

Conference of Presidents of European Regional Legislative Assemblies 7TH Annual Conference, REGGIO CALABRIA 27-9 October 2003

Background

1. Peter Kellam attended this conference as an observer for the Presiding Officer. This minute is intended as a record of the event. This was the 7th CALRE Conference. The Conference is open to Presiding Officer / Speakers / Presidents of the regional legislative assemblies from 8 European Member States. The potential attendance is close to 80, though in Reggio Calabria and Brussels the previous year the number of Presiding Officers attending was 40-45. A conference programme and supporting papers are attached as background information.

The Plenary Session

Inauguration and Opening.

2. Council of Reggio Calabria President, Luigi Fedele formally opened the session and welcomed the delegates to the region and to the Council Building in whose chamber the plenary was staged. A civic welcome from the Mayor of Reggio, Guiseppe Scopelliti then touched on the benefits of the draft EU constitution to Italy and its regions. President Pietro Fuda of the Reggio Calabria Province emphasised the importance of regional balance within Member States. Guiseppe Chiaravalloti, President of the Calabrian Region then highlighted Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean regions as important areas for future focus.
3. President Nencini, CALRE President and President of the Tuscan Parliament addressed the delegates and recommended that the next President of CALRE consider the balance between state and citizen, CALRE initiatives and EU Enlargement. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the Draft Constitution, particularly in reference to unfulfilled principles established at the Laeken Summit. The draft was seen to concentrate too much on the Member states and did not fully address diversity in Europe, subsidiarity, regional input into the Council, and further EU institutional reform. He then outlined the achievements of the CALRE Presidency (complementary working with REGLEG, agreements with COSAC, COR, Council of Europe and the EP) and recommended that the next Presidency of CALRE focus on European enlargement.

Towards the New Europe; Regional Democracy and New Dialogue

4. The President of the Regional Council of Tirana, Elidiani Canaj talked on moves in Albania to reduce the number of regions and empower those remaining. She asked for more co-operation and co-ordination from the EU regions. Lucian Flaiser, President of the Regional Council of Iasi, Romania, outlined the Romanian position on the structural funds debate. Giovanni Di Stasi, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Council of Europe congratulated the Italian Presidency of CALRE for raising the profile of the regions with legislative power within Europe. He added his voice to those were expressed disappointment at the reference in the Draft Constitution to regions. Salvo Fleres, Vice-President of the Sicilian Regional Assembly discussed the role of the legislative assemblies in the Mediterranean region and Pere Rotger I Llabres, President of the Parliament of the Balearic Islands, outlined his view of the national constitutions and regional diversity.

What Form of Dialogue is there Between the Regional Legislative Assemblies and the European Institutions?

5. Giacomo Stucchi, President of COSAC talked of the work of COSAC and outlined progress towards a possible agreement with CALRE. Nino Gemelli, MEP and President of the Committee focussed on Petitions of the European Parliament. He stated that EU member states were different in their political and socio/economic makeup and it was very difficult to establish a uniform standard for regional involvement throughout the EU. Senator Luc Van De Brande, Member of the Committee of the Regions went into detail about the COR position in the EU legislative process.

Speeches and Talks by Chairpersons of the European Regional Parliaments.

6. President Straub of the Baden Württemberg Landtag spoke on the competence of the Union, of the States and the Regions and the control of subsidiarity. President Rigol of the Catalan Parliament outlined his attempts to gain a bilateral agreement between CALRE and the EP. President Mendiola of the Basque Parliament introduced his concept for an e-democracy network amongst regions with legislative power and proposed that CALRE submit a paper to the UN organised World Summit in December 2003. Françoise Shepmans, President of Belgiums Communauté Française then revisited Stucchi's earlier contribution on COSAC. President Menezes of the Azores surprisingly stated that CALRE and individual presidents of legislative regions had not done enough to influence the debate on the Future of Europe. He added that although the Italian Presidency had achieved some success, it had to be more proactive.

7. The Conference was then addressed by Senator Enrico La Loggia, Italy's Minister for Regional Affairs. He felt that CALRE had played a role in the Future of Europe debate and that that the Italian Presidency achieved important results. The Italian Government though happy with the Draft Constitution noted the need to address the regional imbalance of power.

Regions and European Reforms.

8. Franz Schausberger, President of REGLEG and President of Salzburg Land addressed the conference for the REGLEG Presidency and extended an invitation to CALRE to attend the REGLEG annual conference in Austria on November 12 2003. He endorsed the view that REGLEG would continue to try to ensure that Parliaments with Legislative Powers had appropriate status in the new Europe.

9. Manfred Dorler, President of the Voralberg Landtag of Austria spoke of the role of the Committee of the Regions in a post IGC Europe, emphasising that the COR was a young body which needed further strengthening.

Respect and Promotion of the European Diversity.

10. Javier Torres Vela, President of the Andalusian Parliament of Spain, followed by Efisio Serrenti, President of Sardinia Regional Council of Italy both spoke about the economic impact of European reforms, with particular regard to the poorer regions.

11. George Reid, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament discussed the role of regional parliaments in Europe. The Presiding Officer agreed with a number of speakers that the Draft Constitution did not, to date, address some key issues and that the IGC had not indicated that it would tackle these. He endorsed the views of the President of the Azores who stated that CALRE members should do more practically to engage with the EU. He referred to Scotland and the devolved institutions adopting a complimentary approach in working with central Government and UK Parliament, as well as directly with EU institutions to engage on a range of key European issues. He covered the mechanics of European engagement within the Parliament, how focus on Europe is directed through its European and External Relations Committee, but with all committees having a remit towards European issues with increasing engagement. He also brought in the Parliament's participation in staff exchanges with the European Parliament and the establishment of a Scottish Parliamentary officer 'presence' in Brussels. The Presiding Officer reviewed its external relations programme, which included a number of EC commissioners visiting the Parliament to give presentations on a range of topics to MSPs, parliamentary staff and other interested parties. He also referred to the Parliament's inter-institutional linkages and how it is working, both bi- and multilaterally, with a number of key states, regions, and agencies. The Presiding Officer then showed the video 'Scottish Parliament 1999-2003: Working for You' as a vivid example of how the Parliament is engaging with the people of Scotland.

Reggio Calabria Conclusions

12. CALRE Permanent Secretariat. It was agreed that the CALRE would wait for detailed proposals to be put together by the Flemish Parliament and that the Steering Committee would form a working group to consider an appropriate participation fee for delegates attending the Conference.

13. The Reggio Calabria Declaration was passed unanimously (copy attached).

14. In the absence of other interested parties, the Italian Presidency agreed to continue to hold the CALRE presidency for another year. President De Batselier of the Flemish Parliament for the Standing Committee indicated to the Conference that Wales was considering the possibility of the 2004/5 Presidency and that Baden Württemberg would take the commitment on in 2005/6.

Other Business.

15. I met with staff of the Basque Parliament to follow up on the visit of the Basque President originally planned for November 2003. At the request of the President it was agreed that this should be put back until the New Year and that the Basque Parliament would write to postpone.
16. A separate report is being prepared on the implications of hosting the Conference in October 2005.

PJP Kellam