

## COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

**Date :** 9<sup>th</sup> March 2000

**Venue:** Committee Room ?

**Title:** The inter - governmental Conference

**Amser:** 9.30-12.30

### Purpose

To provide Members with information about the Inter-governmental Conference, and alert the Committee to issues which are likely to be relevant to Wales.

### Recommendation

To note the content of the report.

### Background

An Inter-governmental Conference is a procedure used by the European Union to consider revisions to the Treaties establishing the European Union. It consists of a series of meetings at Ministerial and official level, held over a period of about a year.

The main reason for holding this Inter-governmental Conference at this stage is to prepare the institutions of the European Union for expansion in membership over the next few years. The institutions were originally designed for six member-states, and powers have been gradually changed over the years as more countries have joined. Further changes are necessary since it is possible that the European Union will grow from 15 members to 28 over the next decade.

### The Inter-governmental Conference

The European Union has agreed to focus on three issues:

- **The size and composition of the Commission** – at the moment each member state has the right to nominate a Commissioner, and larger member states nominate two. The Commission has therefore increased in size over the years, and would be too large if this practice continued after enlargement. The Inter-governmental Conference will therefore look at ways of limiting the size of the Commission so that it can continue to work effectively

- **The reweighting of votes in the Council of Ministers** – under existing arrangements large countries have more votes, yet small countries have a higher level of votes in proportion to their population. Most of the applicant countries have small populations, and this will have an impact on the balance of votes within the Council of Ministers. It is proposed that votes are reweighed in favour of large member states, who in return will agree to a reduction in their number of Commissioners.
- **The possible extension of qualified majority voting** - until the 1980s most decisions were taken unanimously, despite the provision for qualified majority voting. It became increasingly difficult for the Council of Ministers to make decisions as membership of the European Communities grew, and qualified majority voting became the norm and was extended to a range of policy areas by the Single European Act. It is proposed that qualified majority voting should be extended to further areas to avoid difficulties in reaching decisions following enlargement.

Some European Institutions are keen to extend the scope of the Inter-governmental Conference, and a few issues will be discussed in parallel with the Inter-governmental Conference, whilst others may emerge as part of the discussions. These include:

- Reform of the European Court of Justice
- Reform of the European Court of Auditors
- Co-decision, which would extend the powers of the European Parliament
- Responsibilities and accountability of individual Commissioners
- Number of seats in the European Parliament
- Composition of the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
- Flexibility, which would simplify the procedures for further development of European integration without necessarily needing full Inter-governmental Conferences and revisions to the Treaties

## **Implications for Wales**

None of the three issues on the Inter-governmental Conferences' agenda are likely to have direct implications for Wales. However, the subtle changes to the institutions will have some indirect impacts on the way States and regions influence the policy-making process. It will become increasingly important to influence European Union policy proposals at an early stage, and to implement European legislation effectively.

Should the Inter-governmental Conference discuss the number of seats in the European Parliament, this would have a direct impact on Wales. The European Parliament has already increased in size over the years as membership of the European Union has expanded, and there is a limit to how much more it can increase if it is to remain effective. This issue is likely to be discussed at some stage over the next few years, even if it is not directly addressed at this Inter-governmental Conference. The size of the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee could also be affected by such discussions.

## **Conclusion**

The European Union has agreed a time-table which aims to complete the discussions at the Inter-governmental Conference by the end of 2000, with the process of ratifying the changes to the Treaties by Member States taking place during 2001. The aim is to ensure that all of the changes are in place by the end of 2002, since this is the first date by which applicant countries could join the European Union.

The Assembly will monitor the discussions within the Inter-governmental Conference and will bring any proposals which are likely to have an effect Wales to the attention of the Committee.

### **Compliance**

Under Section 33 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 the Assembly may consider and make appropriate representations about any matter affecting Wales.

### **Contact Point**

European Affairs Division