

## **European and External Affairs Committee**

**Date: 27 May 04**

**Venue: Committee Rooms 3 and 4**

### **Title: Update on the Work of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body**

#### **Purpose**

1. To update the Committee on the work of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body (BIIPB).

#### **Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the European and External Affairs Committee notes:

- That the Body provides a means of raising the profile of the Assembly amongst the parliamentary bodies of the British Isles and, there also exists potential to steer its agenda more towards inter-regional issues.
- That the Body's role could be strengthened through a more direct relationship with its executive comparative body, the British Irish Council.
- That a mechanism be developed to ensure that all Members are aware of and can access information on the Body's activities, particularly committee reports and plenary transcripts.

#### **Action for European Committee**

3. The views of the Committee are sought to assist in providing direction and adding value to future participation by the Assembly delegation in the activities of the Body.

#### **Background**

4. The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body was established in February 1990. 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.

5. The Body consists of twenty-five Members from each sovereign Parliament; five each from the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the National Assembly Wales; and smaller delegations from the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. The composition of the Assembly's cross-party delegation has been endorsed by House Committee and comprises a five Full Members and four Associates (Appendix 1).

6. The purpose of the Body is to bring together Members of the British and Irish legislative bodies to participate jointly in a wide range of non-legislative parliamentary activities. The Body meets for two plenary sessions each year, alternating between the UK and the Irish Republic and usually held at venues other than Dublin and London. The Body normally debates matters of political and general concern, reports from its Committees and Government responses, and has a question period with a Minister from the host country. The day-to-day work of the Body is carried out through its four Committees. The Assembly is represented on Committees B, C and D and shares Standing Committee representation with the Scottish Parliament. The subject committees are:

- A, Sovereign Matters (exclusive to Sovereign Parliaments)
- B, European Affairs
- C, Economic
- D, Environmental and Social.

7. Committee reports are presented to the plenary sessions of the Body, which usually comments on them in the form of a Resolution. They are sent to both Governments and Executives, which make formal replies to the Committee's recommendations. These replies are also published and considered by the plenary session.

8. The Assembly has sent delegations to each plenary session since October 2001. Plenary sessions have tended to follow a predictable pattern in which the first debate is a political motion concerning the Northern Ireland Peace process and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

9. The plenary sessions provide an opportunity to debate topics relevant to the Assembly. The most recent plenary session included a debate on EU Enlargement at the suggestion of the Assembly delegation. Previous debates have included the European Union, Marine Fisheries and a possible joint Irish-Scottish bid for the 2004 European Football Championships. As with the recent debate on Enlargement, through the Steering Committee, it is possible for the devolved bodies to influence the content of the programme of business for each plenary session. The Easter 2004 Plenary Session took place in Clonakilty, Cork and on which Mike German AM reported verbally to the European and External Affairs Committee at its 29 April meeting. The committee will wish to note that the plenary session will take place in October

2004 in Chepstow. This is the first time since devolution that a plenary has taken place in Wales and outside England or the Irish Republic. The delegation would welcome input from the European and External Affairs Committee on possible motions to mark this occasion.

10. The plenary session routinely includes an opportunity for Members to submit oral questions to a Minister from the sovereign Parliament hosting the plenary session. This has provided opportunities for Assembly delegates to submit questions on a range of topics including Health, Transport and European matters. Committee enquiries form a substantial element of the Body's activities. This provides an opportunity for Members to participate and the Assembly to benefit from their respective contents. Recent reports include:

- European Committee – the work of the Nordic Council
- Economic Committee – Health Service Delivery in Remote Areas. This included a study on the provision of Nursing-led Midwifery and involved a committee delegation visiting the Caerphilly Miners' Hospital.
- Environment and Social Committee – Sellafield and Radioactive discharge in to the Irish Sea

11. Committee enquiries in progress include:

- European Committee. Work will shortly commence on a study of the potential for a Common European Defence policy
- Economic Committee. The Committee are in the initial stages of an enquiry into education provision within the British Isles with a particular emphasis on early years and Special Education Needs teaching.
- Environment and Social Committee. The Committee is in the latter stages of an enquiry into Waste Management processes, in particular the use of Incinerators.

12. Plenary transcripts and committee reports are available at the BIIPB website <http://www.biipb.org>. The Assembly has supported the production of plenary transcripts by providing officials from the Record of Proceedings to the British Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association. Transcripts and committee reports are sent by the British and Irish Secretariats to the various Executive bodies inviting responses which are then circulated at subsequent plenary sessions.

## **Issues**

13. There is a danger of the Body being labelled a talking shop. The term 'Groundhog Day' has been used in the two most recent plenary sessions as debates on the political situation in Northern Ireland are held with little if any change on the previous ones. Whilst transcripts and reports are sent to the executive bodies for formal response there lacks a formal link for more effective scrutiny.

14. A further challenge is posed by the lack of participation by the Unionist parties. This reduces the credibility of the Body as a comprehensive forum for the parliamentary groups within the British Isles.

15. Members of the Body have been consistent in recent plenary sessions in calling for a more formal relationship with the British Irish Council (BIC) with the vision that the Body should function as its parliamentary tier. The Body via its co-Chairs has requested that consideration be given to granting the BIIPB observer status at meetings of the BIC. This request has met with a negative response. The Body's European Committee report on the Baltic and Nordic Councils is seen as offering an example for the functioning of inter-regional forums with parliamentary and governmental links.

**PJP Kellam**

## **Appendix 1**

### **British Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body**

#### **Full Members:**

Deputy Presiding Officer

Mike German AM

John Griffiths AM

Dai Lloyd AM

David Melding AM

#### **Associate Members:**

Glyn Davies AM

Brian Gibbons AM

TBN

