

The role of the regions in building the Europe of tomorrow. Governance and the Convention (Bellagio, 15 July 2002)

Caption: On 15 July 2002, Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, gives an address at the meeting with the Presidents of the Regions of Europe held in Bellagio, in which he sets out the essential ingredients for good governance. These include the important role that the regions and local authorities could play in this regard, the use of White Papers for the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the importance of transparency, the increased participation of civil society and representatives of municipalities, towns and regions, as well as improvements to the quality of EU legislation and EU rules. He also highlights the meaningful division of competences between the Member States and the EU and stresses the need for a simplification of the allocation and exercise of these competences, which are to be regulated by the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity.

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Romano Prodi

President of the European Commission

**« The role of the regions in building the
Europe of tomorrow – Governance and
the Convention »**

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Meeting with the Presidents of the Regions of Europe

Bellagio, 15 July 2002

It is vital for the regions and local authorities to play a more active role. A clear distinction must be drawn between such democratically elected bodies, which can play a fundamental role, and civil society.

We can and must make substantial improvements to the system as of now, without waiting for the Treaties to be revised formally, as they need to be. This is the best way to restore our credibility in the eyes of our fellow citizens. Which is why we are proposing action immediately, through the White Paper, with the Treaties as they stand.

The White Paper lays down five principles: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. These principles effectively serve to “apply better the fundamental principles of subsidiarity and proportionality that underlie our Treaties” and they concern all EU institutions.

Which is why we are seeking to:

- achieve more transparency in the day-to-day application of EU policies and greater participation by organised civil society and the representatives of municipalities, towns and regions;
- step up the quality, effectiveness and straightforwardness of EU legislation and improve the application of EU rules through national administrative and judicial channels or through the controlled establishment of EU regulatory agencies;
- refocus the institutions on their core tasks.

Leaders of regional, urban and local communities have a specific responsibility because they are directly involved in the application of a whole series of Community rules and programmes. Such “grassroots democracy” can teach the European Union much in the way of improving communication and political practice.

But we cannot ignore or disregard the national authorities because the regions and subregional authorities work within national constitutional frameworks that differ from State to State, which all EU institutions seek to respect.

Let us move on to the reforms that affect you specifically:

First there needs to be greater upstream participation in the EU decision-making process, right from the conception stage.

This difficult but politically crucial task is primarily the responsibility of the Member States. They must involve the regions and local authorities in working out national positions within the Council.

For its part, the Commission wants more organised dialogue with regional, urban and local actors.

The Commission also wants to explore the “tripartite contract” approach between the three levels of power: EU, State and regional or local authorities. For certain implementing provisions, regional and other subnational authorities will be able to choose the most suitable implementing instruments under a contract setting out clear terms and methods of application and enforcement. In the event of failure to observe contractual obligations, the basic implementing provisions will apply automatically.

We want to ensure that there is consistency between sectoral and subnational spheres at EU level as there is within the Member States.

The Regions – the future of the EU – the Convention

One general topic already considered in depth during the debate on reforming the European Union is the way competences should be broken down between the EU and the Member States. What all agree on is the need to clarify and, where possible, simplify the way competences are allocated and exercised and to devise systems for ensuring compliance with that allocation. To achieve this, many worthwhile proposals have been put forward within the European Convention and by the European Parliament.

Naturally the Commission has made its views known on the subject. It has suggested that the scope of EU action should be determined more precisely by laying down clear constitutional principles and a limited number of EU procedures that are fully understood by all EU citizens. The ideas regulating the exercise of EU competences are the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. These translate the concept of EU value added into political terms. And they fully safeguarding the competences of the States, the regions and local authorities, which continue to be the main bodies EU citizens deal with.

The Commission has still not defined its position on the role of the regions in the future institutional structure of the European Union. For the time being it wants to hear and assess the various positions. It goes without saying that the role of the regions and local authorities is clearly important for the development of the European project.

With a view to the future constitutional treaty, the Commission is following closely the debate on the upgrading of the tasks of the Committee of the Regions and on incorporating the regions into the EU's institutional structure. Many proposals have been put forward, in particular at the Convention's meeting of 24 and 25 June. Those proposals need to be considered in greater detail and their advantages and drawbacks assessed. Balanced, coherent conclusions can then be drawn.

In the course of the debate, due account should be taken of the major differences in the internal organisation of the Member States as regards the regions and local authorities in general. These differences have deep-seated historical and cultural roots and are often enshrined in texts of a constitutional nature. In its loftiest form, the principle of subsidiarity demands that the EU should refrain from interfering in relations between the Member States and their regions and, even more so, to refrain even from seeking to regulate such relations in a uniform way at EU level