

European Affairs Committee EUR 01- 99(min)

MINUTES

Date: Thursday 1 July 1999

Time: 9.00 am

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

Attendance:

Alun Michael, Chair (Labour: Mid & West Wales)

Mick Bates (Liberal Democrat: Montgomeryshire)

Val Feld (Labour: Swansea East)

William Graham (Conservative: South Wales East)

Christine Gwyther (Labour, Carmarthen West and South)

Elin Jones (Plaid Cymru: Ceredigion)

Rhodri Morgan (Labour: Cardiff West)

Alun Pugh (Labour: Clwyd West)

Rod Richards (Conservative: North Wales)

Rhodri Glyn Thomas (Plaid Cymru: Carmarthen & East Dinefwr)

Phil Williams (Plaid Cymru: South Wales East)

Officials

Andrew George (Committee Clerk)

Stephen Thomas (Deputy Committee Clerk)

Hugh Rawlings (Head, European Affairs Division)

Declarations of Interest: None

Agenda Item 1 : Chairman's Opening Remarks

1.1 The Chair welcomed Members to the Committee and commented that it was the first committee meeting to be held since the transfer of powers to the National Assembly. He outlined his vision of the Committee's broad strategic role which would support and complement the work of the subject committees.

1.2 Each Committee member was asked to give a brief overview of their background, experience and interests as regards Europe. In response, the Chair acknowledged the collective wealth of knowledge and experience amongst Members and hoped that the Committee would provide an opportunity for them to demonstrate their talents to the full.

Agenda Item 2 : Operation of the Committee on European Affairs

Papers: EUR-01-99(p.1) and EUR-01-99(p.2)

2.1 The Committee was invited to comment on papers EUR-01-99(p.1) and EUR-01-99(p.2), which summarised the recommendations of the European Strategy Group and set out some proposals from the Chair for the operation of the Committee.

2.2 In view of the importance of the European dimension in all of the Assembly's business, the Chair confirmed that he was the Assembly Secretary with overall responsibility for European affairs. He hoped that his Chairmanship would allow the Committee's collective views to influence the Cabinet's thinking on the many matters to which European matters were relevant.

2.3 In response to a question about National Assembly representation at the Council of Ministers, the Chair confirmed that it would be possible for an Assembly Secretary to attend as a part of the UK delegation. This would be covered in the concordat with the UK Government on the handling of European business. He asked the Clerk to commission a paper for the next meeting to explain the role of UKREP.

2.4 The Chair was also asked about progress in establishing the proposed Council of the Isles. He replied that preparations had been put on hold pending the implementation of the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland. At different times he had spoken to the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Ireland, representatives of parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly

and the First Minister of the Scottish Parliament as well as Ministerial Colleagues. There was enormous goodwill on the matter of co-operation between the regions.

2.5 Questions were asked about the Assembly's input into the European policy-making process and the need for the Assembly to be kept informed about developments in Europe. The Chair replied that the concordats drawn up between the Assembly and Whitehall departments would be a means of ensuring influence on the development of policy. He also saw the Assembly contributing to European policy through UKREP, the Wales European Centre and the five MEPs representing Wales.

2.6 In the light of this discussion, it was agreed that the Clerk should produce a draft 12-month forward work programme for consideration at the next meeting. The Chair asked Members to inform the Clerk of any issues which they would wish to see included in it. Comments made at the meeting included:

- that the Committee needed to bear in mind the potential resource implications of the European Strategy Group recommendations when deciding priorities;
- each subject committee should be asked to consider the European dimension of their work and assess and identify their priorities in respect of Europe;
- Assembly staff should receive training on European matters so that they could gain a better understanding of documents emanating from Europe;
- that officials from the Welsh European Centre should be invited to attend (or submit evidence) when the Committee discussed the relationship between the Assembly and the Centre; and
- that the committee should consider how best to develop greater links with the four Motor Regions.

Agenda Item 3: Establishment of a Wales Forum on European Affairs

Paper: EUR-01-99(p.3)

3.1 The Chair invited the Committee to comment on the proposal to establish a Wales Forum on European Affairs which would enable participants to receive and exchange information on European matters.

3.2 The following points were raised in discussion:

- the Forum should be exploratory and interactive in nature and have the opportunity to develop over time;
- it should begin its work with a conference - to include a plenary session and working

- groups which would provide a variety of opportunities to share information; and
- participants should include people working at a grass roots level in Wales, representatives of business (including agriculture), and Members of Parliament .

3.3 The Committee agreed upon the "conference approach" to the Forum and asked that arrangements be put in hand for this to be held in September or October. The Chair asked members to contribute suggestions for the Forum to officials via the Clerk.

Other Business

4.1 Members were reminded that EC Commissioner, Sir Leon Brittan was visiting the Assembly on 8 July and that members were invited to an informal meeting with him.

4.2 The Chair thanked members for their constructive contributions and hoped that this approach would continue at future meetings.

Committee Secretariat July 1999