Report on the 11th Plenary Assembly of CALRE
Berlin, Germany
21 to 23 October 2007

Introduction

The 11th plenary session of the Conference of Regional Legislative Assemblies in Europe (“CALRE”) took place from 21st to 23rd October 2007 in Berlin, Germany. The plenary was held at the Berlin House of Representatives (the Abgeordnetenhaus), the unicameral parliament of State of Berlin. Berlin forms one of the 16 states of the federal Republic of Germany. A brief background to CALRE is attached in the annex to this paper.

Despite being held in Berlin, the plenary was formally hosted by the Landtag (state parliament) of Baden-Württemberg, which held the presidency of CALRE for 2007. The President (Speaker) of the Landtag of Baden-Württemberg, Peter Straub, chaired the plenary. The Presiding Office of the Scottish Parliament, Alex Fergusson MSP, attended the plenary in Berlin. He was accompanied by Seán Wixted, European Liaison Officer with the Parliament’s External Liaison Unit.

The 2007 Plenary

The 2007 plenary was an opportunity for the Presiding Officer to attend CALRE for the first time since his election to the Office of Presiding Officer in May 2007. The main issues debated at the 2007 plenary were:

- the inclusion in the ongoing constitutional reform process and the EU Reform Treaty of progress made to date in recognition of regional and local authorities in the EU;

- the importance of the role of regional legislative assembly in the ‘early-warning system’ set out in the EU Reform Treaty in relation to the principles of subsidiary;

- the growing importance of transparency and the use of eDemocracy in engaging citizens with regional legislatures;
• support for the proposal to establish a Charter on Regional Democracy by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the Council of Europe;

• EU Regional policy in the context of the review of the EU’s financial framework.

On Monday 22nd April the plenary debated the future of European Regional Policy and the cohesion fund against the background of the upcoming review of the EU Budget in 2008. The plenary was addressed by Ronald Hall, Director of EU Regional Policy at the European Commission. During the debate the Presiding Officer raised the issue of the formulation of EU policy by the Commission and the deficit, real or perceived, between this process and consultation and communication by the EU with its citizens. The Presiding Officer highlighted the important role which can be played by CALRE member parliaments in bridging this gap such as the work undertaken by the Scottish Parliament in engaging the public in Scotland with the political process.

In response Director Hall commended the work of the Scottish Parliament, and other CALRE members, in this area. He highlighted that fact that this was not a lack of commitment on the part of the European Commission, but rather the Commission was dependent on the various Member State governments to work to highlight engagement with the EU amongst their own citizens. The Commission was also dependent, to a large extent, on the domestic media sector in each EU country in order to get its message across to citizens and the success of this varied from country to country. Mr Hall highlighted the role that bodies such as CALRE and the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR) can, and do, play in addressing this need. He highlighted the joint approach taken by CALRE and the CoR such as the joint structured work programme they adopted on establishing a subsidiary network for regional parliaments and their aim to increase the visibility of regions with legislative power with institutions such as the EU Council of Ministers and the IGC1.

This, and other issues were debated by the plenary, and a declaration setting out the views of CALRE on these issues was agreed by the plenary (the Berlin Declaration). The Scottish Parliament does not take part in voting on CALRE declarations as it holds associate membership status of CALRE. On this occasion, as the Presiding Officer was scheduled to return to the UK before the vote on the Declaration actually took place, no abstention by the Scottish Parliament is recorded in the Declaration.

1 (IGC) The Intergovernmental Conference is the formal procedure for negotiating amendments to the founding treaties of the European Union. Under the treaties, an IGC is called into being by the European Council, and is composed of representatives of the member states, with the EU Commission and EU Parliament also participating.
Parliamentary engagement

The CALRE plenary also provides for continued engagement between the Scottish Parliament and other leading regional legislative bodies in Europe. In the last nine years the Scottish Parliament has developed close contact between several of the German Landtags and Spanish regional parliaments. While in Berlin the Presiding Officer took the opportunity to continue this contact by holding informal one-to-one meetings with his counterparts from the parliament’s of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg; Catalonia and the Basque Country.

Izaskun Bilbao Barandica

On the afternoon of Sunday 21st October the Presiding Officer met with Izaskun Bilbao Barandica, President of the Basque Parliament. During their meeting President Bilbao discussed the upcoming priorities for the Basque presidency of CALRE which would run from the end of the 2007 plenary until November 2008. President Bilbao stated that one of the main priorities for their presidency would be a review of the operations of CALRE and to assess how participating members engage in the work of the organisation.

The Presiding Officer expressed interest in this and stated that the Scottish Parliament would make a response to any such review.

Alios Glück

On Sunday evening the Presiding Officer had a meeting with Alios Glück, President of the Landtag of Bavaria. During their discussion President Glück expressed satisfaction with the good relationship which had developed between the Scottish and Bavarian parliaments and noted the visits which had been undertaken by Bavarian delegations to Scotland in the past few years. The President went on to express the hope that there would be further engagement between delegations from Edinburgh and Munich. To that end the President invited the Presiding Officer to visit the Bavarian Parliament at a future date.

Ernest Benach

On Monday 22nd October the Presiding Officer held a breakfast meeting with Ernest Benach, President of the Catalan Parliament. The President and the Presiding Office briefed each other on the current political situation in each parliament following the respective elections in Catalonia in December 2006 and in Scotland in May 2007. Both nations were in a process of review regarding their constitutional relationship with their respective country and the President and Presiding Officer agreed that there was value in continued
parliamentary engagement between Scotland and Catalonia on this and other issues.

President Benach also referred to the decision of the Catalan Parliament to withdraw from NORPEC\(^2\) and highlighted the approach it was adopting of establishing bi-lateral working agreements with other parliaments on issues of mutual interest on a case-by-case basis. To date the Catalan Parliament has established such bi-lateral agreements with the Parliament of Morocco; the Flemish Parliament; the Quebec Parliament and the Californian State Senate. President Benach stated that the Catalan Parliament would be interested in establishing a similar agreement with the Scottish Parliament. The Presiding Officer welcomed this as a constructive idea and stated he would be happy to facilitate a discussion between the two parliaments on this.

\textit{Peter Straub}

On the evening of Monday 22nd October, the Presiding Officer had a brief discussion with Peter Straub, the President of the Landtag of Baden-Wittenberg and President of CALRE for 2007 on matters of mutual interest.

\textbf{External Liaison Unit}

\textit{April 2008}

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\(^2\) NORPEC, the Network of Regional Parliamentary European Committees, consisted of the chairpersons of the respective European Committees of the Parliament’s of Scotland; Catalonia; Saxony-Anhalt and the Basque Country. The European and External Relations Committee of the Scottish Parliament agreed to withdraw from NORPEC on 4 September 2007.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON CALRE

CALRE was founded in 1997 and comprises the Presiding Officers/Chairmen of regional parliaments and assemblies of Member States of the EU. Currently parliaments from 8 EU Member States are represented on CALRE (Austria; Belgium; Finland; Germany; Italy; Portugal; Spain and the UK). Overall 74 separate constitutional/autonomous regions are represented on CALRE with a combined population of over 200 million people (half the entire population of the EU). The legislative powers of these parliaments/assemblies vary depending on the constitutional structure of each EU Member state.

The aim of CALRE is to enhance the role of regional institutions in the EU decision making process by supporting and promoting the principle of subsidiarity, and seeking formal procedures for information exchange between the European Parliament, national and regional parliaments. CALRE meets once a year in plenary session (normally in October) with other smaller meetings taking place throughout the year. The 12 month presidency of CALRE rotates between parliaments on an annual basis following the end of each plenary session. The Basque Parliament assumed the presidency for the 12 month period from October 2007 to October 2008.

The Scottish Parliament and CALRE

The Scottish Parliament has taken part in the work of CALRE since 2000 when Sir David Steel attended the 4th CALRE plenary in Galicia (Spain). Since then the PO has attended most of the plenary sessions of CALRE.