DISCUSSION ON ISSUES OF COMMON INTEREST TO SENIOR OFFICIALS FROM CENTRES OF GOVERNMENT

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on Government Coherence: the Role of the Centre of Government
Budapest, 6-7 October 2000

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I. General

1. Two years ago, the group of senior officials proposed that one session of the Centres of Government meeting be set aside for free discussion, that is, any member could raise any subject that he/she thought important and of general interest. Session III (on Saturday 7 October) has been allocated for this purpose and no formal agenda is proposed, except an address to the meeting by Mr. Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, on the subject of the relations between Government, Legislatures and Civil Society. Because of the current relevance, importance and interest of the subject and the authority and experience of Mr. Violante, who is also the Chairman of the Conference of EU Parliaments, it was thought that the meeting would not wish to forego this opportunity. It is the only time that Mr. Violante is available. He will be joined for this item and the session as a whole by the Secretary General of the OECD.

2. After Mr. Violante’s introduction and discussion, the floor will be open for interventions and free discussion. Some members have already indicated topics that they wish to raise (see below). Other participants might like to notify the Secretariat informally in advance of additional subjects. This is not intended to undermine the spontaneity of the exchanges; it is simply useful to have some idea of the likely range of topics, particularly if a number of participants wish to raise similar issues.

II. Agenda of the Session

3. For convenience and to draw maximum benefit from the presence of Mr. Violante, the session will be divided into two parts:
   - Part I: Relations between Government, Legislatures and Civil Society
   - Part II: Open discussion

III. Part I: Relations between Government, Legislatures and Civil Society

Format

4. A short introduction by Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of EU Parliaments followed by free discussion among participants.

Key points

5. The presentation by President Violante will introduce a number of issues for discussion, among which: the respective roles of parliaments and centres of government in improving the quality of legislation
and ensuring policy coherence, the quality of information provided to parliament by government for law-making and oversight, and relations with civil society.

_Background document_

**OECD Report on Parliamentary Procedures and Relations**

6. The report is based on responses from 24 OECD Member countries and the European Parliament to a survey launched at the initiative of the Secretary General of the OECD, Donald Johnston, in response to a proposal by President Luciano Violante, as Chair of the Working Group on the Quality of Legislation of the Conference of Presidents of EU Parliaments.

7. The Centres of Government network proved an invaluable source of support to the Secretariat in making this initiative a success by ensuring the delivery of this questionnaire to the parliamentary services of their respective countries. The high response rate achieved by this questionnaire is undoubtedly due in large part to this assistance.

8. The report was submitted to the Conference of Presidents of EU Parliaments in Rome (23-24 September 2000) and will be distributed to legislatures and governments in all OECD Member countries. The report provides a comparative overview, identifies main trends and provides examples of good practice. It is descriptive not prescriptive and further analysis will be needed in order to formulate concrete policy lessons.

_Overview of main trends identified in the report_

9. The quality of information from government to parliament is key to law making & oversight

- Parliamentary information requirements for draft legislation are often limited to budget impacts – new procedures, such as regulatory impact assessment, have yet to become widespread.
- Legislatures rarely demand, or receive, systematic information from government on implementation – and make little use of such information during law making even where provided.
- Parliamentary capacity for oversight is growing – notably through closer ties with Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) and the establishment of Ombudsman offices.

10. Parliaments seek to improve the efficiency of their internal procedures and professional support

- Legislatures are developing new forms of debate designed to capture media and public attention and are seeking ways to increase the effectiveness of their decision-making procedures.

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1 By 5 September 2000, a total of 24 responses had been received from: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK. The Secretariat has since received responses from Canada, Iceland and Switzerland to be included in the updated version of the report. The final version will be circulated for approval by OECD Member countries for approval prior to publication at the end of this year.
11. Parliaments are aiming to enhance their openness, transparency and links with civil society

- Legislatures are seeking to balance aspirations for greater openness with the need for arenas – such as closed committee meetings – for non-partisan deliberations which foster better law-making.
- Legislatures are making significant efforts to improve the provision of public information – notably through the use of new technologies – and to provide greater opportunities for consultation.
- While all legislatures acknowledge a growing need for specialist expertise, very few have explored new ways to tap external sources – such as universities and research institutes – on a regular basis.

12. **Part I: Key questions for discussion**

- What steps can governments and legislatures take to reduce legislative overload and its impact on the quality of law making?
- How much information does parliament need from government when considering draft legislation and of what kind?
- How can parliaments contribute to ensuring greater coherence across levels of government - from the supranational to the local level?
- What role does parliamentary scrutiny and oversight play in promoting greater government transparency and accountability?
- How far can parliaments and governments go in meeting demands for more public information and consultation within a representative democracy?

**IV. Part II: Open discussion**

13. So far, participants have indicated that they wish to raise the following issues:

- Risk assessment in policy formation and management
- The changing role of governments and engagement with citizens
- Knowledge sharing and management within government
14. From both sessions, PUMA is hoping to gain a better view of where it should be focusing its work, particularly in relation to Centres of Government and their role in:

- Achieving greater policy coherence
- Formulating strategic policies, particularly in relation to long-term issues in the economic, social or environmental fields
- Improving the standards of service to the citizen, including the application of policies and the efficient delivery of services
- Introducing innovative structures and processes for raising the level of professionalism and management in the public service
- Managing the interface between the administrative and political aspects of government, including its interaction with parliaments, citizens and civil society.