

Committee on European Affairs

MINUTES

Date: 28 June 2001

Time: 2.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly Building

Attendance: Members

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Rhodri Morgan (Chair) | Labour: Cardiff West |
| Nicholas Bourne | Conservative: Mid & West Wales |
| Rosemary Butler | Labour: Newport West |
| Christine Chapman | Labour: Cynon Valley |
| Mike German | Liberal Democrat: South Wales East |
| John Griffiths | Labour: Newport East |
| Ieuan Wyn Jones | Plaid Cymru: Ynys Mon |
| Jonathan Morgan | Conservative: South Wales Central |
| Rhodri Glyn Thomas | Plaid Cymru: Carmarthen East & Dinefwr |
| Phil Williams | Plaid Cymru: South Wales East |

Standing Invitees

| | |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Eluned Morgan | Member of the European Parliament |
| Jos Gallagher | Director, Wales European Centre |

In Attendance

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| His Excellency Lode Willems | Ambassador of Belgium |
| Geoffrey Martin | Head of European Commission Representation in the UK |
| Jackie Brown | Head of Unit, European Programmes |
| Des Clifford | Assembly Office in Brussels |
| Gary Davies | Head, European and External Affairs Division |
| Elisabeth Jones | Senior Assembly Counsel, Constitution, Human Rights and European Team |
| Dennis Turner | Wales Trade International |
| Russell Keith | Committee Clerk |
| Phil Mulraney | Acting Deputy Committee Clerk |

Introductory Remarks

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. He was particularly pleased to welcome His Excellency Lode Willems, Ambassador of Belgium, who would be outlining for the Committee the priorities for the Belgian Presidency of the European Union. Apologies had been received from Assembly members Val Feld and Elin Jones, Catherine Eva, Dr Rose D'Sa, George Wright, and Welsh MEPs Jill Evans, Jonathan Evans, Eurig Wyn and Glenys Kinnock.

Agenda Item 1: Belgian Presidency of the European Union Presentation by His Excellency Lode Willems, Belgian Ambassador

1.1 The Chair introduced the Ambassador, His Excellency Lode Willems, Geoffrey Martin, Sir John Gray, Belgian Consul in Cardiff and Francis de Sutter, Minister Counsellor at the Belgian Embassy. The Chair pointed out that the Belgian Presidency may be of particular interest in Wales because of the unique nature of the Belgian constitution which provides a balance between the responsibilities of Federal and Regional Government.

1.2 The Ambassador thanked the Committee for the opportunity to come and speak to them. As a representative of the Belgian Government he had spoken also to the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Visits such as these would have vital role in informing the Belgian Presidency about the concerns of the people of Europe.

1.3 The Belgian Presidency comes at a crucial moment in the process of European integration. The Union has set itself the goal of creating an area of freedom, security and justice, as well as an area where the quality of life, food safety, protection of the environment and sustainable development are central.

1.4 The Belgian Government has a strong commitment to the principles of federalism and devolution. It would never, however, misuse the Presidency to pursue its own national agenda or interest. The most successful Presidencies were those which worked as a partnership with member states, the European Commission, and the European Parliament.

1.5 The programme for the Belgian Presidency featured four main themes:

- To define the framework for the debate over the future of Europe. Failure to enlarge and deepen the Union simultaneously risks stagnation and rejection. The case must continue to be made for Europe as a common enterprise, the creation of a new polity. With this in mind the Belgian Presidency would be working towards an ambitious Declaration of Brussels-Laken, which would draw the parameters for the 'Future of Europe' debate leading to the Inter-governmental Conference in 2004
- Internal policy issues such as; the introduction of the Euro; modernising social security and the sustainability of pensions, and working towards a common immigration and asylum policy

- Driving forward the enlargement process.
- Re-inforcing the role of Europe in international affairs and continuing work on the European Security and Defence Policy with the aim of achieving a 60,000 strong Rapid Reaction Force by 2003.

1.6 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The perception that the European Union is remote and hostile to national interests needs to be challenged. In doing so, though, the democratic institutions of the EU need to demonstrate a greater ability to engage directly with the people of Europe. National and regional democratic institutions had a big role to play in this process.
- It was considered important that the debate over the future of Europe should not be exclusively about delimiting areas of competence. Such a debate would lead only to stagnation and would suppress the necessary development of the European Union and policy
- The proposed European Defence Force should only take action when NATO is not engaged. This would avoid duplication of effort and provides the European Union with some measure of autonomy over these matters from the Congress of the United States of America. Furthermore, it was important that Europe should have the means to police peace agreements in its own backyard when the USA is not engaged.
- There was a degree of frustration at the limited role for the Committee of the Regions and its failure to develop beyond advisory status
- The Presidency would be aiming to produce concrete proposals to secure the sustainability of the Common Agricultural, Fisheries and Transport Policies by Spring 2002
- The declaration of the seven constitutional regions in Flanders, asking to be fully involved in the preparations for the Inter-Governmental Conference in 2004, was an encouraging development. It provided Wales with an opportunity to network at regional level to achieve common objectives. The lack of a written constitution in the UK left Wales' status as a 'constitutional region' somewhat unclear but did allow a flexibility of approach which had proved advantageous to Wales
- On occasions when the Council of Ministers were considering devolved matters the Belgian system allows the Ministers of the devolved regions to meet and decide on the appropriate response. Where agreement cannot be reached the Regional First Ministers will meet with the Prime Minister and come to an agreement

1.7 The Ambassador thanked the chair and members for the opportunity to come and speak to them and, more importantly, to listen to their views on developments in the European Union. The full text of the Ambassadors speech is attached as an annex to these minutes.

Agenda Item 2: Chair's Report
Paper EUR 04-01(p1)

2.1 The Chair introduced his written report, beginning with a correction. Due to ill health, David Byrne, Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection had been unable to meet Jane Hutt on 25 June. Instead, she had met Mr Byrne's Chef du Cabinet Martin Power.

2.2 The Irish Consul General, Mr Conor O'Reardon, was keen to invite Committee members and officials to lunch at the consulate to discuss the background to Ireland's 'No' vote on the Nice Summit referendum. Officials were attempting to identify the most convenient date for this event.

2.3 The Deputy First Minister took the opportunity to inform the Committee of an announcement made today concerning European Grant Aid covering redundant Corus steelworkers. The total, including match funding, the main source of which was Corus, amounted to £5.3 million. This included £1,562,000 objective 3 money for Llanwern and Shotton and £749,000 objective 1 money for Bryngwyn, Ebbw Vale and Port Talbot. This money would provide for twelve weeks of extra pre-redeployment training for affected workers.

2.4 The following points were raised in discussion:

- Where Assembly Ministers were taking the lead in UK delegations to the Council of Ministers of the European Union, the extent to which they were able to present a distinct Welsh approach as opposed to following the UK brief was in inverse proportion to the degree of European competence applying to the subject under consideration.
- The failure of the Gothenburg summit to confirm the targets and timetable set out by the European Commission and Parliament on sustainable development had been a disappointment. The Chair undertook to write to the UK Government to obtain their views on the failure of the summit to reach agreement, and to feedback to the Committee. He emphasised that the need to reach an accommodation between differing positions necessarily involved making compromises.
- The Conference 'White Eagle, Red Dragon - Poland and Wales: Partners in an enlarged EU' was judged an extremely successful event which could provide a model for such events in future.

Agenda item 3: Working Group on Enlargement Paper EUR 04-01(p2)

3.1 Jackie Brown introduced the paper which set out draft terms of reference for the Working Group on this issue proposed by the last meeting of the committee.

3.2 The following points were raised in discussion:

- It was important to involve all stakeholders in discussion of this issue. It was considered to be of particular importance to generate interest within the private sector in the potential benefits of enlargement

- The Wales TUC should be added to the list of those to be invited to take part
- The Working Group could usefully serve to link the political aspect of enlargement with the possible commercial benefits to Welsh companies and access to participation in 'know-how' programmes such as funds such as PHARE and TACIS.
- WalesTrade International actively pursue opportunities in central and eastern Europe for joint ventures or transfer of technology operations which tend to be more appropriate to market conditions than traditional exports
- The Working Group is expected to report to the next meeting of the Committee with firm recommendations regarding the political approach the Assembly should take on the issue of twinning, including an action plan and timetable

3.3 The Committee supported the establishment of the Working Group with party membership to be determined by party managers and with the addition of a Wales TUC member.

**Agenda item 4: Meeting in Brussels
Paper EUR 04-01(p3)**

4.1 The meeting acknowledged that Wednesdays were the only days on which the meeting in Brussels could be organised but considered that it would create less time conflicts if the alternate Wednesday was chosen to that on which the Economic Development, Education and Environment committees met. The Committee also acknowledged the importance of the Chair being able to attend. Officials were asked to investigate whether there was an alternate Wednesday on which MEPs and the First Minister were available.

**Agenda item 5: Wales' Official Representation on European Fora
Paper EUR 05-01(p4)**

5.1 Des Clifford introduced the information paper which had been requested at the last committee meeting.

5.2 The following points were raised in discussion:

- Members agreed to invite the Minister for Assembly Business to report to the Committee on the work of the Tele Regions Network
- It was noted that the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions would be considering the Assembly's application for membership on 3 July. Members asked that a note be produced and circulated to members in advance of the next Committee meeting, setting out in further detail how the Assembly's membership should operate

5.3 The Committee noted the paper.

**Agenda item 6: Twinning Programme
Paper EUR 04-01(p5)**

6.1 The Chair introduced the background information paper which had been requested at the last meeting

6.2 The Committee noted the paper

**Agenda Item 7: Reports from Standing Invitees
Paper EUR 04-01(p6)**

7.1 John Griffiths reported that there had been one plenary session, on the 13-14 June, of the Committee of the Regions since the last meeting. This had provided an opportunity for Belgian representatives to lay out their priorities for the forthcoming Presidency. It had also considered two matters of particular interest to Wales; young entrants to farming and lifelong learning.

7.2 Clarification was sought on the attitude of the European Commission on state aid for those affected by foot and mouth outbreak. The Deputy First Minister undertook to obtain such clarification and circulate it to members

7.3 Des Clifford introduced the paper which contained written reports from the Welsh MEP's. It was noted that Jonathan Evans was in Beijing on Parliamentary business but that his report would be circulated to members as soon as it became available.

7.4 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The importance of working with MEP's to support Cardiff's bid to become European City of Culture was emphasised. As Director of the Management Board of the bid, Rhodri Glyn Thomas undertook to keep the Committee informed of the progress of the bid
- The lead on issues relating to the URBAN II Programme, which the Commission had recently declared 'admissible' signalling that negotiations with the Wrexham team would soon begin, would be taken by the Local Government and Housing Committee
- There was discussion on the Directive on Large Combustion Plants, with some concern expressed that, by seeking a derogation, the Assembly could be seen to be encouraging the operation of 'dirty' power stations in Eastern Europe. There were differing views on the implications of the directive but agreement on the need and the validity of protecting the future of Aberthaw Power Station and, by association, Tower Colliery. The First Minister agreed to provide the Committee with a copy of the advice upon which his plenary statement of the previous day had been based.

**Agenda Item 8: Minutes of Previous Meeting
Paper: EUR 03-01(min)**

8.1 Members agreed the minutes of the last meeting with a minor amendment. At 2.1, first bullet point line 4, delete 'could usefully be followed by others' and insert 'should be followed by officials in preparing advice for the Committee'

Points for further action or consideration

Gothenburg Summit

First Minister to write to UK Government on failure to reach agreement on sustainability targets at Gothenburg Summit

Enlargement Working Group

To report to next meeting with action plan and timetable for Assembly's approach to twinning

Tele Regions Network

Secretariat to arrange for E Minister to report to Committee on work of Tele-Regions Network

CPMR

Officials to provide a paper on arrangements for membership of CPMR in advance of next meeting

Foot & Mouth

Deputy First Minister to circulate Commission's response on State Aid for areas affected by Foot and Mouth outbreak

Directive on Large Combustion Plants

First Minister to provide copy of advice to Committee

Meeting in Brussels

Secretariat to seek an alternative date for meeting in Brussels

MEP's Report

Secretariat to circulate Jonathan Evans MEP's report when received