

European & External Affairs Committee

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Date:	9 March 2006
Time:	09.00 – 12.00
Venue:	Committee Room 3, Senedd, Cardiff Bay
Title:	The European Regions with Legislative Powers (REGLEG): Wales' Presidency 2006

Purpose:

1. To inform the committee about the Welsh Assembly Government's presidency of the REGLEG during 2006

Recommendation

2. That members note the contents of the paper.

Background

3. The Regions with Legislative Powers (hereafter, REGLEG) began in 2000 as a network bringing together First Ministers (or equivalent figures: nomenclature varies across Europe) from Europe's legislative regions. There is no common definition of what constitutes legislative regional government across Europe and practice varies widely among member states where it exists. The common features are a clear set of competences held at regional level and the ability to pass legislation (primary or secondary, in UK terms; in many countries, no such distinction exists). French regions, for example, are ineligible for REGLEG. Although they have a clear electoral mandate at regional level, the French regions are executive and not legislative bodies and their decision-making capacity, in general, is based on a mutually dependent relationship with central government structures. A structure similar to the French model characterises the Polish regional settlement, as committee members may be aware from our own relationship with Silesia.

4. In all, it is calculated that REGLEG notionally covers the interests of some 74 EU regions drawn from eight Member States: Belgium, UK, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Italy and Spain. Of these, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy and Spain are fully regionalised. The UK, of course, has devolved nations: Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland (currently suspended). Finland has a single autonomous region: the Aland Islands, a Swedish speaking island group allocated to Finnish sovereignty by a 1920's League of Nations decision. The islands of Madeira and Azores are autonomous regions within Portugal.

5. In practice, the number of regions that participate in REGLEG is much smaller than 74 but the group aims to be broadly representative of the wider community. It should be emphasised that REGLEG, and CALRE, are not official institutions; they are essentially political networks. The main end-product of the REGLEG is an annual conference of regional First Ministers and a resulting declaration on key current topics that aims to influence the sway of European policy in respect regional concerns. The focus tends towards constitutional, governance and horizontal issues rather than specific policy areas where consensus would quickly break down. The first REGLEG conference was held in Barcelona in 2000 under Catalan presidency. Since then, the Presidency has rotated as follows:

2001: Wallonia

2002: Tuscany

2003: Salzburg

2004: Scotland

2005: Bavaria

2006: Wales

6. The Welsh Assembly Government has been represented at each of these conferences. The First Minister of the presidency region acts as President of the REGLEG for that year.

REGLEG Co-ordination Committee

7. The practical work of the REGLEG is taken forward by a co-ordination committee made up of officials drawn from a representative delegation from each country's regions. The Welsh Assembly Government has been a member of this committee since 2001. It meets throughout the year at around six-weekly intervals, normally in Brussels but occasionally elsewhere. It is chaired by a General Secretary drawn from the region holding the presidency. The General Secretary is responsible for convening meetings, drawing up agendas and implementing decisions made.

8. The content of the REGLEG's agenda is, to a large extent, determined by the wider European agenda which it mirrors. During its lifetime, REGLEG declarations and associated lobbying have significantly influenced:

- the preparation of reference terms for the Convention on Future of Europe;
- the Convention itself and the draft constitutional treaty;

- the IGC and the final Constitutional Treaty.

The 2006 Wales Presidency

9. The Munich Declaration (2005) mandates the REGLEG to establish, in co-operation with CALRE, an Inter-regional committee of the Committee of the Regions which will bring together political representatives in a network made up of CoR members. The proposed Inter-regional group will discuss its mandate in due course but the general purpose is to raise the profile of legislative regions within the CoR and to provide opportunities for specific co-operation on policy issues when appropriate. As REGLEG President, the Welsh Assembly Government is actively organising the inaugural meeting of this group which is scheduled to coincide with the April 26/27 plenary of the CoR.

10. A key determinant of the policy agenda will be the conclusions of the June Council summit which should provide some consideration of the European Constitutional Treaty in the light of two referendum defeats and thirteen positive ratifications. Other key issues will include Subsidiarity monitoring, Better Regulation, the Commission's communication agenda and the general issues relating to the perceived gap between institutions and citizens. It is not the Presidency's role to script a policy but rather to lead a debate among colleagues and, ultimately, to pull threads together into a coherent draft declaration that is capable of achieving wide political support at the end-of-year presidential conference.

11. Arrangements have not yet been finalised but the presidential conference will be held in Wales, probably in November.

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