

The European affairs Committee

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Venue: Committee room 1, The National Assembly Building

THE EUROPEAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE - AN OVERVIEW

This paper has been submitted by the Liberal Democratic Party.

We have seen a definite improvement in the performance, and relevance, of the European Affairs Committee, in the past year. This has been achieved at a time when there has been a growing need of the Welsh people for closer co-operation with our European cousins. This desire is likely to grow as time goes by, and as the ensuing few years of growth generated by the Objective 1 funding, takes root in the Welsh economy. We Liberal Democrats think that this process should not only be an ongoing one, but should be welcomed, since Wales has been in the backwards hinterland for too long. Economic progress will generate the industrial and commercial growth of Wales; it will also allow social and cultural progress to bloom. For this purpose, it is necessary for the European Affairs Committee to be effective - objective, innovative, and determined to grow in the importance of its role in Brussels.

In line with this reasoning, the National Assembly should play a definite, positive role in the Wales European Centre. It is certain to grow in importance as it derives more influence from its association with UKREP. Indeed, the National Assembly should play more of a constructive and prominent role in UKREP's work in the Brussels machinery. We should be pre-eminent in our activity, with UKREP, in acting as a cross-channel flow for the information that Brussels generates. Given the National Assembly - UKREP closer co-operation, we should find the Assembly becoming more influential in Brussels as time goes on, and we ought to consider further discussion of UKREP's Assembly remit from time to time.

Further, we should be aware at all times of any duplication of the functions of UKREP and WEC. Since UKREP represents Wales on, eg, 190 Working Groups, and since these bodies are of great importance in staking our position in Europe, a much closer contact with the Assembly should be promoted, supporting the influence of National Assembly representatives in the policy - making machinery in Brussels.

We feel that it is of immense benefit to Wales, bearing in mind the Objective 1 status of its poorest regions, that we take a very positive attitude to our business potential, and hence to the living standards of the many that should benefit from the advantages of Sustainable Development. The process of Wales becoming better known as a reliable producer of goods and services, could be enhanced in future by opening up to the existing European market, as well as the Enlargement nations. The Four Motor Regions, Baden-Wurttemberg, Lombardy, Catalunya and the Rhone-Alpes, could prove useful in fostering better contacts, if not immediate trade. This process is likely to take some time, but, together with the WDA, other business groups, etc, it would be an excellent way to increase the importance of the European Affairs Committee, and help to make its pertinence more tangible.

We feel that the European Affairs Committee has made important steps in achieving some of its goals, but we still have some distance to cover. We should work hard at setting Wales firmly on the European map, and be fully aware of European issues that concern us. We need to be more pro-active in terms of our own deliberations, and in any links with WEC that arise now and in the future. It is necessary for the EAC to ensure that it has its sights firmly set on Welsh business prospects, culture, tourism etc, and to see such matters as Welsh participation in European organisations ; this should take the simultaneous aim of influencing those European Union Policies at the Pre - Legislative Stage (Informal), that could influence Wales in some way.

Our attitude is that it is of importance that we work closely with the European Commission Office in Wales, both with the representative in Wales, Catherine Eva, and with the Brussels Liaison Office, headed by Des Clifford. Indeed, we feel that the European Commission has shown a very welcoming attitude to Wales, and that we ought to maintain our contacts with them. We are likely to have a good rapport with them, bearing in mind their attendance at the meeting of the EAC. We should foster this in future, since it is clear that the EC is taking a positive view of the existence of Wales. However, care should be taken that no, or little, duplication occurs between the EC Representative, and either UKREP or WEC.