

June 2003, Cuxhaven.

**North Sea Commission Political Meeting  
“EU Regional Policy beyond 2006”**

[Opening speech by NSC President Bent Hansen.]

Dear colleagues,

Welcome to this political meeting in the historic surroundings of Ritzebuettel Castle. I am pleased to see so many of you, and I take this as a scale for the importance of the issues we are about to discuss the coming two hours - Regional Policy beyond 2006.

2006 might seem a long way ahead, but the discussion and planning of the EU Regional policy after the running period has already been going on for some time. The intensity will grow along with the Commissions Cohesion reports, and the involvement of the Governments. In the North Sea Commission we started the debate at the thematic meeting in March in Middelburg in the Province of Zeeland, and I hope we today can move one step forward.

We are dealing with a sensitive subject, and therefore we are still waiting for official position papers from many governments, but we were in Middelburg introduced to some of the official and unofficial position papers from the state and regional levels. The secretariat has compiled the available papers, and they will continue to update the papers and place them on our website. I believe this will be an important tool for us, when the discussions with our national governments and with the Commission, continues over the coming years. The Danish Government has actually asked for a copy, but I believe they will have to wait a while.

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It is obvious to us all that the enlargement of the Union, which I consider as one of the most successful and positive occasions in the history of the European Community, will have severe influence on the coming structure and financing of the Regional Policy. The programmes will undergo big changes, simply because the gap between rich and poor will grow. However we must remember, that the conditions of the old EU regions will not automatically change for the better, just because of the enlargement. On the contrary, the growing competitive pressure will along with the general globalisation have strong consequences for many regions. Following on from the enlargement – and the spread in economic and regional economic levels that occur within the Union, I also see obvious possibilities to intensify the interreg trans-national cooperation. Geography will change. Old EU-regions will have new roles to play, and new regions will be in the game.

In this scenario I see a growing role for an active EU regional policy, and as such a growing obligation for us in the regions to keep up the hard work and contribute with a clear vision for regional cooperation.

At the present level the discussion is focussed on the Commissions cohesion reports, and the actual needs, but when 2006 approaches the financing will come in focus. Before it all turns into a discussion of money, it is therefore very important to have a specific debate on the context of a future programme, to focus on the needs of a European Regional Policy.

Unofficial statements from a number of Governments, point towards a re-nationalisation of the regional policies. Others go for a solution with “something for everybody”. We must work to influence these positions, and place the regions at the very heart of the debate.

When we look at the present programme things can be improved, and I will in Denmark work for a harmonization of the rules and procedures, hopefully leading to a more integrated approach to regional development. One of the solutions to make it more operational could be, to gather the four funds we have today into one. This will give a more obvious connection between objectives, programmes and funding. Changes are needed, but this should not be taken as an excuse to re-nationalise regional policy or neglect the importance of cross-regional cooperation.

I will now give the word to our two guest speakers, Mr. Esben Poulsen, from the European Commission, and Mr. David McAllister, Member of the Land Parliament in Niedersachsen.

Please Esben, the floor is yours.