

'Defending our powers against Brussels' from the Europäische Zeitung

Caption: Article on the Committee of the Regions, in particular on its composition and its role as an advisory body to the institutions of the European Union.

Source: Europäische Zeitung. Hrsg. Entel, Stefan A.; Brok, Elmar; Prof. Schöndube, Claus; Dr Schoser, Claus ; R Herausgeber Keller, Horst. März/April 2002, Nr. 3. Bonn: Europa Union Verlag GmbH. "Kompetenzen gegen Brüssel verteidigen", auteur:Heinrich, Egon C. , p. 6.

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Defending our powers against Brussels

Strengthening the influence of the Committee of the Regions

by Egon C Heinrich

In early February, certain major changes occurred in the leadership of the European Union's Committee of the Regions (CoR), which was created by the Treaty of Maastricht. Sir Albert Bore, leader of Birmingham City Council in the UK, was elected as the third President of the Committee, his term of office running until January 2004. He succeeds the Belgian Minister, Jos Chabert, a member of the European People's Party (EPP). Since 1998, the new President has been Chairman of the Social Democrat Group in the CoR. He won the post in a crucial vote, defeating the EPP Group candidate, Eduardo Zaplana Hernandez-Soro, President of the Regional Government of Valencia, although Zaplana was subsequently elected as First Vice-President of the Committee.

After his election, Sir Albert Bore addressed the 222 representatives from local and regional authorities in the fifteen EU Member States.

He said that local and regional issues were crucial if the important debate about the future of the Union was to connect to ordinary citizens. 'We should become,' he said, 'the effective "voice" of local and regional government within European affairs, playing a complementary role to the European Parliament.' He also said, 'We face a major task. After two terms and despite a number of useful initiatives, the reality is that the overall impact of the Committee in the general scheme of European affairs remains marginal. (...) we have got to do better: we have got to make a difference.'

Only an advisory body

The larger EU Member States each send 24 members to the Committee. The German contingent includes, amongst others, the Prime Ministers of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber, of Baden-Württemberg, Erwin Teufel, of the Saarland, Peter Müller, of Schleswig-Holstein, Heide Simonis, and of the City-State of Hamburg, Ole von Beust. The former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who was appointed as President of the Convention by the December EU Summit in Brussels, is also a member of the Committee in his capacity as President of the Regional Council of Auvergne.

Each of the 222 members of the Committee of the Regions is allocated an alternate member. In practice, this means that prominent members, such as the Heads of Government of the Federal *Länder*, travel to Brussels only for the most important plenary meetings of the Committee and are otherwise represented by their alternates. The Committee of the Regions is an advisory body of the EU institutions whose task is to bring the specific concerns and viewpoints of local and regional authorities into the decision-making process of the EU. Above all, the Committee was also created in order to integrate the regions of Europe more fully into European policy, its objective being to create a 'Europe of the regions'. In this way, it would help to bring the European Union closer to its citizens. It is precisely here, however, that there are still major deficiencies, as the new President himself was forced to admit.

At its most recent plenary session, the CoR also appointed its six members of the Convention. The Bavarian Minister for Federal and European Affairs, Reinhold Bocktet, was unanimously elected as Chairman of the EPP Group. The EPP Group in the Committee is more or less the same size as the Social Democrat Group. Mr Bocktet has been a member of the CoR since it was founded in 1994. In his new job, he will be mainly concerned with strengthening the influence of regional and local authorities on EU policy and defending their powers against 'interference from Brussels'. He believes that it is important that subsidiarity, which he describes as 'a genuine Christian Democrat principle', should be consistently put into practice in the European Union.