

European and External Affairs Committee

Date: 31st October 2002
Time: 2:00 pm
Venue: Committee Rooms 3&4, National Assembly Building
Title: Annual General Meeting of Peripheral & Maritime Regions, Ioannina, Greece

Purpose

1. To report on the CPMR AGM, hosted by the Epirus Region on 18-20 September, and provide a general update on the Assembly's membership of the CPMR.

Summary

2. The Deputy First Minister represented the Assembly Government at the 29th CPMR AGM, and was subsequently invited by the CPMR to give a keynote speech. CPMR have shown a great willingness, indeed a strong wish, for the Assembly to play a role within the organization and one of the key outcomes of the Deputy First Minister's attendance was an opportunity to meet key figures in the CPMR, as well as to discuss membership issues with English and Scottish local authority members and officials. One particular issue raised was the Assembly's possible involvement leading a project for the Atlantic Area Commission, which the Deputy First Minister is now discussing with officials.

Background

3. The Assembly joined CPMR just over a year ago, at the instigation of the European and External Affairs Committee. As well as membership of the main CPMR organization, we also belong to the Atlantic Arc Commission, one of the 7 geographical entities into which CPMR is divided. Since joining, officials attended last year's AGM and have been to the CPMR HQ in Rennes, France, to meet CPMR colleagues and discuss with them how best the Assembly might position itself within the organization. The Atlantic Arc Commission has in the past been closely involved in the transnational cooperation European Community Initiative funding programme "INTERREG" (under the Interreg II C programme, which has now been followed on by the Interreg III B Atlantic Area programme).

4. The Scottish Executive's application to join CPMR was accepted at the AGM, and this along with other new memberships brings the total number of regions in the association to 150, around 125 of whom were at the AGM. Until the Scottish Executive joined, Wales was the largest of the UK members by far.

POLICY DEBATES

Transport

5. The first policy area to be debated at the AGM was transport, where CPMR highlighted that its principal areas of focus were the Commission's transport white paper and the review of Trans-European Networks. Speakers drew attention to the importance of using European funds for transport, but noted that there was a question-mark over the future place of transport within the revised structural and cohesion fund regulations. The links between the transport agenda and sustainable development were also noted, as was the scope for transnational cooperation on transport projects through the INTERREG III B Community programmes.

Sustainable Development

6. The CPMR had sat alongside the Assembly and 22 other regions at the Johannesburg summit and, like the Assembly, was a signatory of the Gauteng Declaration. The association had been remitted by its members to take a role in the lead-up to Johannesburg but considered that it had now discharged this remit. Members were invited to comment on what future level of involvement they wished CPMR to take, but no conclusions appeared to be reached. Some members pressed for the creation of a CPMR-led working group, with the French Pays de la Loire region offering to host such a group. Their speaker intimated that one of their main interests was the question of compensation for environmental disasters such as the oil spillage along the Atlantic coast of a few years ago.

The European Convention/Governance

7. The Scottish Deputy First Minister, Jim Wallace, was one of the speakers in this debate, focusing in particular on the question of subsidiarity to the regions and to local government where appropriate. CPMR suggested that there should be a Common Regional Policy enshrined in the treaties. Their key words were: solidarity, cohesion, democracy (the institutional place of the regions), unity through diversity, governance and partnership/cooperation. CPMR also called for a strengthened role for the Committee of the Regions. A European Commission speaker, Jose Candela Castillo, said the Commission was very interested in the promotion of the regions. He urged CPMR to join with other associations such as the Association of European Regions and Eurocities in pressing this case. He also commented that Wales had been one of the regions supporting the Commission's drive for the

decentralization of some competences.

8. Mr Wallace's speech underlined the need for sub-national levels of government to play a stronger role and said he did not wish to see a more centralized EU, which would only serve to take the EU further away from the electorate. He suggested the creation of a "subsidiarity watchdog", representing national and regional parliaments to ensure subsidiarity was taken further. This he saw very much as a political rather than a juridical function.

9. A speaker from the floor called for clarification about the future definition of NUTS areas, which were the building blocks for structural funds areas. He said that future decisions should be transparent and that a timetable for their definition should be made known.

Future of EU Regional Policy

(i) Spatial Development

10. CPMR gave a comprehensive presentation of a study they had led which they hoped would go some way to reinvigorating the European Spatial Development Perspective debate. One of the key ideas was the classification of a series of "urban systems", which might be a single city (London), a pair of cities (Glasgow/Edinburgh) or a group of several towns such as those along the M4 corridor. These would be designated as Metropolitan European Growth Areas and would become the focus of governmental economic development and transport policies. CPMR thought that the current priorities of Objective 1 and 2 programmes failed adequately to pick up on the important role of urban development as a driver for entire regions and were in particular keen to see the "new" Objective 2 programme mooted by Commissioner Barnier this summer pick up on this.

11. The presentation will be followed by the publication of a report in early October. It might be noted that many of the audience found the presentation highly technical and the CPMR may have problems engaging with their membership on what is undoubtedly a complex area.

(ii) Future of the structural funds

12. Vasco Cal, who is well-known to Wales structural funds programme management, spoke on DG-REGIO's vision for post-2006. He didn't bring forward any new ideas beyond those set out by the Commission at this summer's Cohesion workshops in Brussels (see EEAC 04-02). He did underline the Commission's wish to see less bureaucracy in future programmes and spoke of the need to ensure that there was still an EU regional policy, visible to its citizens and dealing with the most critical issues

13. The Deputy First Minister spoke in broad terms on the general direction of opinion in Wales on post-2006. He highlighted the Assembly Government's submission of its initial views to the Commission last year and underlined the need for regional policy to be in harmony with other areas of EU policy, particularly state aids and CAP reform – a point which clearly resonated with many delegates. Another

key discussion he raised was the question of intra-regional disparities, an area on which the Economic Development Committee had commissioned some work before the summer recess. The speech was well-received and appeared to convey to a number of English and Scottish colleagues in particular that the Assembly might well have some areas of common cause with them in discussing issues around the future of the funds.

Compliance

There are no compliance issues. Section 33 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 provides that "The Assembly may consider, and make appropriate representations about, any matter affecting Wales."

Divisional Contact

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