

***Malcolm Harbour MEP, Conservative Spokesman for the Internal Market and Consumer Protection explains how the Conservative Party is making Europe a better place for small businesses***

The importance of the principle, "think small first" is not just central to our manifesto but has been at the heart of our policy making in the last two legislatures. With many of our past, present and, we hope future Members having an active role in business before coming to the European Parliament, our party recognises that small businesses are the backbone of the economy and need special attention from politicians.

The EU Small Business Act, adopted last year, represents a positive step forward for SMEs. Conservatives were actively involved in shaping and setting the agenda for this initiative, which makes an important commitment to cut the administrative burden faced by EU's Small Businesses. This proposal represents a real opportunity for SMEs and our manifesto commits us to press for early implementation of the measures, to make sure Small Businesses benefit as soon as possible.

However, most EU legislation, particularly in the single market, employment and environment impacts upon Small Businesses. Therefore whilst this initiative is a good step in the right direction; it is only part of the picture. We have also played an important role in opening up the market in goods and services for SMEs. The Services Directive gave small businesses opportunities to establish themselves across Europe, providing increased competition and job creation. We have also worked hard to open up research and development programmes to SMEs, particularly through the Framework Programmes. We recognise that small businesses often have the ideas but lack the resources to carry them forward, so we will be working to make sure EU funding is flexible and accessible to innovative SMEs.

Access to public procurement has also been incredibly challenging for small businesses, as government contracts tend to be overly prescriptive and complex. Through our work on innovative procurement, we have identified that research and development contracts are more accessible to small businesses and provide increased opportunities to access procurement markets. In the next legislature, our manifesto outlines we will be committed to building an incentive and funding framework to make sure small businesses can access innovative procurement contracts across the EU. We will also be pressing for a 'Small Business Test' to form part of the impact assessment of proposed new legislation and where possible, push for an exception from EU regulation for the smallest firms, to ensure that future proposals will not put small enterprises at a competitive disadvantage.

Conservatives in the European Parliament have fought hard to protect the interests of Small Businesses and will continue to do so in the future. We realise that small enterprises are major innovators and job creators. We want to make it easier for business to take on extra employees and to boost economic growth.