

Committee on European Affairs

MINUTES

Date: 30th November 2000

Time: 2.00 pm

Venue: Committee Room 2

Attendance: **Members**

Rhodri Morgan (Chair)	Labour: Cardiff West
Mick Bates	Lib Dem: Montgomeryshire
Rosemary Butler	Labour: Newport West
Christine Chapman	Labour: Cynon Valley
Val Feld	Labour: Swansea East
John Griffiths	Labour: Newport East
Ieuan Wyn Jones	Plaid Cymru: Ynys Mon
Jonathan Morgan	Conservative: South Wales Central
Phil Williams	Plaid Cymru: South Wales East
Elin Jones, AM	Member of the Committee of the Regions
Catherine Eva	Head of European Commission Representation in Wales
Jos Gallagher	Director, Wales European Centre
Officials	
Hugh Rawlings	Head, European Affairs Division
Charles Willie	Head, Equality Policy Unit

Des Clifford

Assembly Office in Brussels

Julie Bragg

Acting Committee Clerk

Adrian Green

Acting Deputy Committee Clerk

Apologies for absence were received from: Committee members Nick Bourne and Rhodri Glyn Thomas; Brian Smith, Committee of the Regions; Rose D'Sa and George Wright, ECOSOC; and Jonathan Evans, Eluned Morgan, Glenys Kinnock, Eurig Wyn and Jill Evans, MEPs.

Agenda Item 1: Chair's Report

Paper: EUR-03-00(p.1)

1.1 The Chair welcomed those attending the meeting, in particular, the Minister from the Swedish Embassy, Tomas Rosander, Hans de Belder, the Secretary General of the Assembly of European Unions, and Peter Graham-Woollard and John Casterton of the Euro Taskforce for Wales. He also welcomed the new members of the Committee who had been elected on 9 November: Leader of the Opposition, Ieuan Wyn Jones, Rosemary Butler, John Griffiths and Christine Chapman.

1.2 The Chair invited Hans de Belder to give the Committee a short presentation on the work of the Assembly of European Regions. Mr de Belder stated that he was privileged to be in Wales to address the Committee and that this was an historic moment as it was the first time a representative of the Assembly for European Regions (AER) had visited Wales.

1.3 The AER was important as, instead of building a Europe of regions, we should consider ourselves a Europe with regions as there was no way of making a single definition of a European region. The AER was quite different to the Committee of the Regions, which was a European Union institution. The AER was a voluntary political forum designed to promote and develop interregional co-operation; with 260 paying regions, many in Eastern Europe, it had a huge network of contacts with a multitude of experiences. Mr de Belder outlined the following priority areas for AER:

- Enlargement: the biggest challenge. Many regions would become donors instead of receivers of EU funds as a result.
- Languages: A conference was to be held on this issue in 2001.
- Training and cultural exchanges for public servants: these were proving to be very successful.

1.4 Mr de Belder reiterated his invitation to the First Minister and the Committee to send representatives to observe the General Assembly of the Assembly of European Regions conference to be held in Finland, on 7 and 8 December. He suggested that this would be a useful way of finding out the value of AER, given that there were likely to be over 200 different delegations attending the conference including some from Scotland. The Committee agreed to consider sending a representative if it was practical to do so.

1.5 In discussion, Members queried the AER's procedures for considering the issue of enlargement. Mr de Belder explained that there had been an AER committee which specifically considered enlargement. However, as it was such a major issue which touched on so many other areas, including major impacts on social welfare, it was now being considered by a number of AER committees. Members also enquired as to whether the AER's work duplicated the work of the Commission. Mr de Belder considered that there was some overlap but this was not necessarily a problem. The AER could provide alternative and sometimes speedier solutions to issues where the Committee of Regions and the Commission may not be in a position to respond quickly.

1.6 Following Mr de Belder's presentation, the Chair reported on a recent conference of leaders of regional governments with legislative powers he had attended in Barcelona. He referred to the protocol produced at the meeting he had circulated. Most issues raised in the document were to be welcomed, however, both he and Jim Wallace, the Deputy First Minister of the Scottish Parliament had concluded that it was not appropriate to sign up to the paper at this stage. Dr Rawlings explained that the UK Government would prefer not to have a legally binding Charter or convention on regional government, as the protocol proposed. The UK Government considered that guidelines would be more appropriate. The proposal of most interest was to set up a network of regional governments to exchange best practice on getting the regional perspective into the European decision making process.

1.7 The Chair reported that Jane Davidson, Assembly Minister for Education & Lifelong Learning, had led the UK delegation at the Youth Council in Brussels on 9 November, as well as attending the Education Council. Carwyn Jones had also recently attended an Agriculture Council. Jane Hutt, Assembly Minister for Health and Social Services, would be attending a Health Council in December and Sue Essex, Assembly Minister for the Environment, was due to attend an Environment Council, also in December. The Chair invited Jane Davidson to give the Committee a short report of her visit:

1.8 Jane Davidson reported that she had been honoured to lead the UK delegation at the Youth Council as this was the first time that an Assembly Minister has done so. She reported that "youth" is a devolved matter, and that although the UK government was considering a white paper on youth, the Assembly Cabinet had produced its own Assembly consultation paper entitled "Extending Entitlement". She would be talking to David Blunkett to further develop initiatives in this area and maintain her involvement in Youth Council activities.

1.9 Des Clifford advised that, when Assembly Ministers were involved in representing the UK in Brussels, it was a considerable help in raising the profile and awareness of Wales and the Assembly. He reminded the Committee that 9 months ago no opportunities existed for such representation in the European arena but now Assembly Ministers had been or would be able to represent Welsh interests in four different areas at Council of Ministers. This represented a major step forward.

1.10 The Chair advised members that the Wales European Centre's (WEC) paper on the implications for Wales of EU enlargement would not be discussed at the meeting. A new paper on enlargement was to be

discussed at the WEC board meeting in December, and it would be sensible to return to the subject at the January meeting of the Committee. Members queried what issues might be raised regarding enlargement at the European Summit in Nice. Dr Rawlings explained that some of the implications of enlargement, such as the future shape of the European Parliament, might not be discussed at Nice but further detailed debate on that issue would take place during the next year at the European and UK level.

1.11 John Griffiths and Elin Jones reported on their first Committee of the Regions plenary sessions in Brussels. Mr Griffiths said those he had met were impressed with the level of representation of women in the Assembly and particularly the fact that there was a female Finance Minister. He voiced his concern to ensure that the Assembly was aware of forthcoming EC directives. Ms Jones reported some disappointment that Wales was not currently involved in some important schemes such as the young farmers access scheme.

Agenda Item 2: Future Role of the European Affairs Committee
Papers: EUR-03-00(p.2), EUR-03-00(p.3) and EUR-03-00(p.4),

2.1 Members of the Committee had been issued with papers put forward by Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats on the future role of the Committee. As no Liberal Democratic party representative was present, Ieuan Wyn Jones introduced Plaid Cymru views. Suggesting that the Committee should meet on a more regular basis, he focussed on three key areas:

- The lack of opportunities for the Committee to scrutinise draft legislation coming from the Commission. Whilst he acknowledged that there was not sufficient time or resources to undertake a full scrutiny role, selective scrutiny should be possible.
- That there should be a mechanism whereby the Committee could present views to Assembly Ministers prior to Council of Ministers or Summit meetings where they were to represent Wales. Similarly, there ought to be a procedure whereby members could discuss with Ministers the outcomes of such visits. Plaid Cymru also considered that it was essential for the Assembly to consider important European issues, such as the Euro, in plenary session.
- He was also concerned that there should be a mechanism for the Assembly to have a voice in the forthcoming EU summit meeting in Nice.

2.2 The Chair explained that members of the Cabinet would be trying to influence the various European agendas on behalf of Wales. As the UK was one member state, an Assembly Minister who was leading a UK delegation or participating in it would naturally have more influence by being present, making contributions and learning how to play the European game. It was therefore important for Cabinet members to become more experienced at influencing or leading delegations. This was what was happening but it was not always practicable for a Minister to brief the Committee or the Assembly prior to such Council of Ministers delegation meetings.

2.3 Members suggested that the National Assembly Advisory Group's view of the role of the Committee was roughly correct, i.e. that the Committee had a cross-cutting view of European issues but not a direct

scrutiny role in European legislation or directives. However, it was felt that the Committee was not operating as effectively in promoting Wales as it might. Concern was expressed about possible oversight of the Assembly on important EC directives. It was felt that in order to avoid the Committee simply being considered a talking shop, there should be interaction with subject committees in this area. It was agreed that there might be a need for some cross-cutting issues but that this should not dictate the work of the Committee. It should be able to set its own agenda. It was agreed that the Committee should meet more regularly and in fact it would meet twice during the Spring term.

2.4 Regarding scrutiny, Hugh Rawlings explained that the Committee had already agreed to consider the Commission's Annual work programme to enable it to draw the attention of appropriate subject committees to important areas of legislation. He was aware that WEC also intended to take some action in this area. Greater interaction between this Committee and other committees would be vital in the future. He noted that the future role of the Committee might merit reconsideration given the intention to subsume the work of European Affairs Division in a new International Relations Division with a broader remit. On another aspect, he said that the initiative for producing papers for the Committee had come from officials. This was an unusual practice and the Committee might wish to consider this issue further, with a possible wider range of authorship a possibility. Des Clifford considered that the Commission's work programme was very important and should be examined in conjunction with the 5 MEPs in view of their knowledge and experiences.

2.5 Val Feld reported on a meeting she had attended in Glasgow of the Chairs of European Committees in the UK. In considering the remit of all the UK European Committees, she had reached the conclusion that it was possible to undertake scrutiny or co-ordination role but not both. There was scope for co-ordination to be pursued more effectively but it might not be appropriate for the First Minister to chair the Committee if it were to adopt a scrutiny role. It would be better for subject committees to advise Ministers on European Council issues rather than for the European Committee to do so. However, there was scope for this committee to pick up on issues that were not relevant to other committees or relevant to more than one of them. She considered that, in order to carry out its role more effectively, the Committee should meet twice a term instead of once. Members agreed that the Committee should continue to send a representative to the proposed 6-monthly meetings of the UK European Chairs.

2.6 In summing up, the Chair confirmed that Des Clifford would give the Committee regular feedback on the Commission's agenda; that it was primarily the role of subject committees to look at EC legislation; that there should be debates on which areas which the Assembly was trying to influence; and that the forthcoming Review of the Assembly's Procedures should make reference to this. He asked officials to produce a paper on the Committee's future role for the next meeting.

Agenda Item 3: Priorities of the Swedish Presidency of the European Union

Presentation: Thomas Rosander, Minister, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Sweden

3.1 Mr Rosander gave an overview of the issues to be pursued by Sweden during its Presidency of the European Union. Three priority areas would be the main thrust of the Swedish Presidency: enlargement;

employment; and environment. Sweden believed that the EU needed to demonstrate it was a union relevant to its citizens and was open, transparent, modern and proactive. Enlargement was recognised as the most complicated and crucial problem that the EU has so far had to face.

3.2 The aim of Sweden's Presidency would be to establish a framework of economic reforms. Using experiences gained in successfully turning round the Swedish economy, Sweden would be addressing new global demands, such as information technology, through better training and greater access to the internet. They would also address social values. The Swedish presidency would ensure that small businesses were promoted and life long learning was encouraged. The ultimate goal would be to move towards achieving full employment for EU citizens by creating the right environment. Sustainable development was a vital key, creating the right balance and ensuring that there was no strain on essential resources. It would be necessary to look at innovative ways of dealing with the considerable and varied environmental problems.

3.3 Members commented that the aims of the Swedish Presidency reflected the concerns of many countries. The Chair thanked Mr Rosander for his informative briefing. The Assembly very much welcomed the innovation of having such pre-presidential discussions. He would like the Committee to consider the plans of the Belgian Presidency which would start in July 2001.

Agenda Item 4: The Euro Taskforce for Wales

Paper: EUR-03-00(p.5)

4.1 Peter Graham-Woollard, Chair of the Euro Taskforce for Wales, and John Casterton, Taskforce Manager, reported to the Committee on the work of the Euro Taskforce set up by the Welsh Office under the auspices of Peter Hain, the former Minister. The aim of the Taskforce was to establish a programme for action that would help prepare small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Wales for the developments in Europe related to the launch of the Euro.

4.2 In carrying out this programme it had become apparent that there was some resistance to the Euro which had hindered progress. There was a reluctance to accept that the Taskforce had no political agenda and that their work was simply a 'wake up call' to Welsh business. Feedback received suggested that the Taskforce needed to return to basics. Few people wished to hear about the need to prepare for the Euro. The Taskforce had decided to build on existing information and networks and identify business 'ambassadors' with experiences in Europe. In 13 months' time, the Euro would replace the currencies of eleven European nations; one of these, Ireland, was our nearest neighbour and two more of these, France and Italy, would be sending rugby supporters to Cardiff in 2002. Would Welsh business be ready to deal with them in Euros? More generally, the UK would need to be in a position to ensure that SMEs seize the opportunities to deal effectively in the single digital global market in 2002. Those who were late or slow in reacting to the Euro would lose out.

4.3 In discussion, it was recognised that businesses did not like change and preferred to put this issue on the back burner. It was felt that as there were a number of different organisations offering advice and

guidance to SMEs, there needed to be simple ways of tapping into relevant information. Members suggested that it would be useful to see how the different sources of advice fitted together. They agreed that the presentation had been extremely useful and it was suggested that there might be merit in a debate in plenary on the issue of Welsh readiness for the Euro's introduction.

Agenda Item 5: EU Charter on Fundamental Rights

Paper: EUR-03-00(p.6)

5.1 It had been hoped that Win Griffiths, MP, would attend the meeting to discuss this item as he had been a member of the UK working group on the Charter. However, he had been prevented from attending due to pressing parliamentary business. It was therefore agreed to defer the item to the next meeting of the Committee when it was hoped that Mr Griffiths would be able to attend.

Agenda Item 6: Minutes of the previous meeting

Paper: EUR-02-00(min)

6.1 Due to time constraints, the Committee did not consider the minutes of the previous meeting. They would be considered at the next committee meeting.

6.2 The meeting closed at 17.05pm.