

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Date 30 January 2003
Time 14.00
Venue Committee Rooms 2 and 3
Title: British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body

BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY PLENARY MEETING: MANCHESTER, 24-26 NOVEMBER 2002**Background**

1. The National Assembly for Wales plays an active role in the proceedings of the British-Irish Parliamentary Body and is represented by a cross-party delegation drawn from its five Full and four Associate Members. In this instance, as in the previous Dublin Plenary, all five Full Members attended. These are: the Deputy Presiding Officer, Eleanor Burnham AM, John Griffiths AM, Dai Lloyd AM, and David Melding AM. The plenary took place over two days and included debates on recent political developments, relations with the Nordic Council, the joint Irish/Scottish bid to host the 2008 European Football Championships, and the Sellafield nuclear power plant. This report provides a summary of events and key points of interest for the Assembly.

THE 25TH PLENARY SESSION

2. **Recent Political Developments.** The Steering Committee moved the Motion: That the Body reaffirms its support for the Good Friday Agreement; is saddened at the suspension of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland; welcomes the determination of the two Governments to press ahead with all aspects of the agreement; calls on all political parties to redouble their efforts towards the restoration of the institutions which have benefited all the people of these islands; and urges all involved parties to continue their efforts to secure an early resumption of the Northern Ireland Institutions'

3. In moving the Motion, Jim O'Keeffe TD, stressed that reforms must

continue in Northern Ireland. He stated "that progress in Northern Ireland has been moving on the basis of 'two steps forward, one step back'. Northern Ireland is in a 'step back' situation now, and it is incumbent that we return to the 'two steps forward' mode as quickly as possible." Further contributions from the floor emphasised that:

- all paramilitary organisations must disband
- punishment attacks must stop

- Sinn Féin must support the development of the Police Service of Northern Ireland
- the morale of the civil service in Northern Ireland was very low and that measures would have to be taken to address the problems resulting from the running down of government machinery.that the Northern Ireland elections should still take place at the scheduled time that there should be more interaction between the BIIPB and the British Irish Council.

4. Senator O'Rourke expressed the sadness of many at the suspension of the NIA saying that 'They (the people of Northern Ireland) had an organisation and a person that they recognised, to which they could direct their thoughts and concerns...and that was important to them.' Lord Dubs suggested that Members of the suspended NIA should be permitted to attend the BIIPB proceedings as Observers.

5. In summing up the Debate, Michael Mates MP of the Steering Committee quoted John Hume MP's (also in attendance) contribution, that 'direction must be from the people, not the baggage of political parties'. The Motion was carried unanimously.

6. **Joint Irish/Scottish Bid to host the European Championships 2008.** The Steering Committee proposed that the Body 'takes note of the responses of governments and executives to the debate on the motion on the joint Scottish-Irish bid for the European (Association Football) Championships 2008'.

7. This debate raised little of note for the Assembly. Welsh representation in the debate was restricted to Lembit Öpik MP who celebrated the recent successes of the Welsh football team and suggested that the Millennium Stadium be considered if any extra venues might be required.

8. **Links with the Nordic Council.** The Steering Committee further tabled the Motion on the Nordic Council, proposed by the Scottish Parliament, 'the Body congratulates the Nordic Council on its 50th anniversary; notes the benefit that the Council has brought to the peoples, regions and nations of the Nordic area in terms of social, political and economic co-operation; and believes that links between the Body and the Nordic Council should be developed'.

9. Murray Tosh MSP, opened the debate for the Steering Committee by congratulating the Nordic Council on 50 successful years. He outlined the achievements of the Council in political, economic, and social terms and informed the Body of the BIIPB Steering Committee's involvement with the Nordic Council to date. He proposed that the Body takes forward its engagement with the Council and suggested that the Nordic Council could serve as a sound model for the BIIPB. He emphasised that there was a great deal that the committees of both bodies could do together, including discussing and exchanging information about; culture, fisheries and sustainable development.

10. He was followed by the Chairman of the Nordic Council's Environment Committee who explained that the Body and the Nordic Council were 'sister' organisations. He went on to emphasise the benefits of links developed with the Scottish Parliament and explained their value to the Nordic zone. He also mentioned that a major debate in the Nordic Council at present involved the role of the regions in a new enlarged European Union.

11. John Griffiths AM, contributed to the debate with strong support for the Motion from the National Assembly for Wales. He referred to Brian Gibbons AM's recent attendance at the Nordic Council Plenary as a BIIPB delegate

- a mutual interest and concern in Wales and the Nordic countries regarding Sellafield
- strong links between the Assembly's committees and Nordic Council member countries
- common values between the Assembly and the Nordic parliaments, in particular openness and accessibility of the democratic process; shared commitments to sustainable development; and the high proportion of female representation in the legislative bodies
- geographical affinities, in particular shared positions of Wales and the Nordic Council countries on Europe's western maritime margin and the common challenges that this will entail with enlargement.

12. Kevin McNamara MP, closed for the Steering Committee warmly endorsing the Motion, which was carried unanimously.

13. **Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.** The Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland addressed the Body and answered Questions. He reported on the situation in Northern Ireland and the suspension of the NIA. He was convinced that with all the benefits that the 'Peace Process' had brought to Northern Ireland, in terms of economic and judicial reforms etc that a solution could be worked out to the mutual benefit of all He was emphatic that talks must continue but equally emphatic that they should be without the paramilitary threat. He explained that this was the second time that he had addressed the BIIPB and he was impressed by the diversity of cross-party and cross-national co-operation on display.

14. **Sellafield.** There was a debate on the Sellafield Report presented by Committee D of the Body. Kevin McNamara MP, the Chair of the Committee stated that the Report showed that the treatment of nuclear waste at Sellafield was a problem, and that the instillation could pose a security problem (however the obvious sensitivities of investigating this issue meant that the findings were inconclusive). Given the inconclusive findings, Committee D agreed to establish a standing sub-group to continue to monitor Sellafield as it remains an area of concern within both Britain and Ireland. Highlights of the debate included:

- Recommendations that the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland should have access as an observer agency at Sellafield along with the UK Government and the International Atomic Energy Authority.
- Though contrary to initial perceptions, exchange of information between the Irish and UK Governments concerning Sellafield was much greater than might at first be apparent, not enough information was available in the public domain.
- The ambiguous attitude of the UK Government towards long-term contracts with BNFL, waste management strategies, and its lack of effort in enforcing waste shipment agreements was confusing

15. Eleanor Burnham AM contributed to the debate welcoming the report and stating her interest as the environment spokesperson for the Welsh Liberal Democrats and as a North Wales regional Member. Her constituents 'have grave concerns about the long term effects of Sellafield on their general health, and the general perception that the plant has become a dumping ground for the world's nuclear waste.' Eleanor Burnham AM will be a member of Committee D's standing sub group set up to maintain continued monitoring of Sellafield.

16. Senator Mary O'Rourke, in closing, expressed her disbelief of the UK Government's stance on the safety of the Sellafield plant. She proposed that the Report be viewed as an interim statement in an ongoing monitoring process. The 'Interim Report' was endorsed with one objection. The Body will send the Report to the British Irish Council for its attention.

17. **Discussion Paper.** Andrew MacKinlay MP put forward a discussion paper for consideration by the Body. He felt that the status of the Body needed to be reaffirmed and proposed a range of measures to improve its value and efficacy. These measures include:

- requesting that the Prime Minister address the Body
- Ministerial attendance at relevant debates
- representatives from appropriate bodies at relevant debates
- improved synchronicity in working with the British Irish Council.

Members agreed to consider and discuss the proposals at the next Steering Committee and at the next Plenary.

COMMITTEES

Steering Committee

18. The National Assembly for Wales will take over from the Scottish Parliament in providing a Member to represent the Devolved Bodies with effect 01 January 2003 and for a one-year term. Dai Lloyd AM will take on this role. The next Steering Committee meeting is scheduled to take place in London on 13 January.

19. Committee A (Sovereign Matters):

- The general political situation in Northern Ireland
- Criminal Justice
- Monitoring the work of the British Irish Council.

20. Committee B (European):

- Links with the Nordic Council.

21. Committee C (Economic):

- Will decide on a topic for consideration at their next meeting in January.

22. Committee D (Environment and Social):

- Waste management strategies
- Establishment of a sub-group dedicated to monitoring Sellafield

NEXT PLENARY

23. The next Plenary will be held in Kilkenny 23-5 March 2003. The session will include debates on:

- Recent Political Developments
- The Body's Annual Report
- Committee A Report - Penalty Points/Traffic Offences
- Committee C Report - Tourism
- Fisheries

OTHER NOTES

- Brendan Smith TD, took over from Michael O'Kennedy as co-chair of the BIIPB
- The British Irish Parliamentary Reporters Association served as official reporters of the BIIPB.

PJP Kellam
14 January 2002