine Buchet of the Civil Justice Unit at the European Commission speak about the different issues competing for a share of the Commission's resources, how those issues were prioritized and the issues currently receiving attention. Philip Mead then gave an update as to the current status of Rome II and the divergences in protection between the laws of the state of the accident and the domicile of the victim. Marco Bona followed with information about recent reform in Italy and the approach of the European Courts by way of recent case law.

The afternoon session focused on occupational health and, in particular, stress at work. Allan Gore provided a resume of workplace legislation in the EU comparing the terminology of the directives issued by the EU with that of the implementing regulations in the UK, and also provided details of cases in which the UK courts had interpreted such regulations. Asbestos claims have been on PEOPIL's agenda since the conference in Dublin in 2003, and Lydia Charlier of Netherlands firm Beer Advocaten gave an encouraging lecture as to the current law in the Netherlands in respect of asbestos claims. Two lectures on stress at work then followed, with Douglas Hornung providing an overview of the legal aspects whilst Dr David Gold of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) providing details of the ILO's SOLVE programme which is an interactive educational programme to assist businesses to develop corporate/institutional policies to address psychosocial problems at work. The statistics Dr Gold gave us as to the cost of psychosocial issues to a business and the economy in general were startling and of interest to the delegates both as lawyers and as managers of law firms.

As is traditional at all PEOPIL conferences, the first day of the conference was followed by a drinks reception and gala dinner and dance. Beer Advocaten sponsored the drinks reception, and the addition of a diamond in each glass of champagne, two of which were the genuine article, heightened the anticipation! The lucky recipients of the two diamonds were announced during the meal (congratulations Maarten Tromp and Lydia Charlier!), which was superb. The serving of dessert was accompanied by a fabulous firework display which was more than matched by the quality of the delights on offer! The meal was followed by music and dancing into the early hours during which two of the Italian members, Marco de Fazi and Marco Bona took to the stage to prove that they have the musical talent to rival their legal skills!

The next day of the conference got off to a slightly delayed start following the night's social activities, but there was another full morning's programme to get through. The break out sessions for the RTA and Whiplash, Medical Negligence and Asbestos special interest groups were well attended and allowed the delegates to focus on the areas of most interest to their practice. Diana Wallis MEP then brought us up to date with some of the most recent developments in EU Law and as usual her speech was delivered with an infectious passion. The final session of the conference was an introductory session in respect of international and domestic aviation claims with Peter Hearne, Fellow of The Royal Academy of Engineering, providing an overview of commercial air transport safety regulation and James Dingemans QC giving an overview of the legal framework in respect of claims arising from aviation accidents. This was the first conference at which aviation claims had been discussed and given the level of interest in the topic, further lectures on this topic will no doubt be scheduled at future conferences.

As I left Antwerp at the end of the conference I reflected on how quickly the conference had passed, what an insightful programme it had been and how much I had enjoyed meeting up with my European colleagues. I am sure that I speak for all of the delegates when I thank the Belgian members, particularly Herman Naeyaert and his wife Francine, for a fantastic and most hospitable time in their country and the beautiful city of Antwerp. I must also thank Peugeot Belgium who provided the cars to transport delegates from the airport in Brussels to Antwerp, and Niels Berben, his wife and team of drivers who did a wonderful job of transporting the delegates from and to the airport (providing us with a brief tour of the city on the way!) and of assisting with the partners' programme, and who sacrificed their weekend to do so. I am already getting ready for Prague in 2007!