



BUILDING A BRIDGE

Scottish Executive Report on
Communicating Europe to its
Citizens

Brussels
20 March 2007

Summary

Building a Bridge: Summary

Europe's citizens have never been more connected. The Internet has opened up communication channels undreamt of even a decade ago. A 24-hour, seven-days-a-week broadcast media provides uninterrupted news service across the member states, and mobile communications have given individuals the freedom to communicate as and when they please.

At the same time the European Union has been transformed, taking on a wide range of tasks that touch the daily lives of every citizen.

Yet the connection between the European Union and the people it serves has never been weaker. People say they know little about the EU and feel they have little or no say in its decision-making process.

Democracy can only flourish if there is a conversation of equals between political institutions and citizens, which is why the European Commission published its ***White Paper on a European Communication Policy in February 2006***.

It also launched ***Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*** to encourage a discussion about the future of the European Union.

Scotland's devolved government, one of the European Union's newest democratic institutions, has worked with the European Commission to help it develop better ways of engaging with citizens.

This study ***Building a Bridge between Europe and its Citizens*** set out to explore what lessons could be drawn from Scotland's recent political renewal. It also considered how EU institutions could work with devolved and regional governments to communicate better with citizens, and better communication can help deliver further progress on the Lisbon Agenda.

The project team used a range of methods to develop its conclusions.

- It studied examples of Scotland's innovative public consultation methods.
- It examined exciting research into public attitudes to Europe as well as political engagement and participation at a national level.
- It explored the role of the Scottish media in communicating on Europe.
- It hosted a number of events to engage directly with young people and civil society.

The detailed findings are set out in the report *Building a Bridge*, but the main findings are consistent with the research which informed the White Paper on Communications and Plan D.

- People will engage in the political process if they believe that their voice will be listened to, and acted upon.
- Citizens find it easier and more relevant to engage with their regional political institutions and civil society on European matters – these are seen as the trusted bridge between the people and the EU.
- People do not want more information about Europe, they want better, straightforward messages about what the EU institutions do on their behalf.
- They want the EU to have a human face – decision-makers need to meet directly with people they serve rather than hide behind bureaucratic processes.

Scotland's devolved government does not claim to have the definitive solution for better communications between Europe and its citizens.

But Scotland's recent experience of translating the settled will of the Scottish people – devolution – into a practical political process that is accessible, open and responsive to the people it serves does mean that we have a meaningful contribution to make to this debate.

The White Paper on Communications recognises that a working European “public sphere” cannot be shaped in Brussels, but it could be developed right across the Member States if Brussels were to work in partnership with national and regional government and institutions.

To this end Scotland and the European Commission will undertake further joint work to help build the bridge between Europe and its citizens.

The Way Forward

Scotland has one of the most accessible legislatures in Europe and its government is committed to meaningful public consultation. The European Commission has already made major strides in the way it consults on major policy initiatives and has introduced minimum standards for consultation.

Scotland’s political institutions and civil society should work with the Commission to develop a regional programme of pre-legislative and other relevant consultations based on best practice in Scotland.

The European institutions are not subject to the same party political “noise” as regional and national governments, yet they have failed to develop a clear set of coherent, relevant messages with which to engage with citizens. No institution can communicate successfully without that clarity.

The Scottish government, working with civil society and the European Commission, should develop a coherent set of messages which set out the nature and benefits of the EU membership, and then develop a strategy for communicating those messages.

One of the most obvious ways to communicate with the people is through the media, but despite the EU having made considerable efforts to improve the way it interacts with the media, the White Paper recognises that coverage of European issues “remains limited and fragmented”. This assertion was supported by the media tracking exercise which formed part of this study.

The Scottish government and the European Commission should pilot a joint media strategy on a topic of mutual interest, focusing on both traditional media and new technologies.

The White Paper recognises that the European Union and its institutions are often perceived as faceless and without a clear public identity. Scotland’s recent experience shows that political information must have a human face if it is to be relevant. Further, the public trust in political information more if the range of sources is broader than elected politicians and political parties.

The Scottish government should work with partners such as Scotland Europa to take Scots to Europe to learn for themselves how the EU institutions work, and how they can best influence them.

The Scottish government should work with partners such as the Scottish Parliament and the European Commission to bring Europe to Scotland. This programme could include regular events for young people, official visits by Commissioners and other leading figures.

Cover Image courtesy of *The Herald & Evening Times* picture archive.

RR Donnelley B50966 03/07

