



Committee of the Regions

8th Conference of Presidents of Regions with legislative power (REGLEG), Barcelona, 16 November 2007

Speech by Mr Delebarre, president of the Committee of the Regions

Dear President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to address your assembly.

The fact that the REGLEG general assembly is meeting for the second time in eight years in Barcelona, a showcase and example of successful decentralisation policy, is of course no accident. As Mayor of Dunkirk, I – like others - must confess to feeling a certain amount of envy each time I come to Barcelona. Dunkirk and Barcelona may not have the same natural or geographic advantages, but who knows what my city and my region might achieve if they enjoyed the same latitude for action as Barcelona and Catalonia!

After last year's Cardiff summit, this is my second annual REGLEG summit in my two years as president of the Committee of the Regions. I am honoured to be here and wholeheartedly welcome the fact that the presence of the CoR president - even if he is the mayor of a city in Europe's most centralised state - is now a more or less normal occurrence.

For me, the fact that this is so shows that we have succeeded in finding our respective bearings.

REGLEG has its own place in the landscape of local and regional players involved in European integration. Like the major associations of local and regional authorities, REGLEG plays a role in all the key areas of integration. Yet the REGLEG network is more than an association, firstly because of the sheer importance of the elected representatives behind the network, and secondly since, unlike an ordinary European "lobby", it has access to extremely powerful relays at the level of the Member States represented within it. The pairing with the CALRE is, of course, an additional advantage.

For its part, the Committee of the Regions is the only European Union institution which represents local and regional interests and the only European body within which regions with legislative powers are fully represented. The Committee of the Regions is also the only structure which enables REGLEG to lend its voice to those of local and regional authorities from all 27 Member States. It is true that many of these authorities neither have nor will ever have the status, power and remit of the regions you govern, but if regional issues are not to be reduced to the issues of a minority within the EU, an alliance must be forged between all Europe's regions and municipalities. The motto proposed for the EU in the Constitutional Treaty, "united in diversity", also applies perfectly both to the CoR and to the relationship between the Committee and REGLEG.

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Moreover, a snapshot of the successes achieved over the past few years by and for Europe's regions and municipalities demonstrates that, for each issue, a strong political alliance of local and regional players has been a prerequisite for achieving the results we can now see, whether it be the 2007-2013 regional policy reform, the strengthening of the local and regional dimension of the subsidiarity principle and subsidiarity monitoring within the EU or the creation of new cooperation instruments such as the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

Having just referred to the normality of our relationship, I must also note that conversely, the context in which it takes place seems set to change significantly .

For several things are about to come to an end, not only the marathon of institutional reform which has been the background for REGLEG's work since its inception in 2000, and the work on the Nice Treaty, but also the changes the Committee of the Regions has been going through since it was created following the Maastricht Treaty.

On 19 October, Europe's leaders succeeded in reaching an agreement on a new Treaty. This Treaty is the result of a consensus and is, in my opinion, the best option in the current circumstances. The future Lisbon Treaty will be put to all the Member States for ratification in 2008 so that it can come into force at the beginning of 2009. In the majority of the Member States, the decision as to whether to accept the new Treaty will be put before national parliaments and, in some countries, regional parliaments as well.

This Treaty may finally make it possible to provide the EU with the fresh impetus, which we all needed. From the perspective of regions and cities, the Treaty has particular significance, in that it signals a recognition of the key role played by local and regional authorities in European integration.

With this Treaty, progress has been made on many fronts, from recognition of respect for local and regional self-government by the EU, to a strengthening of the mechanisms for implementing and monitoring the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and the inclusion of territorial cohesion among the Union's objectives.

As far as EU policies are concerned, the Lisbon Treaty remains faithful to the provisions of the Constitutional Treaty. Moreover, to the CoR's great satisfaction, the major challenges of climate change, a European energy policy, economic governance, services of general interest and the area of freedom, security and justice have been taken into consideration.

The Committee of the Regions also welcomes the Treaty as it relates to its own status.

Since the CoR's creation in 1994, each revision of the Treaties has strengthened its powers and enhanced its political role. This revision is no exception to the rule. It is true that the Committee is still... a committee; it will not become an EU institution in the legal meaning of the term. However, it does obtain new rights, notably the right of direct recourse to the European Court of Justice in the event of a breach of the principle of subsidiarity and the right to appeal to the Court to defend its own prerogatives. Since recourse to the Court of Justice has hitherto been the sole preserve of the

EU institutions, in practice, as Antonio Vitorino, former Commission representative on the Convention, currently acting as special advisor to the Portuguese presidency for the IGC, stated before the CoR Bureau, the CoR can now be put in the same category as the other institutions, having become more than a simple advisory body.

Lastly, the protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality has been included in the Reform Treaty as Protocol no. 2, immediately after Protocol no. 1 on the role of national parliaments. As you note in your draft declaration, the implementation of this protocol will ensure that local and regional authorities are more closely involved in drawing up, implementing and evaluating Community policies. In this context, the monitoring of subsidiarity through the subsidiarity network established within the CoR, opens new possibilities for involving the local and regional tier in multi-level governance.

With these benefits of the Lisbon Treaty as a backdrop, I am in no doubt that this is the dawn of a new era for the regions. The idea of building Europe without involving them directly is now unthinkable. As elected local and regional representatives, this gives us rights, but also obligations and responsibilities. We must ensure that citizens are involved closely in the process of European integration. We must all mobilise and take part in the joint undertaking to communicate and dialogue with Europe's citizens, as indeed the European Commission invited us to do in its "Communicating Europe in partnership" initiative, published last October.

In this context, it seems important to emphasise that, as a text, the Lisbon Treaty is at least as complicated as the current Treaties - hence the need to reach out to the citizens of our regions and cities to explain the new treaty and the benefits it can bring as regards the way in which the EU institutions operate.

In particular, it is our responsibility to work together with the legislative assemblies to activate local and regional authorities' capacity for communicating about Europe in the EU as a whole. To this end, I propose:

- that a network of local and regional authority press offices be created, which could tailor the news of the latest European developments to local and regional interests, thereby enabling local and regional media to use information on Europe more easily and effectively;
- that seminars be organised for local and regional representatives in the various Member States, in collaboration with national associations of local and regional authorities, in order to discuss the most sensitive issues in their national contexts;
- that open letters from regional governments be published in the major newspapers to explain the benefits of the Lisbon Treaty;
- and that occasions such as Europe Day (9 May) be used to hold special sessions in regional and local councils, open to MEPs and Members of the Committee of the Regions and focusing on the achievements of European integration and the process of EU institutional reform.

Over the next few months, the Committee of the Regions will endorse these proposals and will invite you to take part in implementing the various concrete activities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The permanent institutional navel gazing, which has been particularly acute in the last five years, has caused European integration to lose ground. It has also undermined the legitimacy of the underlying political system.

I therefore hope that the pendulum will now swing back to a time of practical politics, since we cannot hope to convince citizens about Europe if we have nothing tangible to offer.

By 2013, institutional reform will no longer be the main European challenge for local and regional authorities. For this reason, I trust that REGLEG will work with us to deal with legislative issues and to meet the major challenges currently under discussion which will shape Europe: the revision of the Lisbon Strategy, climate change and energy policy from 2010, and the future of the EU budget and therefore of cohesion policy from 2013.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to focus briefly on the need and mechanisms for cooperation between REGLEG and the CoR. I have already praised the excellent cooperative relationship set up over the last few years.

In addition to its institutional role which I mentioned a few moments ago, the Committee of the Regions is also a forum for consultation between all regional and local stakeholders, as well as a political catalyst. It provides an opportunity for mutual understanding, analysing common stances on various European policies and horizontal networking between regional and local stakeholders in Europe. I believe that every actor is a winner in this process of mutual support.

I know you share this belief because the Committee of the Regions is always intimately involved in your debates. Indeed, each of your declarations adopted since your first ministerial conference in 2000 in Barcelona has highlighted the importance of the CoR and supported its political activity. In these political declarations and during the respective inter-governmental conferences, you have always worked to strengthen the role of the Committee of the Regions in the European Union's decision-making process and I wish to thank you for this political alliance which has been both stable and loyal.

However, above and beyond this general and institutional support for the Committee, I am delighted to note that during my term of office as president of the Committee of the Regions, the cooperative relationship and working ties between the Committee and REGLEG have grown stronger and become increasingly operational.

Firstly, we have put our relationship on a formal footing, which for a European institution is more than a mere symbolic step. In December 2006, our respective secretaries-general signed the first joint action plan, for 2007. The assessment of the Committee's implementation of this action plan is very positive and I can only call on our secretaries-general to pursue this form of cooperation in 2008. I am sure that the Flemish presidency of REGLEG will agree with me on this point.

Two years ago in Munich, you decided to set up an inter-regional group within the CoR. I feel that this decision illustrates your determination to pursue the priorities and projects of regions with legislative powers in the broadest context of the family of local and regional authorities in Europe. For its part, the CoR will strive to support its members from regions with legislative powers in their political activities.

REGLEG has wholeheartedly upheld the Committee's actions in favour of better European governance and compliance with the subsidiarity principle. The process of monitoring subsidiarity through the interactive subsidiarity network established within the CoR opens up new possibilities for involvement at regional and local level and is supported by REGLEG.

After a pilot phase in 2005-2006, this network is now fully operational. Today, 22 governments from regions with legislative powers are partners in the network and already participating in the ongoing consultations on the liberalisation of the gas and electricity markets, immigration and the labour market, as well as the European Union's health policy. Of course, I am also delighted that the Barcelona declaration, which will shortly be presented to you for adoption, makes reference to this network and encourages organisations to join.

I would like to extend my thanks to REGLEG for this, and I take this opportunity to pass on the invitation to join the network. I believe that network registration forms are available in the meeting room.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenge of a common Europe guaranteeing peace, prosperity and stability for our citizens will continue to be one of the fundamental tasks for politics at all levels of our continent. This common Europe has not yet been achieved. Its construction continues every day. To paraphrase Ernest Renan's definition of the nation, it is our ambition for Europe to be a "daily plebiscite". This ambition will be achieved through conviction and commitment.

I call on you to join forces with us and take up this challenge and thus contribute to ensuring that Europe can develop on the healthy basis of transparent, multi-level governance in which the regions play an integral part.

Thank you for your attention.
