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## Wallstrom calls for 'Copernican revolution' in way EU communicates and welcomes CoR's plea for Plan D to embrace decentralisation

European Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström today welcomed calls for decentralisation to be at the heart of her 'Plan D' initiative, aimed at re-connecting Europe with its citizens through increased "democracy, dialogue and debate".

The Communication Commissioner, who was addressing the Committee of the Regions (CoR) Plenary Session in Brussels, said decentralisation was an "excellent method" for helping to bridge what she described as "the growing gap between the world of politics and the world of people's lives".

Mrs Wallström made it clear to members that she wholeheartedly embraced the link between Plan D and decentralisation, adding: "It makes sense as a way that we should approach this."

In her address to the Plenary, the Commissioner said that Europe was facing a difficult time and that it needed nothing less than a "Copernican revolution" in the way it communicates with the public.

One of the lessons of the violent outbreaks in France in the past three weeks was that politicians had to start seeing citizens "as the centre of everything", she declared. "This is not just a problem for France or for the mayors of big cities. It is a warning to all European politicians," she added.

The Commissioner stressed that Brussels could not carry out the revolution alone: it had to be a joint project, she said, with local and regional politicians taking a key responsibility.

"I count on this Committee to bring down the EU-wide consultation to the regional and local level. You are ideally placed to set up local debates on local issues that have a European dimension and to channel the feedback from those debates to the Commission and the other Brussels institutions. You are also ideally placed to channel information in the opposite direction – from Brussels to the people in your local area," she said.

The Commissioner welcomed an invitation from CoR President Peter Straub to meet representatives of associations of local and regional authorities next January. The President said a "systematic dialogue" was vital; he also urged the Commissioner to hold regular meetings with regional journalists and ensure that her own directorate becomes more involved in the Open Days European Week of Regions and Cities, the

annual event organised by the CoR and the Commission's DG REGIO in association with regional offices in Brussels.

Michel Delebarre, leader of the CoR Socialist Group and Mayor of Dunkerque in France, also put forward several concrete proposals. He said that the Commission should capitalise on the impact of the Structural Funds "as the face of Europe" by insisting that the public has to be informed when major projects receive financial backing from the EU.

He called for more emphasis on the training of young people and more education on "what the European reality is". The EU institutions should have more spokespeople on the ground and require its civil servants to spend part of their careers in regions and cities, he said, so that they become more aware of the constraints that authorities often face when implementing EU legislation.

Responding to his suggestions, Mrs Wallstrom said that some countries found it "shameful" to admit to receiving EU funding, but that there were signs that this attitude is changing. She pledged that civic education would be a "very prominent issue" in her White Paper on Communicating Europe, due out next month, and that she was counting on the support of local and regional authorities in this area.

She agreed with Mr Delebarre's suggestion that officials should have to spend time in regions and cities to stay in touch with local concerns, stating that had already promoted this idea in an internal action plan.

Franz Schausberger, representative for the Austrian Land of Salzburg and speaking on behalf of the EPP group, also threw down the gauntlet on "D for Decentralisation", insisting that there should be "a clear timetable for a decentralised debate on Europe".

He said that Commission representations in Member States should actively promote the work of CoR members: "We're not a bunch of lone rangers," he declared. He also called for EU officials to spend more time out on the ground: "You need to stop sitting in a glass temple and get out there and talk to people," he exclaimed.

There was no let-up for Mrs Wallström from her compatriots, Kent Johansson, leader of the ALDE group and a member of Västra Götaland's Regional Executive, and Anders Gustav (EPP), Mayor of Solna.

Mr Johansson backed the view that decentralisation should be part of Plan D and urged the Commissioner to build on her prior experience as a TV executive to forge stronger links with regional television. The challenge was to reach out to the "20-year-old generation" with a new vision of Europe, he said.

Mr Gustav said he would like to see the Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, meeting representatives of regions and cities on his visits to Member States, not just national figures. He also stressed the need for greater subsidiarity, saying: "What Europe does well it should do more of, but that's all."

Keith Brown, leader of the UEN-EA group and a member of Clackmannanshire Council in Scotland, said that a "continual dialogue" was vital if the EU was to meet its communication objectives. Above all, he said, the EU needed to "keep it real" and avoid the sense of drift evident in Europe.

The Commissioner agreed that the EU needed to keep it real: it would only become credible in the eyes of the public by delivering on its promises, she said, adding that Scotland was to be a pilot project for a Commission project aimed at boosting awareness about democracy and education.

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