

Committee on European Affairs

Date: 30 November 2000

Time: 2pm

Venue Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

Title: Note of meeting of European Chairs in the UK (EC-UK)

This paper has been submitted by the Scottish Parliament who hosted the inaugural meeting of the group.

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Inaugural meeting – 10.30 a.m. Friday 3 November 2000

Venue – Strathclyde European Partnership Ltd, Glasgow

Attended:

Scottish Parliament European Committee

Hugh Henry MSP (Convener)

Cathy Jamieson MSP (Deputy Convener)

Stephen Imrie (Clerk)

David Simpson (Assistant Clerk)

Franck David (Administrative Support)

House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee

Jimmy Hood MP (Chair)

Dorian Gerhold (Clerk)

House of Lords European Union Committee

Lord Tordoff of Knutsford (Chair)

Tom Mohan (Clerk)

Northern Ireland Assembly Committee of the Centre

Edwin Poots MLA (Chairperson)

Oliver Gibson MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Dr Andrew Peoples (Clerk)

National Assembly for Wales European Affairs Committee

Val Feld AM (Committee Member)

Julie Bragg (Deputy Clerk)

Also Present

Laurie Russell (Chief Executive – Strathclyde European Partnership Ltd)

Apologies were received from Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM.

The meeting was chaired throughout by Hugh Henry MSP

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- Morning Session

Hugh Henry thanked everyone for being able to attend despite various transport problems throughout the country. He opened the meeting stating he saw this forum as an opportunity to build closer links, learn from each other’s experiences and see how we can best develop common goals and values.

A general discussion followed about how we each approach European issues. Among key points raised were:

- Jimmy Hood spoke about the process in the Commons; he emphasised that the importance of, when dealing European documentation for scrutiny, being "selective to be effective"
- He pointed out that the Commons Committee scrutinise documents not on merit but in terms of political and legal importance
- Mr Hood also highlighted the importance also of Parliament's own office in Brussels as a source of advance intelligence
- Lord Tordoff explained the role of the House of Lords Committee and in particular it's 6 sub-committees
- He pointed out the excellent working relationship shared by the Commons and Lords European Committees built up over the years
- One area of concern was the ability to exercise the Scrutiny reserve in time before Ministers took action – but he drew attention to the publication "Correspondence with Ministers" which publishes letters between his Committee and the relevant Ministers
- He also flagged up a forthcoming Lords inquiry into the proposals from Brussels for a second chamber being set up for the European Parliament – something the Lords Committee rejected previously
- Both the NAFW and NIA Committees have different roles to those in Westminster and Scotland, particularly regards scrutiny, nonetheless European matters are still of key importance – with the emphasis being on promoting Wales and Northern Ireland in Europe and ensuring both get the best deal possible
- Val Feld AM spoke about the structure of the Welsh Committee. As well as Assembly Members, the Committee also has co-opted onto its number on a non voting basis groups such as the Welsh MEPs, Committee of the Regions Members, ECOSOC and the Welsh Representative Office in the EU
- The NIA Committee of the Centre's role is to report on the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland and as such, European issues are only a small – but nonetheless important – part of it's remit
- Both Edwin Poots and Oliver Gibson emphasised the importance of having effective information gathering structures and the ability to be pro as opposed to reactive – i.e. to help set the European agenda
- Hugh Henry suggested a paper be drawn up between the Clerks looking at how information and intelligence is obtained and exchanged – and how we can use this to make our presence felt individually and collectively in Brussels. This paper could also suggest perhaps a mechanism for ensuring such an information exchange is as streamlined and effective as possible
- A further paper should also be drawn up looking at areas of co-operation between everyone
- Afternoon Session
- Laurie Russell gave a brief talk to the Committee on the role of Strathclyde European Partnership and the Scottish Programme Management Executives (who handle the Objective 2 Structural Funds process in Scotland). Mr Russell stayed with members for the rest of the meeting
- Hugh Henry asked Jimmy Hood about the effectiveness of Parliament's Brussels Office. Whilst Scotland has a representative office in Scotland, this primarily is that of the Scottish Executive (i.e. Government). Was having an office separate from the Government valuable – and could information gathered from Parliament's office be shared with the other European Committees?

Jimmy Hood agreed the Brussels office was very important. There are some sensitivities as to information being shared – as a lot of the advice coming from the Brussels office is of a "frank" nature – but he had no objections to this issue being pursued

- The meeting then discussed the merits of the devolved bodies having representation at COSAC. Mr Hood had been trying to get at least observer status for Scotland for the COSAC meeting under the French Presidency, but this had been rejected. He would however try to pursue further under the Swedish Presidency. Meantime however, he suggest the Clerks network prior to COSAC meetings to ensure views can at least be fed to him prior to his attendance. (For information the Website for COSAC is: <http://www.cosac.com/english/index.html>)
- Summary of the Day

All present agreed the initial meeting had been a success – and were keen to repeat the exercise. Cllr Poots volunteered to host the next meeting in Northern Ireland – possibly in February or March 2001. It was agreed generally to meet every six months with the location alternating between the Parliaments and Assemblies.