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It was good to see you and other Committee members on 31 March for what I thought was a very useful discussion on the Convention on the Future of Europe.

We have already touched on some of the issues in the written briefing that you sent me. However, I wanted to respond in more detail to the points you raise. As you know, the paper that I submitted to the Convention on the future role of regions was drawn up in close consultation with both the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament. I believe this paper put the UK firmly on the front foot in the Convention in the plenary discussion on the regions. It was positively received by many in the Convention, as well as among wider regional bodies across Europe.

I agree that the Convention should deliver a stronger, formalised role for the regions in the EU decision making process and that we should acknowledge the democratic legitimacy of regions with legislative power. Our devolved administrations spend a significant amount of their time and resources on implementing EU law. But the Treaties do not recognise this burden of responsibility, and I believe they should.

We must also ensure that regional assemblies and others, like local government, responsible for implementation, are routinely consulted about proposals that will affect them. That consultation needs to take place early on, so that your views can be properly taken on board.

As you know, the Government is committed to ensuring that the Devolved Administrations are involved in the subsidiarity early warning mechanism. Whilst there is general agreement in the Convention to creating such a mechanism, there has not yet been conclusive discussion about precisely how this will work in practice. I envisage EU legislative proposals being e-



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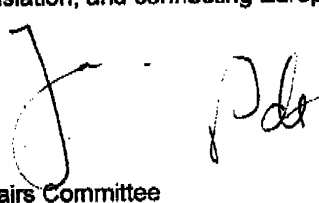
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mailed to national parliaments to consider. Whilst it will clearly be for Westminster to decide how those proposals will be considered, the Government has made it clear its wish for the regional assemblies to be given the opportunity to consider and pronounce on those proposals.

You raised a concern that policy areas where Wales has a particular interest and, possibly, a distinct view should be acknowledged and mechanisms to handle these put in place. As you know, the overarching Memorandum of Understanding between the Government and the Devolved Administrations and the specific Concordat covering EU policy making, provide full and continuing involvement of the Devolved Administrations in the formulation of a UK line on EU proposals, both at political and official level. The JMC (Europe) both informs the Devolved Administrations about matters to be discussed at a forthcoming EU Summit and seeks their views. I know that all involved find the JMC(E) to be valuable, while remaining conscious that EU relations are solely a matter for the UK Government.

Your briefing also suggests that the constitutional Treaty should be explicit about providing a right of direct appeal to the European Court of Justice for the regions. We strongly believe that Member States must remain the foundation of the Union. It would therefore be inconsistent to give regions direct access to the ECJ. However, it is important that the concerns of regions and local government in relation to subsidiarity can be heard by the ECJ. That is why we have proposed that the Committee of the Regions - which was set up specifically to represent those regions and local government at EU level - be extended such a right in relation to breaches of subsidiarity.

I strongly support deepening and widening the role of the regions and local government in the EU. This will help us tackle some of the issues at the heart of the Convention, such as enhancing democratic legitimacy, improving the quality of legislation, and connecting Europe to its citizens.


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