

**Speech Reconnecting Europe with its citizens - The
Role of the Regions
By Brad Watson OBE, Cabinet member for
Communications, West Sussex County Council, GB**

**Communicating Europe Conference, Europe: so close
yet so far?
23 May 2008**

Dear Commissioner,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here today, representing the Assembly of European Regions before this audience drawn from regions from all over Europe, journalists and EU specialists. I am grateful for the opportunity to address an issue that I believe is central, both to the regions and to Europe.

Communicating Europe: Why do I think this is a subject we need to discuss among the regions and how could regional leadership develop further in communicating Europe to its citizens?

Where are we today in the process of European cooperation?

One year ago, the heads of states and governments signed a new framework for Europe: the Lisbon Treaty. We all know that this has been a stony path, especially after the public 'no' to the Constitution from France and the Netherlands two years ago, and after long and controversial debates during the reflection phase. Most EU countries have decided to ratify the Lisbon Treaty by parliamentary vote, except for Ireland which is forced by its constitution to put the text to referendum. The ratification process started in December 2007. The Treaty has by now been signed by nearly half of the 27 member states. The Treaty must be signed by all 27 member

states in order to come into force in January 2009, the year of the elections for the European Parliament. Ratification processes are set to continue throughout 2008. The referendum in Ireland will take place on June 12. There are a couple of financially strong opponents: Sinn Fein, the Irish left-wing republican party, joined by a number of leading businessmen, and an organisation called Libertas, which stresses the lack of transparency and the negative effect on business. In some member states, for example in Germany, constitutional complaints can slow down the ratification process.

As it looks now we could (hopefully will) have a new treaty by the end of 2008. A Eurobarometer survey from last year shows a slight increase in public opinion in favour of the European Union. In 2006 only half of the population agreed to the Union, in 2007 this increased to 57 %. But we should not rely too much on this upward trend which is due to several circumstances, not least to a more favourable economic environment in many EU member states.

European elections are coming up in 2009. Since the first European elections, turnout has been falling. Whereas in 1979 63% of the voters were interested, there was a steady decline of about 2 per cent with each election during the 20 years that followed. In 2004 the turnout was down to 45.6 per cent. If our citizens do not understand why, for what and for whom they vote, the next crisis will not be far away.

Communicating Europe to the citizens is a continuous process. As in national politics we have to make sure citizens are on board. It is imperative that communication and dialogue on Europe is well informed (proper) and effective allowing people to make up their minds based on facts with a clear understanding of the choices that lie in front of them.

For the first time the Treaty allows member states to step out of the European Union. (I have used the Wording in Treaty).

What would happen if the first state steps out? What would that mean for the European Union?

We need to recognize that one serious problem the EU faces today is the widening gap between Europe and its citizens, and that the regions are the most powerful players in place to bridge that gap. Therefore, we have no alternative but to communicate fully.

For starters, I firmly believe that if there is to be genuine dialogue then for example the EU's dialogue vehicle 'Europe Direct' needs to be re-named Europe Connect. The use of the word Direct implies the wrong emphasis.

1. We need to involve citizens.

We cannot preach Europe from the pulpit. We need to foster active citizenship as part of a lively democracy. It is a well-known fact, that empowerment and involvement results in commitment. If I am throwing a party without my neighbours they will certainly ring my bell, complain about the loud music, and maybe call the police. So I'd better invite them to my party. The same is true for the building of Europe. Brochures are not enough. We need active involvement if we want citizens to identify with Europe.

2. We need pro-active European communication,

not when legislation has passed, but before. We need the consultation and involvement of national and regional authorities in the decision-making process. It is our task to make the Lisbon Treaty real for its citizens, and take advantage of our new rights in the Treaty. In order to be successful we need the media on board.

3. We need more Europe in the media

While we are aware of a European sphere for economic news, e.g. Financial Times or the Economist, a similar

domain for European politics is not as prominent. Although regional or local media often reach a large number of people, its coverage of European issues remains limited, and all too often critical. In many countries regional or local media are important sources of information, often the first one. Studies have shown that in the media landscape European politics is often treated as external affairs. However, European affairs is also concerned with internal politics. Le Monde for example has only recently removed its separate European pages. Europe now figures on all pages. Studies have also shown that there is a communication gap between journalists in Brussels and their home base.

Regional newspapers often do not have an EU correspondent in Brussels, but if they do, they often act as a "gatekeeper" judging about what readers would be interested in and throwing out "boring" European affairs.

4. We need Europe to communicate Europe to key groups.

Journalists are very well trained when it comes to knowing their national politicians. But most of them would fail when asked to name the members of the European Commission. Europe is becoming more and more important. Therefore we need to bring Europe closer to the citizens, starting with the media and young people. As young people are a major part of the future, they need to understand Europe so they can make their own informed decisions. We need to understand that communicating Europe is not a discretionary expense; it is a necessary investment in our future and the future of Europe.

5. Europe needs faces.

The Commission White Paper on Communication states that "Europe is often perceived as faceless: it has no clear public identity".....The Commission is far away, geographically, and far away in the minds of people. Citizens know their regional and national politicians; they hardly know the Commissioners or the Members of the European Parliament.

6. Finally, we need the regions to bridge the gap between Europe and the national governments of the member states.

Often Europe and the national governments are placed as opposing parties: Europe versus the member states. Regions can be the ones to bridge that gap. Regions & Local Government implement a large percentage of EU policy, in fact about 70%. They have to ensure that what is decided at the EU level actually works on the ground. Many of the European Union's policies, such as social cohesion, depend upon regional as well as national action for their success. It is the regions that observe and experience the direct impact of EU policies upon the citizen.

It could well be said that the EU is a group of Nation States working together for the common good delivered through Regional and Local Government.

Thus, reconnecting Europe with the Citizens is the role for the regions

How can regions do this? What could be our objectives for the future? In its White Paper 'Reconnecting Europe with its Citizens', the AER has outlined 22 recommendations on how regions can work better to communicate Europe to its citizens.- I will give some examples:

1) Pro-active communication in the pre-legislative phase.

It is important that the regions are involved in the decision-making process for EU-policies. They must be able to play a decisive role in shaping policy. Therefore, it is vital that there is pre-legislative consultation of regions in the European policy-making process. It is of key importance that regional expertise is mobilised at the policy design stage, before the lines of the policy are set. Fewer mistakes would be made if the Commission consulted the regions right at the beginning of the drafting process, on any issues that concern regions in the ultimate implementation of legislation.

It is often said that to influence EU Policy, it is best done before it is written down.

Regions have to reflect the citizen's voice to Europe while at the same time informing the citizens about Europe. The Lisbon Treaty gives the regions more rights and national and regional parliaments also have a say in the decision-making process. We now have to make use of these rights:

- For example the Lisbon treaty obliges the European Commission, when drafting legislation, to consider whether the decisions would be better made at the national, regional or local level. The Commission needs to consult all the players who may be affected by legislation.
- The Committee of the Regions has the right to take cases to the European Court of Justice where it believes that the Commission has breached the principle of subsidiarity. This is a big step forward.
- The Treaty introduces an 'early warning system'. This means that the Commission must refer all new legislation to National Parliaments for consultation. This gives an additional possibility to regions with legislative powers in federal countries to influence the content of legislative proposals. The involvement of national and regional parliaments in European decision-making will support the legislative process and broaden the understanding that the Union is by nature linked to national and regional political systems.

2) Citizens' involvement.

The AER has introduced the idea of the Citizens Forum on Europe in order to create a genuine debate between European decision-makers and the citizens. Together with regional politicians and MEPs, citizens discuss European politics, and citizens' concerns. These concerns vary from country to country. While the Swedes are mostly concerned about the environment, their Finnish neighbours are worried about services for elderly people, Danes about terrorism threat, and most Europeans citizens about jobs and pensions. Polls show that 60 % of

the European citizens believe that in 50 years time Europe will be a leading diplomatic force in the world.

3) Media.

Regions can ensure that EU issues are properly communicated to the regional and local media. They can give concrete examples of how EU legislation impacts on the local community. They can show how European-funded projects are of direct relevance to the citizens, for example in education, environment, youth and culture. Regions can contribute to make the European Union “real” to the local population and of interest to the local press. In our daily work with journalists we can point to local EU-funded projects that bring concrete benefits to the citizens in our regions.

We can mobilise our press officers to develop positive human interest stories on the impact of European policies and funds on distributed to our own regions and citizens.

4) Curricula and Training.

In many cases, regions often set educational curricula. We need our curricula to include European citizenship. As our young people grow up in an increasingly integrated and globalised world, they should learn a second European language. School curricula should attach greater value to European issues, including the teaching of European history and how the EU works.

Furthermore, politicians and officers should be informed about European policy so that they can adequately communicate Europe to their citizens.

Finally, regions could influence the curricula of higher education as graduates will build careers in an integrated Europe.

5) Human interest stories.

Regions can provide the human interest interface that allows citizens to understand why Europe is relevant to them personally. They can place European policies in the

context of their regional reality. They can discuss European politics in their regions.

We can work together with MEPs and the Committee of the Regions to set up discussion forums on European issues of direct relevance to our regions. We can bring Commissioners and MEPs to our regions and our citizens, or alternatively bring our local politicians closer to Europe. In doing so, it is vital that we brief regional media on European affairs.

There is another reason why the regions should take a strong leadership in communicating Europe: regions are closest to the citizens. They are best placed to know what they feel about issues that concern them. Therefore, they can advise whether a decision is best taken at European, national or local level. Before concluding, I will now give to floor to our most successful promoter of subsidiarity, Richard Medic, Mr. Subsidiarity.

To sum up, consultation of regions in the pre-legislative phase, active citizens' involvement, communication with and detailed briefing (training) of regional media, and influence on education, are some of the ingredients in support of an active role of the regions in communicating Europe and bridging the information gap between the European Union and national governments.

And Finally -

The projects handed in for the 1st AER Communicating Europe Award show the efforts of the regions in communicating Europe. They show some brilliant ideas. I hope that next year when we meet again at the annual AER communicating Europe conference each region brings one journalist from a regional newspaper, TV or radio station to this conference.

Thank you very much for your attention.