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Ref: EUR-02-00(min)

Committee on European Affairs

MINUTES

Date: 8 June 2000

Time: 13.15pm

Venue: Committee Room 1

Attendance: **Members**

Christine Gwyther
(Temporary Chair)

Labour: Carmarthen West & S Pems

Mick Bates

Liberal Democrat: Montgomeryshire

Delyth Evans

Labour: Mid & West Wales

Val Feld

Labour: Swansea East

Alun Pugh

Labour: Clwyd West

Rhodri Glyn Thomas

Plaid Cymru: Carmarthen & East Dinefwr

Phil Williams

Plaid Cymru: South Wales East

Jill Evans

MEP

Catherine Eva

Head of European Commission Representation in
Wales

Officials

Hugh Rawlings

Head, European Affairs Division

Caroline Turner

European Affairs Division

Philip Bird

European Affairs Division

Margaret Evans

Head of Personnel Management Division

Chris Tudor

Personnel Management Division

Des Clifford

Assembly Office in Brussels

Andrew George

Clerk

Julie Bragg

Deputy Clerk

Apologies were received from Rhodri Morgan, Nicholas Bourne, Jonathan Morgan, Jocelyn Davies; Brian Smith, George Wright, Rose D'Sa; and Jonathan Evans, Eluned Morgan and Glenys Kinnock, MEPs.

As the Chair was absent on Assembly business in New South Wales, the Committee agreed to appoint Christine Gwyther as temporary Chair for this meeting.

Agenda Item 1: Chair's Report

Paper: EUR-02-00(p.1)

1.1 The Chair welcomed Delyth Evans to her first meeting as a member of the Committee.

1.2 The Chair said that the Chair's report covered a number of issues, perhaps the most significant being the recent establishment of the Assembly Office in Brussels. Des Clifford, the Head of the Office, said that he had taken up his post the previous week and was currently exploring how to work most effectively with the Wales European Centre (WEC) and the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Union (UKRep). Members agreed a proposal that he should be invited to attend future meetings of the Committee in order to report back on all aspects of his work.

1.3 The Chair highlighted the importance of Assembly Secretaries attending Council of Ministers meetings in Brussels not only because this is where decisions are made which affect Wales but also in order to raise the profile of Wales.

1.4 Concerns were raised about paragraph 3 of the report about the exercise of the Assembly's vote in WEC General Meetings; arrangements should be put in place to ensure that the views of all parties should be ascertained before the First Secretary cast the Assembly's vote. The Chair said that the First Secretary would seek to represent the views of the full Assembly at all times but agreed that the process for taking the views of all parties into account should be considered further. She asked officials to prepare proposals for how this might be achieved for the Committee to consider at its next meeting.

Agenda Item 2: INTERREG

Paper: EUR-02-00(p.2)

2.1 The paper provided information about the INTERREG Community Initiative which was particularly important for the wider relationship between Wales and Ireland. Philip Bird explained that the Wales - Ireland programme had been seen as a success in both countries and was quoted by the Commission as an example of good practice and innovative projects. There would be an opportunity to broaden and enhance such projects under INTERREG IIIA. Projects under Strand B would require the involvement of two member states rather than three as originally thought. Clarification on funding was expected shortly from the Department of Trade and Industry.

2.2 The Assembly's consultation process on the new programme, which was looking for strong SME involvement and rural development content, would finish on 9 June. A partnership group to consider the responses to the consultation would meet on 22 June. The members of the partnership group had been proposed by umbrella organisations such as the WLGA, WDA and the Wales Tourist Board, two private

sector organisations and others. The Irish had not gone out to consultation but would be holding a series of seminars, one of which he would be attending on 19 June.

2.3 In discussion, the following points were raised:

- under INTERREG II, more money had been allocated to the Irish partners than in Wales. The Irish had taken up 98% of their share, but Welsh partners had only used 78% of theirs. A full publicity exercise would be undertaken in order to increase the take-up of Welsh funds for the new programme;
- the funding from the EU would be subject to match funding and so the overall programme budget could double;
- the start of the programme had been delayed because the European Commission had only recently issued the Guidelines for the programme;
- eligible areas for INTERREG II in Wales had mostly been in Objective 5b programme area. The same area remains eligible under INTERREG III, but this area will now be eligible under Objective 1 and so projects may be eligible for a higher intervention rate. Complementarity with Objective 1 projects would be one of the considerations in agreeing to fund projects;
- under the programme's adjacency rules, Llandrillo College was likely to be eligible to submit bids for funding.

Agenda Item 3: Secondments

Paper: EUR-02-00(p.3)

3.1 The Chair introduced this item by saying that the Committee had been keen to see that Assembly staff took up posts in European institutions so that Wales could be better represented and informed about developments in the EU and could bring that experience back to the Assembly. She invited Margaret Evans to inform the Committee of the work which was being undertaken to encourage secondments.

3.2 Ms Evans said that Personnel Management (PM) Division had taken steps to ensure that the provision of information on secondment opportunities was timely and well-publicised. They had compiled a register of Assembly staff who might be interested in taking up secondments and taken measures to ensure that the correct support mechanisms were in place. These included: pre-visits to Brussels; attachments; training courses, especially language training; short term assignments to appropriate Assembly Divisions; an appropriate financial package; and arrangements for re-entry to the Assembly at the end of the secondment. A much more strategic approach to the secondment process was being put in place with set budgets and targets and a rolling programme of secondees.

3.3 Members queried whether the target of 3 secondments in 2000-2001 building to 6 in 2003 was high enough and wondered how this compared with other countries. Margaret Evans said that this was a starting point and it would be possible to increase numbers in the future if current plans were successful. The budget for secondments had already doubled as a result of the importance which the Committee attached to secondments. Caroline Turner said that as Wales was not in itself a member state it would be difficult to compare numbers of secondees with countries such as Ireland on a like for like basis. Wales did have the advantage of also being able to second staff to the Assembly Office and the WEC, which had taken priority so far this year.

3.4 In response to a query as to whether there were plans to bring secondees from European institutions to the Assembly, Margaret Evans said that the normal arrangement was for the parent employer to cover the costs of their staff on secondment. A 'two-way street' was desirable as a long term objective.

3.5 The aim of the programme was to bring benefits for the Assembly and also to enable individuals to develop skills for their own career development. At the moment the programme was just for Assembly civil servants using a secondment budget set aside in the Assembly's running costs. Consideration had not been given to including the staff of other public bodies. Hugh Rawlings said that if the Committee wished to take this approach, a separate bid for funding from a programme budget would have to be made in the forthcoming budgeting round. The Chair suggested that the Economic Development Committee could commission a paper if necessary. It was suggested that the European Affairs Committee could have its own budget to enable it to carry out the activities it wished to pursue. The Chair said that such a move would have to be approved by the Assembly.

3.6 Catherine Eva said that an Assembly official was about to be seconded to the European Commission in Wales. His role would be to alert Heads of Assembly Divisions and officers of political parties in the Assembly of developments in the Commission and to be reactive to the needs of Members. In achieving this he would work closely with the Assembly Office in Brussels, the WEC and the Assembly's European Affairs Division.

Agenda Item 4: Welsh participation in European Organisations

Paper: EUR-02-00(p.4)

4.1 The Chair said that the Assembly's participation in European organisations would need to reflect the existence of the Assembly Office and becoming a member of the WEC. Wales would have two full members and two alternate representatives on the Committee of the Regions (CoR), which was an EU institution; and one full member and one alternate on the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE), which was a part of the Council of Europe.

4.2 The Assembly of European Regions (AER) and the Conference of the Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) were informal groups which had been formed in the 1970s and 1980s before the EU and Council of Europe had created their own local and regional representative bodies. Although they provided an opportunity for networking, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) had recently withdrawn from both because they felt they were no longer benefiting from their membership. It was possible that the Assembly would be invited to join instead and it was recommended that the Assembly should concentrate on the CoR and CLRAE rather than join the other two bodies.

4.3 Phil Williams and Jill Evans voiced concerns about Wales not having a voice in AER and CPMR. As a former member of the CoR, Jill Evans felt that it was ineffective. It had no formal relationship with the European Parliament even though there was scope for the two bodies to work in partnership. The CoR consisted of government nominees, not all of whom were selected democratically. AER on the other hand provided an opportunity for members to network and had been formed because of the need for that kind of networking in the European system. It consisted of grass-roots members and very high profile people, such as Jordi Pujol, President of Catalonia, and was a well respected body. It produced lots of material and held many conferences and so, even if the Assembly did not affiliate to it, it should monitor what it does. Members noted that the Scottish Parliament had decided to monitor how the AER and CPMR were operating before deciding whether to join.

4.4 The Chair proposed that officials should attend some meetings of the AER and the CPMR as observers and report back to the Committee. Members also agreed Jill Evans' proposal that the Welsh members of the CoR and MEPs should be invited to consider ways of working together.

Agenda Item 5: Influencing European Union Policies

Paper: EUR-02-00(p.5) and EUR-02-00(p.6)

5.1 The Committee agreed to the Chair's proposal to consider items 5 and 6 together as they were interrelated. Paper 5 set out proposals for the way in which the Assembly could take into account and influence European policies and legislative proposals. Paper 6 described the processes used to scrutinise EU policies and legislation in Westminster and the Scottish Parliament. The Committee's draft Forward Work Programme (paper 7) reflected the proposal in paragraph 5.7 of paper 5 that the Committee should consider forthcoming European policies and legislation at two meetings a year and cover other issues during its other meetings.

5.2 Caroline Turner introduced paper 5 which defined three stages in the European Union's policy-making process - pre-legislative (informal); legislative (formal); and implementation. The Committee needed to be clear which stage they wanted to influence. A lot of work was already undertaken by officials at the informal and formal stages which members would not be aware of. The Committee had already initiated a series of EU policy reviews for Assembly Secretaries and subject committees to consider. Apart from Agriculture and Rural Development, these had been tabled for information at subject committee meetings and on the intranet. The WEC had recently produced an analysis of EU policies and identified priorities. In the light of these initiatives, the paper proposed that the Committee should formally consider the impact on Wales of the Commission's work programmes and the priorities of the Presidencies of the Union twice a year and alert the Assembly to the outcome. The presence of MEPs, ECOSOC and CoR members would allow them to inform the discussion and bring members up to date with recent developments.

5.3 Officials had recently visited the Scottish Parliament to discuss their approach to scrutiny. The Parliament's original approach had involved a rigorous process of examining whether there was a Scottish line on all EU policies but they had found few instances where there was a distinct Scottish interest. Even when there was one, they had not been very successful in influencing the UK line or their Executive. This system was very time consuming and had little effect. They were reconsidering their procedures to identify priorities in advance. Members were advised that Wales could obtain from Whitehall, as the Scottish Parliament does, the 1200 or so documents produced by the EU, together with the Government's explanatory memoranda. The problem was in finding the staff to deal with those documents. The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee had 16 staff at its disposal and the 2 and a half staff of the Scottish Parliament's Committee had found the work unmanageable.

5.4 In discussion, members raised the following points:

- ensuring subject committees were fully engaged in the process of considering information from Europe would be difficult, even with advice from the WEC. It would take time to develop a specific Assembly line. Committees needed to be able to prepare for what was likely to come through and gauge the limits of what they could do and learn how to play the system.
- an Assembly Secretary who attends the Council of Ministers has to follow the UK line. However, it was possible that the Welsh line might be different from the UK position. The Chair said that the views of the devolved administrations are taken into account in developing any UK line. By attending more Council of Ministers' meetings Assembly Secretaries could ensure that the line was being adhered to.
- Wales should be better represented in working groups in Brussels where there would be an opportunity to influence policies as they were developing. It was noted that delegations were usually small and discussions focussed on very technical details. The Assembly has been very successful in bilateral discussions on structural funds. UKRep had indicated they would very much welcome more Assembly involvement at this level.
- officials in policy divisions would be a vital link in becoming aware of relevant European Directives in their areas and bringing them to the attention of Assembly Secretaries and Committees.

- all members of the European Affairs Committee were also members of subject committees. They could highlight the European dimension in those committees so that the overall profile of Europe was raised.
- it was suggested that the Assembly could consider producing a newsletter along the lines of that produced by the European Committee of the Scottish Parliament. This could act as a first point of engagement for Assembly Members and officials and also raise the profile of Europe for the public. It was however noted that the Scottish Committee worked in a very different way and its terms of reference were very different. Much of the information contained in the newsletter was available in other forums. The WEC website was extremely useful and the Assembly Intranetwebsite had very recently been revamped. Other sites and sources were listed under item 7 on the agenda.
- a clear management structure could facilitate the effective flow of information. This might include nominating a single official to be responsible for European matters in each Division. Members were informed that such a role already existed within Divisions to a greater or lesser degree depending on the extent to which the EU impinged on their policy responsibilities. However, it would be possible for these officials to liaise more formally.

5.5 Members agreed that they needed further discussion of the Committee's role and the Assembly's mechanisms for connecting with Europe. It was suggested that the different political groups might each prepare a paper outlining their thoughts so that the Committee might consider how to proceed. The Chair agreed that this was a useful suggestion and invited all members to produce a paper so that the Committee could come back to the subject. In the meantime, members agreed all of the recommendations in paper 5.

5.6 The Chair informed members that the annual debate on matters relating to the EU would take place in Plenary on 27 June. The Committee's annual report would inform that debate. A draft would be circulated to members for consideration shortly.

Agenda Item 6: Review of the Committee's work to date and the Committee's draft Annual Report Papers: EUR-02-00(p.7)

6.1 This item was considered in conjunction with item 5 above.

Agenda Item 7: Sources of Information on EU issues Paper: EUR-02-00(p.8)

7.1 This item provided the Committee with sources of information on all matters related to the European Union. Catherine Eva had also provided members with a copy of the European Commission's Directory of European Information in Wales. She said that it would shortly be possible to provide information on-line using a network of information providers. The European Commission Office in Wales would no longer be an information source in itself because its role in future would be dealing with "policy, politics and press". However, there were ongoing discussions on the possibility of locating the European Information Point, currently in the Commission's office in Cathedral Road, close to the Assembly. In response to a query, Catherine Eva explained that there would not be an overlap between the Cardiff University European Information Service and the European Information Point because they were aimed at different audiences, but there might be longer term financial implications for the Assembly if this were to be done.

Agenda Item 8: Minutes of previous meeting Paper: EUR-01-00(min)

8.1 The minutes of the last meeting were agreed subject to the following amendments:

- paragraphs 1.4 should reflect the point that all of the papers for the meeting had been provided for the Committee's information rather than decision;
- and paragraph 2.3 should include the point that the amount of resources available for Wales' activities with the Four Motor and other regions world-wide was small and it was important to maximise their impact.

8.2 The meeting closed at 15.40pm.

19 March 107

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