

Committee on European Affairs

MINUTES

Date: 25 November 1999

Time: 9.30am

Venue: Committee Room 1

Attendance: Members

Alun Michael, Chair	Labour & Co-operative: Mid & West Wales
Mick Bates	Liberal Democrat: Montgomeryshire
Nicholas Bourne	Conservative: Mid & West Wales
Christine Gwyther	Labour: Carmarthen West and South
Elin Jones	Plaid Cymru: Ceredigion
Jonathan Morgan	Conservative: South Wales Central
Rhodri Morgan	Labour: Cardiff West
Alun Pugh	Labour: Clwyd West
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Plaid Cymru: Carmarthen & East Dinefwr
Phil Williams	Plaid Cymru: South Wales East
Prof Rose D'Sa	ECOSOC
Joseph Gallacher	Wales European Centre Director

Officials

Hugh Rawlings	Head, European Affairs Division
Caroline Turner	European Affairs Division
Catherine Eva	Head of EC Representation in Wales
Andrew George	Clerk
Julie Bragg	Deputy Clerk

Apologies: Val Feld; Brian Smith, Committee of the Regions; George Wright, ECOSOC; Glenys Kinnock, Jonathan Evans, Jill Evans, Eurig Wyn and Eluned Morgan, MEPs

Agenda Item 1: Chair's opening remarks

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. He noted that no MEPs had been able to attend because the timing of the meeting had turned out to be inconvenient for them. He reminded the Secretariat to continue to check the availability of MEPs when time-tabling meetings. He also noted that Val Feld was absent because she was representing the Assembly at a conference in Helsinki on use of ICT in smaller European regions. Members agreed a proposal that she should be asked to report back to the Committee in due course.

Agenda Item 2: Assembly Representation in Brussels

(a) Assembly Office

(b) Wales European Centre

Papers: EUR-03-99(p.1) and EUR-03-99(p.2)

2.1 The Chair asked Hugh Rawlings to introduce these papers which described a complementary approach to the Assembly's representation in Brussels by establishing a dedicated office within the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Commission; and by becoming a partner in the Wales European Centre (WEC). The Assembly's office would provide specific services for the Assembly which it would not be appropriate for the WEC to offer. It would be co-located with the WEC office and a rent would be agreed. It was hoped to get the office in place early in 2000. A Scottish Office report about how the various European regions were represented in Brussels had been circulated to Assembly Members for information on 5 November.

2.2 Proposals for the Assembly's membership of the WEC were under consideration by the WEC board. It was important that the Assembly's membership of the WEC should not be thought of as a 'take-over'. The Assembly would make a financial contribution to the WEC in the same way as every

other member. There might be different viewpoints amongst WEC members from time to time, and this was to be expected, as was the understanding that individual members would need to preserve the confidentiality of their own particular business. However, Assembly membership would reinforce the concept of a 'Team Wales' approach.

2.3 A question arose in discussion about whether the Assembly office would serve all Assembly Members or only Assembly Secretaries. It was confirmed that services would be provided for all Members but the precise nature of these would differ of necessity. For example, an Assembly Secretary representing the Assembly at a Ministerial meeting in Brussels would receive a different service to an Assembly Member visiting on an informal basis.

2.4 It was not possible to give an exact figure on the Assembly's annual subscription to the WEC as this was still under negotiation. However, Members noted that the total subscription made by local authority members was £189,000 a year.

2.5 In response to a question, the Chair said that in the past, the four Welsh representatives on the Committee of the Regions (COR), had been chosen from local government. However, post-devolution, the Assembly would be able to nominate two representatives of its own. Proposals would come before the Assembly in due course. Rose D'Sa explained that the work of the European Union Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) was identical to that of the COR but its representatives were members of the public rather than politicians. ECOSOC could be helpful in maximising the representational role of the Assembly. The Chair asked officials to consider how ECOSOC members might access the WEC website for information about the drafting of EC decisions and amendments to them.

Agenda Item 3: Secondments to European Union Institutions

Paper: EUR-03-99(p.3)

3.1 In introducing this paper, Hugh Rawlings explained that in the past, secondments of civil servants to Brussels from the Welsh Office had been primarily designed to assist individuals to gain wider experience and enhance their careers. In this respect, secondments to the EU had been seen in the same context as those to other organisations within Wales. It was now more appropriate to look at secondments to the EU in terms of actively promoting the interests of the Assembly and ensuring that, on returning to the Assembly, individuals were placed in posts which would benefit from their experience in Brussels. It had also been recognised that European Affairs Division needed to work with secondees for some time prior to their secondment in order for them and the Assembly to gain the most from the experience. The possibility of secondments to the EU has been advertised to staff on 19 November and considerable interest had already been shown.

3.2 In discussion, it was accepted that the Assembly needed to take a more strategic approach towards placing individuals in European institutions. The Scottish Office and the Irish Government had taken time to get their officials placed in key positions in Europe in a way in which Wales had not done in the past. It was crucial to make as much of the talents of staff as possible within the relatively small pool of the Assembly. Opportunities for secondments would be actively considered as they

arose and the issue of secondments would be one to which the Committee would return in the future.

Agenda Item 4: Implementation of European Directives

Paper: EUR-03-99(p.4)

4.1 The Chair confirmed that he had written to Assembly Secretaries to ask them to look at the impact of European directives on their areas of responsibility and to report to the relevant subject committees as appropriate. Jill Evans MEP had helpfully provided officials with comprehensive information about the European Parliament's Committees and the policy areas they cover. A central monitoring system for implementing arrangements in Wales would be essential to ensure that European decisions were implemented on time and infraction proceedings were avoided. It was agreed that officials should circulate a version of the paper to all Assembly Members for information.

Agenda Item 5: Proposed arrangements for Committee on European Affairs visit to Brussels

Paper: EUR-03-99(p.5)

5.1 The Committee agreed the proposal to undertake a business trip to Brussels. The Secretariat would inform members of possible dates, so that diaries could be blocked. The week commencing 28 February 2000 was being considered because of the possibility that it would coincide with the opening of the WEC's new premises. The Secretariat would confirm dates as soon as possible.

Agenda Item 6: UK White Paper on Developments in the EU

Paper: EUR-03-99(p.6)

6.1 Members noted that this White Paper was issued on a six-monthly basis. The latest edition was available for Members to view on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office web-site.

Agenda Item 7: Representation of the European Commission in Wales

(i) Paper: EUR-03-99(p.7)

(ii) Presentation by Catherine Eva, Head of European Commission Representation in Wales

7.1 Catherine Eva outlined the role of the European Commission's Wales office and the way in which its role had developed since its establishment in 1973. It is a part of the EC President's team and has responsibility for political reporting, political relations and press and communications. As well as sending a daily report to the EC on activities in Wales, the Representation, staffed by 3 people, also provided briefing for the EC on developments regarding devolution, provides information working through local providers, runs seminars and briefing sessions and could provide monthly seminars for Assembly Members on EC matters. It also arranged visits for EC Commissioners: Chris Patten, Franz Fischler and Michel Barnier were all visiting separately in the Spring of 2000.

7.2 Members agreed that Catherine Eva should have a standing invitation to attend and contribute to future Committee meetings so that every element of the political and information network in Wales could be represented.

Agenda Item 8: Report back from first meeting of Wales European Forum and draft agenda for next forum in April 2000

Paper: EUR-03-99(p.8)

8.1 The Chair reported that the meeting of the Wales European Forum on 22 October had been a large and distinguished gathering but it was noticeable that attendance had tailed off considerably in the afternoon. He suggested that for future meetings it would be necessary to get strong representation and a real focus so that interest could remain high for the whole event.

8.2 Following discussion, it was agreed that a half-day event on "Europe and business" should go ahead in South Wales in April 2000. Officials were asked to draw up proposals for a separate North Wales event which would focus on issues of particular relevance to North Wales.

Agenda Item 9: Minutes of previous meeting

Paper: EUR-02-99(min)

9.1 The minutes of the last meeting were agreed subject to the third sentence of paragraph 6.1 being amended to read: 'This would have a slightly different emphasis in that West Wales would now be receiving Objective 1 funding from the EU and Eastern Ireland would not'.

9.2 The next meeting had been pencilled in for 17 February. The date would be confirmed in the next two weeks in the light of the latest European Parliament Calendar. The Secretariat would also be arranging a short informal meeting to discuss arrangements for the visit to Brussels.

9.3 The meeting closed at 11.25am.