

European and External Affairs Committee

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Update on Assembly Members' activities: British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA)

Purpose

1. To update the Committee on the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA).

Background

2. At the request of Members of the Oireachtas in Dublin and the Parliament at Westminster, the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body was established in February 1990 with the consent and co-operation of both Governments.

3. Initially, the Body provided a link between the UK and Irish Sovereign Parliaments, though since 2001 it went through a post devolution enlargement exercise incorporating the Scottish Parliament, the devolved assemblies and the Crown dependencies within its structure.

4. In October 2008, the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, re-branded itself as the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA). During this period the remaining places on the BIPA which were available to members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, were filled by the Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party.

5. The purpose of the BIPA is to bring together Members of the participating institutions to engage jointly in a wide range of non-legislative parliamentary activities. The Rules for the Conduct of Business are relatively brief and based on the practice of the House of Commons and the Dáil Éireann.

6. The BIPA consists of:

- (a) Twenty-five Members from each sovereign Parliament (Irish Members & British Members).
- (b) Five each from the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly for Wales.
- (c) One each from the High Court of Tynwald and States of Guernsey and Jersey.

There are also:

- (a) Twenty Associate Members from the two sovereign Parliaments
- (b) Four each from the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly.
- (c) One each from the High Court of Tynwald and each of the States of Guernsey and Jersey.

The composition of the National Assembly's cross-party delegation was agreed between the party groups and subsequently endorsed by the Presiding Officer in 2007:

Full Members (Committee)	Associate Members (Committee)
Rosemary Butler AM (Steering Committee)	-
Alun Cairns AM	Darren Millar AM (Committee C)
Mike German AM (Committee B)	Jenny Randerson AM (Committee B)
Dai Lloyd AM (Committee D)	Bethan Jenkins AM
Joyce Watson AM (Committee C)	Alun Davies AM (Committee B)

7. The BIPA now stands ready to take the next step in fulfilling the role envisioned by the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement in becoming the East-West Parliamentary Forum. This will facilitate its development as an integral part of the machinery of co-operation which has developed over the last 10 years between the UK, Ireland, the Devolved Nations and the Crown Dependencies.

Committees

8. The four Committees conduct inquiries on matters of common concern. They meet regularly throughout the year and take oral and written evidence from interested parties, including the two Governments (Ireland & UK), on which to base their Reports.

9. The National Assembly for Wales is represented on Committees B, C and D and is also represented on the Steering Committee by the Deputy Presiding Officer.

Steering Committee - is chaired by the two Co-Chairs, and includes representatives from the parliaments, regional assemblies, and devolved institutions. It operates as the BIPA's management committee. The Steering Committee meets immediately prior, during, immediately after, and in-between plenary meetings to plan and co-ordinate the operation of the Assembly.

The subject committees are:

A - Sovereign Matters (exclusive to Sovereign Parliaments)

B - European Affairs

C - Economic

D - Environment and Social

10. Committee reports are presented to plenary sessions which usually comment on them in the form of a resolution. Reports are sent to both Governments and Executives which then make formal replies to the recommendations. These replies are also published and considered by the Assembly in plenary session.

Committee B - considers matters arising from Britain and Ireland's common membership of the European Union. The committee has selected Mike German AM, to look into the committee's recent inquiry to a 'British and Irish Regional Economic Space' (See paper 1a).

Among the important issues the committee has considered are:

- (i) The Common Agricultural Policy
- (ii) The Recession and EU migrant workers
- (iii) Cross-border trade within the EU

Committee C - considers economic matters and the shared interests of the economies throughout Britain and Ireland. Joyce Watson AM has attended recent committee meetings to examine the support mechanisms and incentives available to those in the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector.

Previous work has included:

- (i) Economic benefits of tourism
- (ii) Renewable Energy except Nuclear
- (iii) Apprenticeships

Committee D - is devoted to matters of environmental protection and sustainability, and social issues. Dai Lloyd AM attended committee meetings last year in London & Edinburgh for a short inquiry into getting the unemployed back into work.

Previous studies have included:

- (i) The integration of newly arrived migrants to NI, Ireland & Wales
- (ii) The Irish community in Britain
- (iii) Climate Change and Renewable Energy

Reports

Reports and Government responses on the subjects above are published on the BIPA web site at - www.britishirish.org

Plenary Conferences

11. The National Assembly for Wales has sent delegations to each plenary session since October 2001. Historically plenary sessions tended to follow a predictable pattern in which the first debate was a political motion concerning the Northern Ireland Peace process and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Conferences are co-chaired by a spokesperson from the Houses of Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

12. Since the restoration of devolved governance in Northern Ireland the BIPA has moved towards considering other themes of common interest to its Members. At the most recent plenary conference (Cavan February 2010), the National Assembly for Wales delegation were able to contribute to both of the main themes, which were:

The Economy and the Banking Sector - presentation from Professor Patrick Honahan Governor, Central Bank of Ireland and An Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD.

Co-operation in Policing (Northern Ireland & Ireland) presentation from Garda Commissioner Fachtna Murphy & PSNI Chief Constable Matt Baggott.

Motions - may be tabled by an individual Member or in the name of the Steering Committee. At the Cavan conference a motion was

put forward by Andrew Mackinlay MP, that the BIPA calls on the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Health to defer the cancellation of the Reciprocal Health Agreement with the Isle of Man planned for 1 April 2010. At the BIPA meeting in Cavan members unanimously backed this motion by Andrew Mackinlay for the agreement to continue.

In April 2010, The Health Minister for Wales, was informed by the Secretary of State for Health, that he has decided not to end the reciprocal agreement with the Isle of Man and has advised the Minister that the old agreement will now stay in place until 30 September 2010 with a view to a new agreement then being put in place, subject to the Ministers agreement.

The last five plenary conferences have been held on the dates and the locations listed below:-

36th - Wexford (Ireland) 27-29 April 2008

37th - Newcastle (UK) 19-21 October 2008

38th - Donegal (Ireland) 29-31 March 2009

39th - Swansea 18-20 October 2009

40th - Cavan (Ireland) 21-23 February 2010

The 41st Plenary Conference will take place in the Isle of Man, on the 21-23 November 2010.

Annual Reports & Plenary Minutes

13. Since 1997 the BIPA has produced an Annual Report to reflect the work of the Assembly over the years. Plenary Minutes and Summaries are also produced after each conference. These are located at www.britishirish.org.

In addition to the website, the Clerk to the National Assembly for Wales produces a Post Summary report after each plenary conference. In future, these reports & summaries will be posted on the National Assembly for Wales Members Homepage.

Summary

14. Though the BIPA provides a means of raising the profile of the National Assembly for Wales amongst the Parliamentary Bodies of the British Isles, there exists the potential to steer its agenda more towards inter-regional issues.

15. It is recommended that a procedure is developed to ensure that all Assembly Members are aware of and can access information on the BIPA's activities, particularly through BIPA committee reports and BIPA plenary transcripts.

16. The primary strategic relationship the BIPA should seek to develop is with the British Irish Council (BIC). This issue has been referred to many times in BIPA plenary sessions over the past few years. Such a relationship would assist the BIPA in developing a more coherent work programme for its business, as well as helping to develop the relationship between the BIPA and the Governments of the UK, Ireland, the Devolved Nations and the Crown Dependencies.

Rosemary Butler AM
Deputy Presiding Officer