



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Issues: Committee of the Regions
Briefing

23 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Paul Givan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr John McCallister
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Trevor Cummings	Committee of the Regions
Mr Francie Molloy	Committee of the Regions

The Chairperson: We welcome Councillor Trevor Cummings, and Francie Molloy MLA who was of course, until recently, a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Francie, are you leading?

Mr Francie Molloy (Committee of the Regions): I will do my wee bit, and Trevor will come in on the next bit. Thanks very much for the invitation to give our presentation to the Committee. Jonathan Bell and I have done it before. Trevor is the new person representing the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) on the Committee of the Regions.

To come back to the Committee of the Regions and the role played by the Assembly; I have to say that there has been no big improvement in relation to the recognition, back-up or support that the Committee of the Regions gets from the Assembly since the last time I was here. My understanding was that a group was to be set up, which would be representative of the Executive, and that it would have some sort of idea of what lines and what role the Executive were following in relation to Europe and how they thought that would be of benefit, and that, within the Committee of the Regions, we could raise those issues. However, that has not happened to date, so there has been no improvement in that way.

In relation to the Committee of the Regions, it is also worthwhile pointing out that, like the European Parliament, there are large blocks and groups, such as the socialist group and the others, which are part and parcel of that. We are not aligned to any of those, which means that, by and large, those groups make the decisions. They come together, take a position on things and then vote. It is very

seldom — though it has happened on a few occasions — that we have the opportunity of having the swaying vote. Arnold Hatch has been a representative on a number of different occasions in the delegation, and sometimes it comes down to one or two votes. In relation to subsidiarity — about where local government should give priority to regional Assemblies — that issue has been the deciding factor a number of times.

By and large, the Committee of the Regions comprises the plenary sessions, at which all members — roughly 400 across Europe — are represented. We have two members — one from the Assembly and one from local government. Then, there are four committees, and we are represented on all of them, one from each party across the Assembly and local government. I sit on the environment committee, which, by and large, deals with similar issues to what we deal with here. Climate change is obviously one of the big issues in Europe.

The budgets are the big issue. Until agreements are reached on those in the Parliament, very little actually happens down the line. Common agricultural policy (CAP) reform is one of the big issues in the Committee of the Regions in the same way that it is a big issue across the European Union in various ways. In the past, I have been getting the priority list of the UK delegation and the priority list of the Irish delegation. What I do is take what I see as best for the interests of the people of this country. Taking that, North and South, CAP is a similar approach, from the point of view of the farming community, of trying to maintain the CAP and ensure that the farming community gets the support that it has been getting in the past and that any reforms that come in do not damage the farming community.

The other area where the Committee of the Regions would be of benefit, if we were working it right, is in advanced warning of issues that are coming down the line. The Committee of the Regions will be looking at issues now that will perhaps not come into the European Parliament for three or four years. The Committee will take a position on those. There would be an opportunity for the Assembly, if we had knowledge of that, to influence that position. Of course, we should not overestimate how much we can influence things, but at least we could, within the UK delegation, have an influence. It is surprising that, within the UK delegation for instance, a number of the groupings are not aligned to any of the major blocks in Europe and have an independent role. That could be useful, from our point of view, because it gives us more than just the representation we have from here.

How the Irish presidency will pan out is a big issue for the Committee of the Regions. A lot of European meetings will be held in Ireland this year. That gives the North and the Assembly an opportunity to play their role in that. There is also opportunity for transferring staff so that they can get experience during the presidency. I know that a couple of staff are transferring to get that experience and knowledge. It would be worthwhile for us to get the experience of the Irish contingent over the years. The South has built up a reputation for being able to draw down the maximum funding.

Peace IV, as we heard during the earlier briefing, is a big issue. Although it has never become a big issue for the Committee of the Regions, overall, how Peace IV is developed is important to this Committee and others in the Assembly. We need to try to make sure that Peace IV meets the needs of the community here, instead of the other way round. If we look at previous examples of European funding, we will see that, by and large, programmes were put together and then groups were expected to tweak their applications to meet those. We should be trying to make sure that, for what may be the final Peace programme, the programme meets the needs of the area, and that those needs are identified at an early stage, instead of having to rewrite programmes later on.

As Tim said in his research briefing, at the early stage, it was perhaps misinterpreted as to what the Barroso task force actually was. It is not just a group of people sitting in Europe, ready at our beck and call. It is about facilitation, to ensure that we maximise funding from Europe. Ronnie Hall, who chaired the task force, is a local from County Tyrone. I think that we should make more of that and the role that people such as him played. I suggested a conference, not just to inform civil servants and staff, which has been done in the past, but to inform the public, and those who may be future applicants, of what the role of the task force is and how it can be used to the best advantage of the community.

Speaking to Ronnie Hall in the past, he has told me that he is very keen that the Barroso task force be used better; that the facilitation facility should be used and that we should be trying to maximise other funds in Europe. To some extent, we have been spoiled by the fact that we have looked at Peace and rural programmes as the two big funding mechanisms. A number of other schemes, funding and co-operation programmes across Europe could be drawn down.

You asked earlier whether we need Peace funding or whether money could be drawn down in various other funding streams. We may be able to draw down some money, but I do not believe that it could all be drawn down in other funding, because we would be competing for it. A lot of this is about co-operation with other countries to try to draw down funding, whereas Peace funding is deliberately intended to develop our role and make funding available particularly for the North.

That, by and large, is what we should be doing, but we should not lose sight of the other funding bodies in Europe that we have basically ignored because we have been concentrating on the Peace and rural programmes in the past. So that is my introduction. Members will obviously have questions or whatever. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Francie. Trevor, do you want to make some opening remarks?

Mr Trevor Cummings (Committee of the Regions): Thank you, Chair. I would like to add a couple of points. I want to thank Francie for that very comprehensive coverage of the issues that are relevant to us at the moment.

I would just like to add a couple of points. The first is about the priorities for 2013 and, following on from that, the aspirations for the Committee of the Regions. For the priorities that have been set out, and this has been stated before and I will state it again, Europe 2020 is very much the focus. The budget, which is being debated, will be very much dependent on what amount is available. The percentage breakdown has yet to be determined as well.

There is particular focus on two areas. The first is the single market, and the emphasis placed on that and its advancement. Of course, we know that new nations have come in. When the Committee of the Regions is presented with legislative documents and policies, we are challenged on a daily basis because of the deprivation that exists in a lot of the poorer nations that are coming in.

The second area is innovation, and research and development. For us, there is also a big push on that. As I move on to talk about aspirations, I will explain that a wee bit more.

As policy and legislative documents come through, which we seek to influence and on which we take votes, we get an insight into what may be coming down the road. I believe that we have opportunities ahead of us for innovation and research.

I am particularly keen on the principle of communication. Again, Francie touched on that. Under the EU entrepreneurial region initiative for 2015, there is an opportunity for us to pursue an application. We certainly have the capacity to deliver such a thing, but the challenge is that we need joined-up thinking. It is fine for us on the Committee of the Regions to identify such opportunities, but it is important that other agencies are involved in and contribute to an application.

Those are the challenges that lie before us. We, on the Committee of the Regions, will influence policy day and daily, participate in five plenary sessions in the coming year, and implement the directives.

Again, I come back to point about communication and the benefits of working together. I know that an all-Member parliamentary group is being put together. That would be another good platform that we could feed into. All those things will be required to dovetail more effectively in order for us to realise the full potential that lies before us. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: Trevor, thank you very much.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks for the presentation. This question is for Francie. At the beginning, you mentioned a conference. How near is that?

Mr Molloy: I do not think that it is near.

Mr G Robinson: You are looking at an awareness conference. Is that right?

Mr Molloy: Yes.

Mr G Robinson: Good stuff.

Mr Molloy: I do not think that it is even at the planning stage. We need to make people aware of what the task force can deliver and what its role is. This Committee or several Committees could push for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to organise that. I think that it is necessary, because there is not a complete understanding of what Barroso is about and, as a result, I think that we are missing opportunities. Even if we did not get as far as holding a major conference, having the likes of Ronnie Hall or other European officials here to take Assembly Members through that and make them aware of what is available and what the benefits are would be beneficial to us in the future.

Mr G Robinson: That is a good idea.

The Chairperson: I do not dispute it, Francie, but the Barroso task force was set up in May 2007, which is five and a half years ago. Is it not a definition of something approaching failure that, five and a half years on, people do not have the requisite degree of understanding of what it is about?

Mr Molloy: Yes, it is, but I do not underestimate the benefits that the Barroso task force has delivered. Some of that goes unnoticed because Departments just work with the officials in Europe and are directed, and our Executive office in Brussels is tying in with the Barroso task force officials on a continuous basis. However, we need to increase awareness of those opportunities among the entrepreneurial people out there and the people who are looking for other sources of funding. I do not think that the public and those who have the business skills have been made fully aware of that. I do not underestimate what Departments have drawn down already and what benefits there have been to them.

The Chairperson: OFMDFM wanted an EU perspectives group put together. That would include people such as you, MEPs and the European Economic and Social Committee that Jane Morrice and Michael Smyth sit on. Has that met?

Mr Molloy: If it has met, I have not been made aware of it. The civil servants and the Departments may have met but we have not been involved.

Mr Cummings: There was one gathering recently, but it was more informal and set an agenda.

The Chairperson: Do you think that it has potential to bring cohesion to our approach?

Mr Cummings: Absolutely; it certainly will help.

The Chairperson: Francie, you mentioned your disappointment at the beginning. What specific practical measures would you like from the Assembly?

Mr Molloy: This Committee's sessions have been useful. To me, it is the only group that has brought everybody together in the one room. That has been beneficial. Practical support is required. There is a tremendous amount of paper around this room, but given the amount of paper in Europe, it will be impossible for any one individual to go through it. It needs research, guidance and support from the Executive about where their priorities lie. Backup staff here need to be informed by the Executive and by OFMDFM, but across all Departments, to ensure that that support is given, that ideas are floated in it and that we have the opportunity to have an input.

The Chairperson: Trevor, when you go to the Committee of the Regions, you do so knowing that a lot of people pick up their information from their daily newspapers and read criticism of Europe for imposing regulations that people feel do not fit in Northern Ireland. Is it the same generically across all regions?

Mr Cummings: Given that I have recently taken up the mantle, I would maybe need a bit more time to come to a view on that. We have a good support mechanism over there that allows us to have influence at that level, and that can bring a positive outcome to legislation that might be going through at that time. The UK support group has 24 full members who regularly meet with me before even going to committee. So, there are those in a position to bring about a positive outcome if we seek assistance.

Mr Molloy: There is better support for Trevor at local government level than there is at Assembly level. Belfast City Council has a larger team working on European issues than the Assembly. Belfast City Council has taken on a regional role, and the Assembly has missed out on that opportunity.

The Chairperson: Do you have a view, Francie, on which other European regions we should use as comparators?

Mr Molloy: We should probably work towards the Spanish approach to the regional Assembly and their power in Europe. We have different issues in the North to those that the British Government would have. So, I think that there are different issues that would be of benefit to people here, and we have to play different roles. It is the same with the Spanish situation. The regional Assembly there has more power. When we as a committee met with the Catalans at that time, they put great emphasis on the Committee of the Regions for the role and influence that it has and for the advanced warning that it gives them for future developments.

Mr Givan: I want to pick up on one point. Thank you for the presentation. It strikes me that you are well across the brief for the work that you are doing, and I know that you are there battling for all of us in that respect. I want to ask about getting the information. Clearly, you are not experts in all areas of neighbourhood policy, climate change and energy. Are you getting information from the Department to advise you on Northern Ireland's position, for instance? Are they doing the same in local government? Are you getting information fed through to you? Obviously, you are, ultimately, there for your own right, so to speak. Even if civil servants or someone else say that the world is about to end because of climate change, you are not bound by that. You can take a sensible approach when it comes to voting. How do you balance the information that you get and the ultimate decisions that you vote on?

Mr Cummings: As Francie pointed out, the local government backup system is excellent for me, in particular, and for Arnold Hatch who is my alternate. NILGA, in partnership with the local government authority based in London, has been tremendous in providing the various pieces of information that are required to make decisions.

I am not altogether sure what avenue I would go down. I am not sure whether it would be the Barroso task force or whether I would pursue one of the four desks to get information directly from the Assembly. It is not altogether clear for me at this time. However, when it comes to decision-making, the local government authority briefs provide the most information for me.

Mr Molloy: As I said, from the Assembly's point of view, I have had no correspondence whatsoever with Committees in relation to it, and I have had no briefings from the Executive or any other body within the Assembly. The best briefings are coming out of local government, and, with regard to what is relevant to our situation, the best briefings are coming from the UK or Irish delegations. That is where the difference is. The UK delegation, largely, take a Westminster or British Government role within it; sometimes it is different, and sometimes it is the same.

Take the issue of subsidiarity, for instance. I know that there were issues in the Environment Committee around road transport. The Committee felt that those issues should be decided locally, rather than in Westminster. The Committee wrote to the House of Lords, got a response and got an influence into it. That is something that we have to do more of, rather than Westminster deciding what might be suitable here. It might not be suitable here. The stringent restrictions that you might have on something might be suitable for England, Scotland, Wales or even part of them, but not necessarily for here. Each Department has to look at that more. That was only because Shauna, who was looking at that procedure coming down the line, got that information. She got it at a very late stage, so the alarm bells were not ringing very early on in the situation, but the Environment Committee got in during the last week. That had been floating about for the past 12 months probably, but no correspondence or information had been gathered.

I imagine that the same applies across a number of Committees; legislation is going through, and then we get feedback along the lines of, "This is a diktat coming from Europe." However, there are sometimes opportunities to influence it. There might not be influence all the time, but we are missing some opportunities to influence. We are even missing opportunities to influence the Westminster Government on what our needs or issues are.

Mr Givan: Take the reform of the common agriculture policy. I am surprised that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is not actively telling our Committee of the Regions

members what, from a Northern Ireland perspective, is in our interests, so that they are able to use that channel to raise concerns and try to influence things at policy stage. So, that may be something that we want to write to our Departments about, to say, "The Committee of the Regions is here, and the members are on it — use them". However, they are obviously not bound by them.

Mr Molloy: On the likes of CAP, because it is such a big issue and all the MEPs have a similar line in relation to it, it is one area where we would follow through, and DARD would have advised us of its particular arguments. Outside of that, an awful lot of other legislation is going through Europe, and it affects here. Sometimes it is not on the big European issues that you would think about but just along the lines of issues such as driver regulations or transport regulations.

The Chairperson: Twice, I think, we have had officials come to us and say, at a fairly late stage, "You are going to have to endorse this European regulation otherwise you will get an infraction." One was seafarers, which we are coming to later today, and the other was this gender-neutral insurance premium issue. Do you have a lot more advanced notice of that than, say, this Committee?

Mr Molloy: No. Within the Committee of the Regions, those are probably issues that came down the road two years ago. So, the issues that are coming up in the Committee of the Regions now are things that will be coming up here in maybe two or three years. That is the advance notice. However, Departments, the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive here should be getting from Westminster and the House of Lords their opinions on the legislation that is being put through at present in Europe.

Mr Moutray: Francie Molloy has been very frank in relation to the disconnect, as he sees it, between the Committee of the Regions and the Assembly. I wanted to ask — although I think I probably know the answer now anyway because reference was made to Belfast City Council — but is the connection better, generally, between councils across Northern Ireland and yourselves?

Mr Cummings: Certainly through NILGA, yes, there is a good connection before we participate in any of the committees or plenaries that take place. Yes; that would be my experience.

Ms McGahan: Thank you, Francie, for your presentation. I read somewhere that the European Commission proposes the legislation. I think there is a Scottish model where they get that clarity, if you like, to show all proposed legislation, and that allows them to have an early input. Is there a mechanism for us to get that?

Mr Molloy: Yes, I understand that that comes through to the Executive regularly and that Westminster will correspond with the Executive. Before that, whenever this Committee held its inquiry into Europe, it was very clear that the House of Lords and Westminster at that time had been corresponding with the Northern Ireland Office to get our position and opinions. We emphasised at that time that it should be going directly to the Executive so as to get the Assembly's role within it as well as the Northern Ireland Office's. So, that agenda is certainly there as regards legislation going through at present. However, as I said, at that stage, it is often too late to make decisions. It is already well down the line, and being able to influence Westminster's response may be difficult.

The Scottish would be more active. We have four people in the Executive Office in Europe. The Scottish and Welsh offices would be a lot larger, and Westminster is the dominant office, even in comparison with the Irish delegation. I think the Irish delegation has something like 190 officials across the various departments. We have four. It is important that we do not expect that those four desk officers in the European Office will be able to deliver all that we need here. There will have to be better correspondence across the different ways. Local government, particularly local government based in London, has, I think, perfected the correspondence and advanced notice that it can get. However, again, following on from the Lisbon Treaty, the issue is that we need to take on a greater role in relation to subsidiarity, where this Assembly or local government should be consulted more on legislation that is going through Europe, instead of just Westminster deciding on our behalf.

Mr G Robinson: I have just one supplementary question: have you had much correspondence with the MEPs?

Mr Molloy: Yes; I have good correspondence with them, and I also have feedback from them on what they are pursuing. Like others, because there is so much in Europe, the MEPs have to prioritise what they look at, so they have their own priorities. We had a conference in Belfast a few weeks back, at which the MEPs and members of the public were given the opportunity to exchange views, and I

thought that was useful. That is why I say that, on the likes of Barroso, we need better opportunities for exchanges of views and discussions with the general public.

Mr Cummings: May I come in on the back of that? The MEPs are very proactive in meeting us when we are out in Brussels. They seek us out. If there is a policy or an issue that is coming up, they will advise, guide and keep us informed.

The Chairperson: OK, members, are we content? Francie and Trevor, would you have any objection if we were to ask NILGA to share any briefing papers provided to you for the meetings of the Committee of the Regions? Or would you pass on that request on our behalf, so that we can have that information?

Mr Molloy: I think it best that you correspond directly with NILGA.

The Chairperson: OK. We are happy enough. Trevor and Francie, thank you both very much.

Mr Molloy: You can also advance the situation to the point where the Assembly gives us the information on where its priorities lie.

The Chairperson: It certainly will not be a step backwards, Francie. Thank you both very much.