

From a mango to a movement

When the Assembly of European Regions (AER) launched its 'Subsidiarity is a word' movement last month, spokesman **Richard Medic** did not expect to be spending his big launch day in a police holding cell

A few months ago, I was having lunch with my then new boss, AER secretary-general (SG) Klaus Klipp, when our conversation took one of those inspired turns of indignation otherwise reserved for pre-brawl bar-room banter. In our case, the indignation hadn't been fuelled by alcohol, but by the SG's infectious faith in the principle of subsidiarity.

He'd been talking about how important subsidiarity was to AER's work, about how the organisation had been promoting the principle since the 1980s. In 1991, he explained, AER had lobbied for the subsidiarity principle to be entrenched in the Maastricht treaty. In 2005, when the ill-fated European constitutional treaty was being drafted, AER had helped secure the extension of the principle to regional and local levels, as well as a provision allowing the European court of justice to hear cases in which EU legislation had allegedly infringed the principle. These provisions, my new boss concluded triumphantly, have since been included in the treaty of Lisbon.

We then turned to the irony of the fact that subsidiarity – a word representing a pillar of social, theological and political thought for centuries, from Althusius to Pope Pius XI to Jacques Delors – was yet to be recognised in English by that citadel of linguistic influence, Microsoft Word spell-check (I've already attracted the red squiggly

line four times whilst typing this text.) We've since discovered that the word isn't recognised by the Italian version of MS Word either, despite its explicit reference in the Italian constitution. And this is a word mentioned in the Treaty of Lisbon 30 times. Thirty.

"Three months of research ... yielded 71 dictionaries in 23 languages that did not recognise the word [subsidiarity], and a number of others that had included the word but with an incomplete or incorrect definition. The sadly popular dictionary.com defines subsidiarity simply as 'secondary importance'"

Thus the 'Subsidiarity is a word' movement was born. During that lunch, we began plotting a linguistic revolution: we would demand recognition of the word not only in MS Word, but in every dictionary of every language worldwide. The logic was simple. By ensuring that the word itself was fully recognised in all languages, we could better promote understanding of the principle among citizens. And the more citizens understood the value of the principle, the more the EU, its member states and other nations would be compelled to fully respect that principle in political and legislative practice.

We set about planning the launch of the movement, code-naming it 'mango'.

A fitting nom de plume, we thought, for a movement whose creative appeal was as sexy as that most luscious of fruits (and because "subsidiarity is a word" was a mouthful to have to repeat). Three months of research by individuals from within AER's secretariat,



TV cameras captured Richard Medic's arrest for 'bureaucratic necessity'

Does this man know that subsidiarity is a word?



member regions and networks yielded 71 dictionaries in 23 languages that did not recognise the word, and a number of others that had included the word but with an incomplete or incorrect definition. The sadly popular dictionary.com defines subsidiarity simply as “secondary importance”.

So last month we sent open letters to Microsoft and to the dictionaries, along with language institutes, academies and other stakeholders across wider Europe. To explain the movement to our European partners, we distributed ‘Subsidiarity is a word’ postcards in and around the European institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg. We set up a ‘Subsidiarity is a word’ group on Facebook enabling users to add more dictionaries to our subsidiarity shame wall: We pitched the story to a bemused but supportive media who understood the significance of the political message underpinning the movement.

Richard Medic is the AER spokesman

And what real movement these days doesn’t kick off with an arrest posted on YouTube? The fact that I was arrested not for committing a crime but out of “bureaucratic necessity” is a nice twist when you consider that AER’s member regions are constantly rallying against the shackles of centralised red tape.

Subsidiarity is necessarily a vehicle for grass roots action, since that is what regional and local governments encourage and what bottom-up governance presumes. In the true spirit of that principle, we didn’t pay a large company to translate our open letter into 23 languages – that was done by supporters within AER’s secretariat, member regions and networks. We didn’t hire anyone to distribute 5000 postcards in Strasbourg and Brussels – that was done personally by our staff. And when we send the next round of open letters to dictionaries, it is individuals from regions across the world that will have

brought those dictionaries to our attention (we’ve already received lists of “shamed” dictionaries from regions in Australia, China, Russia, and the US). Pushing change from the ground up – this is how the principle of subsidiarity works, and it’s why our movement continues to gain momentum.

At the time of writing, we were still waiting for Microsoft’s response to our open letter. Our request, no doubt, is still making the long journey to central command in Seattle. ★

How you can support the movement:

Join the ‘Subsidiarity is a word’ group on Facebook, at: www.facebook.com

Watch ‘Subsidiarity Man arrested for a word!’ at: <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=YkYwmhTqbwl>

To see the list of “shamed” dictionaries, the open letter to Microsoft and other background information go to AER’s homepage at: www.aer.eu

And for further information about the movement please contact r.medic@er.eu