

Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee

Inquiry into Wales' Role in the EU Decision Making Process

EU 7 – European Economic and Social Committee

Evidence to the National Assembly for Wales' Constitutional Committee –11-9-2013

Wales's role in EU decision making process

1. What is the EESC and its role in the decision making process?

The EESC- European Economic and Social Committee [eesc.europa.eu] was established in 1958 as a Statutory Consultative Body of the European Union. Its responsibilities were enhanced by the Treaty of Lisbon in recognition of the growing importance of participatory democracy and the need to increase citizen involvement in the decision making processes of the Union.

It is often described as a “sister body “ to the Committee of the Regions of which The Assembly is a member and actually shares Staff and Building resources on Rue Belliard in Brussels.

It also describes itself as a “bridge” between civil society and the other European Institutions, acting as an advocate of dialogue, a conciliator of differing views, a facilitator for citizen voices and champion of wide and transparent consultation.

It comprises some 350 appointed, non-salaried Members from all 28 Member States reflecting the views and expertise of Social Partners [employers, trade unionists etc] and civil Partners [SMEs, NGOs, Farmers, the Professions, Educationalists, Consumer experts, Disability and Rights Champions and the general Voluntary Sector].

The EESC 's ability to influence the EU decision making process depends on the ability of its Members, Staff and Experts to provide quality formal and informal Opinions on all aspects of European

Policies which are referred to it by the Council, the Parliament and/or the Commission. Members join working groups and thematic Sections to research and debate and eventually seek agreement through monthly Plenaries before forwarding Opinions reflecting the considered views of the EESC to the decision making Bodies. The European Commission in turn responds formally and publically to those Opinions indicating their influence and relevance. There is also scope for the EESC to issue its own- initiative Opinions to challenge the Institutions or develop new thinking from civil society. Most of the Opinions are researched through hearings and the involvement of civil society members across the Union, whilst acknowledging that there is much more scope for increasing participation levels, given the recent advances in technology and a desire for a more inclusive European Union.

The Committee is in regular contact with both Commission Officials, Parliamentarians and Commissioners who regularly attend and address Plenary meetings [as do State Representatives during the term of their Presidencies of the Council].

Apart from its policy Opinions the Committee is represented at International Conferences and works with the Economic and Social Committees – where they exist- within Member States. It holds an Open Day, has a schools education programme and champions the EU “Year of—eg- Volunteering, Citizenship [2013] “ Campaigns. It also plays a real role in helping to prepare civil society capacity in EU Candidate Member States as well as developing non political links with civil society organisations across Continents.

2-What is Wales’s role in the EESC ?

Wales’s involvement in the EESC and ability to influence.

[a personal and non-scientific observation!]

Wales has 3 Members of the 23 UK Government nominated membership in the 350 strong EESC. Before 2006 it had 2 very skilled and respected members in Rose D'Sa and Brian Curtis. In 2005 the WCVA[Wales Council for Voluntary Action] in recognition of the growing importance of the Third Sector to the active citizenship of Wales, the inclusiveness of the Assembly and Welsh Government in partnership working as exemplars of worth to other European States and Regions and as deliverers and facilitators of significant EU Resources and Programmes, requested to the then First Minister Rhodri Morgan that Wales should have increased participation opportunities at an European level .This to include an extra nomination to the EESC from Wales within the existing UK Complement, which the First Minister duly delivered. All Members act, once appointed, as individuals developing views based on their experiences and observations during debates and amendments at voting time. However the UK Membership as do some others, organise meetings with UK Government Officials which include Welsh Government representatives in Brussels, to exchange views. The First Minister also periodically invites the 3 Wales Members and MEPs for an exchange of views [diaries permitting!]

Both Brian and Rose have been actively involved in drafting Opinions and acting as Chairs and /or Rapporteurs and I have recently been elected to the Executive of the Rural, Agricultural and Environment Section [NAT].I also secured the right to speak in Welsh at Plenaries, with the full support of the Welsh Government's Staff in Brussels. Indeed I maintain regular contact with Welsh Government staff in Brussels who are very supportive. In all relevant Opinion debates I

try to assess any negative or positive impact that new EU policies might have on Wales. When I might not have a detailed competence I am able to seek advice primarily through WCVA or other relevant civil society organisation, though taking full responsibility for my final voting decision. WCVA , through its European Policy Officers have access to the EESC Draft Papers and are able to help me formulate a view by disseminating a request for consultation through relevant organisations. This is an attempt to improve connectivity and influence between Wales Civil Society and the EU Institutions.

With the support of WCVA, I have also facilitated study visits of European Colleagues and Officials to Wales and to the Senedd as well as facilitating visits and speaking opportunities for civil society representatives from Wales at Hearings in Brussels. My knowledge of developing European policies has also enabled me recently to contribute here in Wales, for example, as a member of the Welsh Government's Agriculture Minister's Rural Development Programme [2014-2020] Advisory Group. Whenever possible I try to speak to organisations and schools about the EESC and participative democracy at all levels of government. I have also used the Welsh Government's regular forum on European Affairs to engage with our Welsh Stakeholders as well as maintain contact with Officials of the European Commission's Wales Office.

The Future

The continuing increase in Member States joining the Union may place pressure on some Member States to reduce the size of their Delegation. I would hope that with just 3 members, Wales would not have its ability to influence reduced.

The challenge for Members is to increase knowledge of the work of the EESC and seek further ways of engaging with citizens in their

interaction with EU decision makers and other citizens across the Union.

Tom Jones, EESC member, 11-9-2013.