

## COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS EUR-05-01(p.8)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2001</b>
<b>Time</b>	<b>9.00am</b>
<b>Venue</b>	<b>Committee Room 3</b>

### **Title: European Governance – Paper for European Affairs Committee 17 October 2001**

#### **Background**

1. The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, identified promoting new forms of European Governance as one of the European Commission's four strategic aims for its term 2000-2004. During the first part of 2001 the Commission stimulated a broad-ranging dialogue to examine what the issues are in practice and to prepare the way for a Commission White Paper.
2. Underpinning the exercise is a sense that the EC needs to re-invigorate its relationship with its partners – governments, regional and local authorities, NGOs, civil society and the wider EU public.
3. The prospect of enlargement encompassing the former Soviet block countries of Eastern Europe, as well as the Mediterranean islands, has added extra impetus to the process. Enlargement on this scale is unprecedented and represents a rigorous challenge to the way the EU conducts its business. There is widespread acknowledgement that an EU with nearly thirty Member States cannot simply carry on as it has done in the past.
4. The Commission's White Paper, "European Governance", was published at the end of July and summarises the Commission's thinking to date (see next section). The White Paper is part of an on-going approach to governance that will develop over the next couple of years. The final section of this briefing paper aims to describe the likely timetable and how the Assembly plans to play its part in the debate.

#### **What Does The White Paper Say?**

5. "European Governance: A White Paper" was published by the Commission on 25 July this year. The full text runs to 35 pages and should be read in full by partners with particular interest in this aspect of the EU. Otherwise, it is preceded by an executive summary.
6. The Paper opens with the Commission recognising failings in the way the EU does business and a perception of growing distance between the institutions and the citizens.

- The Irish "No" vote in the referendum on the Nice Inter-Governmental Conference and the recent pattern of protest at European summits is taken as evidence of estrangement.
7. There is a paradox at the heart of the problem, "***The Union is often seen as remote and at the same time too intrusive***". This is particularly true in the UK context where some elements of the media portrays the EU as meddlesome and encroaching on Member State territory. Arguably, the emphasis in Wales is more constructive (after a fashion) since media treatment tends to concentrate on delivery in Wales of EU programmes (ie CAP and structural funds) so there is at least focus on issues that matter. But given that most people in Wales get much of their media from London-based outlets we are not immune to the general UK position.
  8. The essence of the White Paper is perhaps best summed up in this sentence, "***It is time to recognise that the Union has moved from a diplomatic to a democratic process, with policies that reach deep into national societies and daily life.***" In other words, change must occur to counter the view that decisions are simply the result of fifteen – or however many – people sitting around a table. In recent years the European Parliament has gained influence and this has improved democratic legitimacy (although there is a worrying decline in voter turnout) but the EU has to stretch wider and deeper if it is to encompass anything like a full participation.
  9. The paper emphasises strongly the roles of regions and civil society in the consultation process, "***There needs to be a stronger interaction with regional and local government and civil society. Member states bear the principle responsibility for achieving this.***" It goes on to say that the Commission itself must do more to achieve "***systematic dialogue***" with representatives of regional government.
  10. The above points are at the heart of the matter. The European Union and its institutions cannot confer additional powers onto the Assembly: the internal governmental arrangements of Member States are matters for them, not the EU. Wales' recent experience since devolution is very positive. The arrangements developed with UK government allow the Assembly to play a very positive and full role in Europe. It is important that we maintain an active dialogue with UK government and other devolved partners about developing our participation at the European level. The Commission acknowledges the need for "***systematic dialogue***" with regional government. This is very welcome. The Commission is generally open to approaches but systematic effort is sometimes lacking (although not in all areas).
  11. The White Paper identifies five principles underpinning good governance: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. This boils down to a view that sound policy is best achieved by abandoning traditional "***top down***" approaches and replacing them with a "***virtuous circle***" based on feedback, networks and inclusion.
  12. "***Regions and cities often feel that, in spite of their increased responsibility for implementing EU policies, their role as an elected and representative channel interacting with the public on EU policy is not exploited.***" Wales benefits significantly from being part of the EU. The Assembly and our partners in Wales are well placed to make sense of EU policy in terms that people can relate to since almost every part of Wales' benefits in some direct way from EU initiatives. Arguably, this is not so

easy to demonstrate on a UK-wide basis.

13. The White Paper suggests some enhancement in the role of the Committee of the Regions, notably that it should play a more proactive role in preparing exploratory reports in advance of Commission proposals (at present it tends only to respond to proposals after publication).
14. The White Paper proposes drawing up a code of conduct setting a minimum standard of consultation that the commission must follow – again, a positive move that we would welcome.

### **What Happens From Here?**

15. The First Minister has lead responsibility for European policy. He will be considering a response the White Paper in consultation with the European Affairs Committee. There is, of course, nothing to stop political parties responding independently and directly to the Commission.
16. The Commission White Paper is open for responses until 31 March 2002.
17. It is proposed that a draft response from the First Minister be circulated among members of the European Affairs Committee in due course. Committee members are invited to put forward their views on the White Paper, either now or at the next committee meeting. The committee is invited to consider and express a view about whether consideration of the White Paper would be a fruitful subject for plenary debate?
18. The debate on Governance will run on two tracks. It may result in early action in areas where progress can be made quickly. In parallel, there is a wider debate under way known as "the Future of Europe". This was initiated after the Nice IGC and will prepare the ground for another IGC in 2004. This is designed to look at constitutional issues that may arise post-enlargement. The specifics of this debate are not yet clearly worked out but should become more so after the Laeken Summit in Brussels, in December this year, where the Belgian Presidency hopes to seal a declaration identifying the main issues.

**Desmond Clifford**

**Brussels October 2001**