

A COSAC for the Regions?

Irene Oldfather, Convener of the Scottish Parliament's European Committee and Member of the Committee of the Regions, sets out proposals for a new regional network

In his informative article in your magazine of the 16 September, Rory Watson provided a useful overview of the work of COSAC – the network of European Affairs Committees in member states' parliaments – and its relations with the European Parliament (EP). This worthy network is enjoying a significant amount of attention as the delegates to the EU's Convention on the Future of Europe consider the issue of the role of national parliaments in EU affairs and the links between the member states and the EU institutions.

But what about regional parliaments? Where do they fit in? What type of interrelationship should the European Affairs committees in regional or sub-Member State national parliaments have together, and what might be their relationship with the European Parliament and other institutions such as the European Commission?

Regrettably, this type of issue does not seem to rate too highly on the political agenda for IGC-2004 or amongst the members of the EU's Convention on the Future of Europe. I do note, however, that the idea of a working group on regional issues is still a possibility, depending on the work of the contact group with regions. Despite the encouraging moves within the EP's Constitutional Affairs Committee to initiate a report into the regional dimension of the future of Europe debate through Giorgio Napolitano MEP, not much attention is being played to how regional parliaments engage collectively with the European institutions. Despite the Commission's White Paper on Governance, which floated the idea of tri-partite contracts between the Commission, the Member State and the regional bodies, little progress seems to be being made to implement the concept. Despite the excellent report by Alain Lamassoure MEP and his idea of 'partner of the Union' status for regional parliaments – supported overwhelmingly by the Scottish Parliament's European Committee – nothing seems to be moving on this front either. In addition, despite the efforts by the Committee of the Regions' delegation to the Convention, they are still only a small number of regional voices amongst the many.

Of course there are some positives, regional parliaments are playing their part in debates across the EU, such as the Scottish Parliament which is for the first time represented as of right in the Committee of the Regions (COR). For example, our Minister-President (First Minister) in Scotland, Rt Hon Jack McConnell MSP, is amongst the COR's rapporteurs for future of Europe issues. However, as part of the future of Europe discussions, I would like to see the COR reformed, given more power and recognition. And a significant group of the so-called constitutional regions signed the Flanders' Declaration and are about to issue a new statement calling for more say for regional bodies, following a conference in November 2002 in Tuscany.

But what can be done at a practical level amongst committees and backbench members of regional parliaments outwith our executives or government representatives. Is there a need for the 'workhorses' of our parliamentary institutions at a regional level – its committees – to forge closer links and to model ourselves on the *raison d'être* and objectives of COSAC?

In the Scottish Parliament, we would argue there is. The devolved government in Scotland – the Scottish Executive – is responsible for the transposition and implementation of EC

legislation in many policy areas (environment, transport, health, justice etc.) and can be fined and penalised directly if Scotland fails to meet its European obligations. Second, Scottish Ministers can and have participated directly in Council of the EU meetings, even leading the UK delegation on occasions.

We would argue that there is much to learn from our parliamentary experience in Scotland and much to be gained from discussing such ideas, sharing best practice in terms of parliamentary procedure and considering common positions on EU policies, with similarly-minded and similarly-powered 'European Affairs' committees in other regional parliaments.

That is why in mid-November the 'European Affairs' committees in the Parliaments of Scotland, Catalunya and Flanders are aiming to sign a formal agreement establishing a trans-European network of such committees in the constitutional regions. This follows the formal agreement amongst our three parliaments for closer co-operation and strong bilateral links between our executives. Upon establishment of the committee network, efforts will be made to extend membership to committees in other regional parliaments with similar powers across the EU. The three parliaments are confident of a broad welcome by the European Parliament in terms of forging a direct, informal and closer working relationship between the new network and MEPs and their committees in the EP.

We would call on your readers to give this network – Network of Regional Parliamentary European Committees (working title!) – their full support and would welcome feedback on its merits.