

WRITTEN QUESTION E-2598/99

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to the Commission

Subject: Wording of Article 158 of the Treaty relating to islands

The Treaty of Amsterdam amended Article 158 of the Treaty, which relates to economic and social cohesion, so that it now contains a reference to islands. The way in which the article is worded varies, and is sometimes contradictory, depending on which language version is referred to. In some language versions, Article 158 covers only 'the least favoured regions or islands', while in other language versions it applies 'to disadvantaged regions or to islands'. These two phrases clearly have very different meanings: the first version states that the islands are merely a subcategory of the regions designated as disadvantaged on the basis of socio-economic criteria, while the second version clearly identifies the fact of being an island as a separate criterion and calls for special treatment.

The fact that inconsistencies have been allowed to appear in a text as important as the Treaty is quite astounding. What is even more amazing is the way in which the wording of the French version changed between June 1997 (following the IGC) and November of the same year (when it was published in OJ C 340). In June 1997, the European Council's web site published a summary of the agreement reached in Amsterdam. The French version read as follows:

'g) Island Regions

Article 130a(2) of the EC Treaty shall be amended as follows:

In particular, the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or of the islands, including rural areas.'

A few months later, the wording had been changed; in the text published in the Official Journal, it became:

'In particular, the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas.'

It should be pointed out that the change seems to have been made, as far as we know, only to the French version, since, in the other published language versions of the Treaty (such as the Italian version), Article 158 refers to 'the least favoured regions or the islands'. It would therefore appear that the discrepancies cannot be attributed to the harmonisation of the text by lawyers and translators, work carried out with the unanimous consent of the Member States, following the agreement reached in Amsterdam.

Commissioner Barnier, in both his current capacity as the Commissioner with special responsibility for regional policy and as the former French Minister for European Affairs responsible for the IGC negotiations until June 1997, would appear to be in a better position than anyone to explain to Parliament why the wording of Article 158 changed.

Could he explain to Parliament why the wording of the French version of Article 158 of the Treaty changed between June 1997 and November 1997? Which of the two versions, 'of the least favoured regions or islands' or 'of the least favoured regions or of the islands' corresponds, in letter and spirit, to the text which he negotiated on behalf of France, at the Intergovernmental Conference?