The primary purpose of the House of Lords European Union Select Committee is to scrutinise EU law in draft before the Government take a position on it in the EU Council of Ministers. This scrutiny is frequently carried out through correspondence with Ministers. Such correspondence, including Ministerial replies and other materials, is published where appropriate.

This edition includes correspondence from May to November 2008.

EUROPEAN UNION SELECT COMMITTEE

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DEBATE EUROPE (COM (2008) 158)

Letter from the Chairman to Jim Murphy MP, Minister for Europe, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The Committee considered this Communication on 15 July, and raised concerns about it. We would be grateful for answers to the following questions, to arrive not later than 6 October:

1. On the basis of the first two years of “Plan D”, what EU value does it add, in the Government’s view? Has the Government conducted any cost-benefit analysis of EU activity of this sort?

2. Just €150k are allocated for “decentralised communication actions planned by Commission Representations in 2008” in this country (see page 19 of the Communication and paragraph 20 of your Explanatory Memorandum). Can anything worthwhile be achieved with so small a sum?

We will retain the Communication under scrutiny pending your response.

17 July 2008

Letter from Jim Murphy MP to the Chairman

Thank you for your letter of 17 July 2008 about the European Commission’s communication COM (2008) 158: Debate Europe. You will have seen my letter to Michael Connarty setting out my response to the Commons European Scrutiny Committee’s queries. I am writing to you to address the specific questions in your letter.

The Government has not conducted any cost-benefit analysis of the first two years of Plan D and we have no plans to conduct any such analysis in the future. The Commission have reported that they will be using an external assessor to carry out a thorough assessment of the results of Plan D/Debate Europe and expect to have the results by September 2009. We believe this assessment will be the most effective way of analysing Plan D results at national and pan-European level. As such, we do not believe a cost-benefit assessment by the UK or any other EU Member State would have any additional value.

We expect the independent assessment will allow us to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of Plan D/Debate Europe projects as mechanisms to achieve the goals of 'going local, creating a public sphere and promoting active European citizenship'.

You also asked whether anything worthwhile can be achieved with the £150,000 allocation for ‘decentralised communication actions planned by Commission Representations in 2008’ in the UK. We have consulted the Commission further to seek an explanation of this figure. The Commission reported:
This is a call for proposals launched by the Commission’s UK representations in January 2008 to select universities and think tanks active in England to stage events on the Commission’s communications themes for 2008, in return for project grants of between €5,000 and €50,000. Projects were eligible for a maximum of 70% grant funding from the Commission. The deadline for proposals was 9 May 2008. All applicants were assessed against the criteria laid down in the call and ranked. A shortlist was drawn up on 23 June 2008, which sets out the basis on which applicants were chosen and on which the amount of the grant was decided. As with any call for proposals, the allocation was divided according to the selection, evaluation and award criteria laid down by the call. The figure was chosen on the basis of local knowledge as to how much it costs to organise debates and the desire for the debates to be held as widely as possible across the country.

I am grateful to the Commission for their explanation that these funds will be used with third parties to co-fund the staging of events across the UK on the Commission’s Communication priorities. The Government agrees with the principle that the applicants and the allocation of funds should be assessed against objective criteria.

The Government is content with the explanation that this sum was determined based on previous experience of the funds needed to stage such events. However, we suggest that the Commission keep this year’s activities under review. If these joint events prove to be a success and meet their objectives, the Commission may wish to consider increased funding from the €7.2 million allocation.

We look forward to the independent review in 2009 and will maintain contact with the Commission Office in the UK on these specific events.

We have also contacted the Commission to clarify the future handling of the Debate Europe Paper. There is no further ED level discussion planned. Instead, the document is an update paper which has been sent to all Member States and Institutions for analysis and comment. The Commission welcomed our views and questions on Debate Europe and is responding to similar questions and observations from the other Member States. We now look forward to the Commission’s evaluation, anticipated for September 2009.

30 September 2008

ANNEX

COMMUNICATING EUROPE IN PARTNERSHIP

Objectives and principles

1. The European Parliament, Council and the European Commission attach the utmost importance to improving communication on EU issues in order to enable European citizens to exercise their right to participate in the democratic life of the Union, in which decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizens, observing the principles of pluralism, participation, openness and transparency.

2. The three Institutions wish to encourage the convergence of views on the communication priorities of the European Union as a whole, to promote the added value of an EU approach to communication on European issues, to facilitate exchanges of information and best practices and develop synergies between the Institutions when carrying out communication relating to these priorities, as well as to facilitate cooperation among the Institutions and Member States where appropriate.

3. The three Institutions recognise that communicating on the European Union requires a political commitment of EU Institutions and Member States, and that Member States have their responsibility to communicate with citizens about the EU.

4. The three Institutions believe that information and communication activities on European issues should give everyone access to fair and diverse information about the European Union and enable citizens to exercise their right to express their views and to participate actively in the public debate on European Union issues.

5. The three Institutions promote the respect of multilingualism and cultural diversity when implementing information and communication actions.

6. The three Institutions are politically committed to achieving the above objectives. They encourage the other EU institutions and bodies to support their efforts and to contribute, if they so wish, to this approach.

A partnership approach

7. The three Institutions recognise the importance of addressing the communication challenge on EU issues in partnership between Member States and the EU institutions to ensure effective
They wish to develop synergies with national, regional and local authorities as well as with representatives of civil society.

They would like for that purpose to foster a pragmatic partnership approach.

8. They recall in this respect the key role of the Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI) serving as a high-level framework for the Institutions to encourage political debate on EU related information and communication activities in order to foster synergy and complementarity. To that purpose, the IGI, co-chaired by representatives of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission, and with the participation of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee as observers, meets in principle twice a year.

A framework for working together

The three Institutions intend to cooperate on the following basis:

9. Whilst respecting the individual responsibility of each ED institution and Member State for their own communication strategy and priorities, the three Institutions will, in the framework of the IGI, identify yearly a limited number of common communication priorities.

10. These priorities will be based on communication priorities identified by the ED Institutions and bodies following their internal procedures and complementing, where appropriate, Member States’ strategic views and efforts in this field, taking into account citizens’ expectations.

11. The three Institutions and Member States will endeavour to promote appropriate support for communication on the priorities identified.

12. The services responsible for communication in Member States and ED institutions should liaise with each other to ensure successful implementation of the common communication priorities, as well as other activities linked to ED communication, if need be on the basis of appropriate administrative arrangements.

13. The Institutions and Member States are invited to exchange information on other ED related communication activities, in particular on sectoral communication activities envisaged by the Institutions and bodies, when they result in information campaigns in Member States.

14. The Commission is invited to report back at the beginning of each year to the other ED Institutions on the main achievements of the implementation of the common communication priorities of the previous year.

15. This political declaration has been signed on [date].