



**BRITISH-IRISH
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

**COMHLACHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH
NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

FIFTEENTH PLENARY SESSION

30 and 31 March 1998

Slieve Russell Hotel, Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Final Revised Edition)

(Produced by the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association)

FIFTEENTH PLENARY CONFERENCE

The Fifteenth Plenary Conference of the Body opened in public session at 9.30 a.m. in the Slieve Russell Hotel, Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan with Mr Michael O'Kennedy in the Chair.

The Chairman welcomed members to the Conference. He also welcomed the British Ambassador, Her Excellency Mrs Veronica Sutherland CMG.

1. ADOPTION OF PROPOSED PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS.

Ordered, That the proposed Programme of Business, as amended, be approved.-(**Mr Kevin McNamara**).

2. PRIVILEGE

The Chairman reminded members that the proceedings of the Body did not attract parliamentary privilege.

3. ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

The Chairman gave notice that in accordance with Rule 2a the following Associate Members had accepted the invitation of the Steering Committee to assume the powers and responsibilities of Members for the whole of the session: Ms Helen Jackson, Mr Peter Temple-Morris, Mr David Tredinnick and Mr Gerry Reynolds.

The Session was suspended at 9.45 am and resumed at 10 am, with Mr Michael O'Kennedy in the Chair.

4. ADDRESS BY AN TAOISEACH, MR BERTIE AHERN TD

The Chairman welcomed the Taoiseach to the 15th Plenary Conference. He said it was an historic event for the Prime Minister to address the Body - a recognition of its role and the commitment of many people to it. He said it was an important framework in which to maintain contacts, goodwill and understanding.

The Taoiseach addressed the Body as follows:

I thank the two Co-Chairmen for their welcome to the 15th Plenary Session of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which held its first Session last evening. I am delighted to be here this morning and wish the conference well. The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, which represents Members of both Chambers of our respective Parliaments, provides a unique forum for the exchange of views across the whole range of issues of common interest and concern and has done so successfully over the years. We, in Government, have been very satisfied with that progress and the contacts and relationships which have been built as a result.

I am delighted to be with you at the 15th Plenary Session here in Ballyconnell, County Cavan, a Border region. A few Members from the constituency are here and I am proud to join them. The location of this gathering here in Cavan has a relevance for the work of the Body. Ancient legend has it that Ballyconnell takes its name from Conal Cearnach - fellow hero with Cúchulainn of the great Gaelic saga of the cattle raid of Cooley, where the Ulstermen fought the might of Queen Maeve of Connacht's army. Like all things Irish, we do not forget such things easily.

Moving quickly on, in modern times Cavan has suffered the adverse consequences of having much of its natural hinterland and economic theatre cut off by the Border. Nevertheless, despite this handicap, the people of Cavan have all the traditional Ulster virtues and entrepreneurial skills, and it is one of the most go-ahead counties in the country economically. With the opening of the magnificent Shannon-Erne waterway, formerly the Ballinamore-Ballyconnell Canal, one of the finest waterways of western Europe has been revealed to an ever-increasing number of tourists from mainland Europe and beyond. This hotel and other progressive economic developments in this region - actively supported by the Irish and British Governments, the International Fund for Ireland and the European Union's Peace Programme - also show how much we can all do with unity of purpose.

Economic progress in recent decades has been striking in all the Border counties, although much remains to be done to overcome the disadvantage of the historical situation. My Government, together with the British Government on the northern side - and with the welcome and generous support of the EU Peace and INTERREG Programmes and the International Fund for Ireland - are determined to ensure that peace and economic progress continue to benefit this region, and in so doing to reverse the negative impact of the Border and security situation on realising the region's full potential.

The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body has made many useful and supportive contributions to the wider political debate across the range of issues of mutual interest. The authoritative and unique insight that Members have brought to issues as diverse as the Irish community in Britain, environmental issues affecting the United Kingdom and Ireland and the crucial and continually sensitive issue of animal health has led to a deeper and better understanding of these issues in both our countries.

Nor can the Body be accused of sticking to soft or neutral topics. Its consideration of issues such as policing in Northern Ireland and the current review of the potential for the de-escalation of the security measures are examples of the more difficult issues it is prepared to look at in an objective and co-operative spirit. Indeed, its programme for this Plenary Conference fully engages it in the debate around the most sensitive and crucial of issues facing these two islands at this time. I look forward to the reports of its discussion on the multi-party talks and to learning Members' views on future elected institutions and their implications for the role of the Body.

Amongst its membership are many who have striven for many years to bring about greater mutual understanding between all the peoples of these islands. I acknowledge those individuals who have, for many years, led the way in trying to find a better way to do business between these islands and within the island. There are many, too, who have given distinguished service in both the Irish and British Governments, Indeed, this Body has a remarkable record in grooming TDs for ministerial office. An obvious example is my Cabinet colleague, Deputy Dermot Ahern, a former Co-Chairman of the Body, who joined Members for dinner last evening. Many of my Oireachtas colleagues see bright futures emanating from this Body.

Perhaps the most important function of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body is simply to encourage contact between parliamentary colleagues in these islands, which is a noble reason. These contacts often foster friendships that can prove invaluable in the sometimes difficult negotiations in which we must engage. Indeed, the contacts made here and the friendships formed over the years are very much a model of how our relationships could and should be progressed in the challenging times immediately ahead.

As we are all well aware, East-West co-operation is not a new concept. We have long recognised that a unique relationship exists between Ireland and the United Kingdom, stemming not only from our geographical closeness, but also from intertwined histories. For social and economic reasons, there has been a close intermingling of the people and cultural influences and over the years there have been a number of valuable initiatives, including this Body, aimed at furthering and developing this unique relationship.

My predecessor and John Major agreed on a multi-faceted programme on East-West co-operation in 1995 which followed on from an earlier agreement that year in Mallorca on the desirability of strengthening the bilateral relationships between the two countries. Last May a further list of areas of mutually beneficial co-operation was agreed in the margins of the European Council by my immediate predecessor. In addition, a steering group was established, which is co-chaired by my Department and the Cabinet Office, to monitor and drive East-West co-operation.

We have made significant progress. Last December I published a joint report with Prime Minister Blair which outlined the types of co-operation which had taken place on a wide range of fronts. The report details links in almost every area of public policy, including areas such as transport links, the application of information technology in schools, youth exchanges, food safety, the fight against crime and drugs, health and the environment to name but a few. All are areas of great relevance to our people and it was a very comprehensive document.

We have also witnessed considerable progress in the Strand Three discussions which are taking place in the peace talks which embrace East-West relations and co-operation. Throughout these discussions, the Irish Government has always recognised that a successful settlement must incorporate the development of a

wider East-West dimension. There is no doubt that Strand Three institutions will play an important part of an overall agreement. The intergovernmental council proposed as part of an overall settlement will deal with the totality of relationships between the two countries and will include representatives of the British and Irish Governments, the Northern Ireland Administration and the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales. Although there is already a great deal of useful co-operation between the British and Irish Governments on many issues, there is no doubt that the current move towards devolution within Britain will open up exciting new possibilities which a new council could develop. We believe this council would provide a valuable mechanism for consultation and co-operation on a wide range of East-West matters and we look forward to its establishment as part of a settlement.

I want to turn now to the settlement as a whole. As the Government sees it, the shape of a settlement is clear. In essence, a mutually acceptable and workable settlement should involve the following: first, balanced constitutional changes in both Ireland and the UK to reflect the principle of consent; second, Northern Ireland institutions, including an assembly exercising devolved executive and legislative responsibility on a basis where each community there will share power and responsibility; third, a North-South ministerial council and North-South implementing bodies; fourth, an East-West intergovernmental council for purposes of co-operation involving the two Governments and devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; fifth, standing intergovernmental machinery between the two Governments for interaction and co-operation on matters involving Northern Ireland that will remain under London control; sixth, equality of treatment provisions; and seventh, measures to establish an acceptable peaceful society dealing with issues like prisoners, security in all its aspects, policing and decommissioning.

The word "compromise" is the key in this context. There are elements in the package, as I have outlined it, which will cause difficulties for Nationalists. In particular, it is no secret that Nationalists - to a greater or lesser extent - have difficulties with the prospect of constitutional change and the establishment of an assembly. I believe, however, that the majority at least of Nationalists are prepared to contemplate such measures as part of a balanced accommodation. I believe that Unionists recognise this. What Nationalists need to know in return is the response of Unionists to this unique opportunity. In particular, we need to know the attitude of Unionists to substantive and workable North-South structures, including implementing bodies with meaningful powers, which we regard as indispensable to an agreement.

As far back as 1991, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, who is here today, established that it was common ground among the major parties concerned, including both the DUP and the UUP, that hope of achieving a new and more broadly-based agreement rested on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of relationships, namely those within Northern Ireland, among the people of the island of Ireland and between the two Governments. This three stranded approach underpins the Joint Declaration of 15 December 1993 and the

Joint Framework Document of 22 February 1995 and forms the basis of the current multi-party negotiations. The key to success, as Peter Brooke indicated, is that all three relationships must be adequately addressed.

The establishment of a North-South body and implementing bodies is without prejudice one way or the other to eventual decisions on the constitutional future. I make no secret that, in the long-term, I want to see a united Ireland brought about by agreement and peace. I share Wolfe Tone's vision of abolishing the memory of all past dissensions and of substituting the common name of Irishman in the place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter. I believe that this is an honourable and attainable vision, springing from an honourable tradition. It can be achieved only by open, democratic persuasion and after a long process of building trust and confidence. Forty years ago, de Valera stated that a forced unity would ruin national life for generations. That remains our outlook today.

I said it before, but it is worth repeating, that the Irish Government does not view these negotiations as a win/lose contest. What we want to achieve as a result of these negotiations is a win/win situation for Nationalism and Unionism alike. What we want is a level playing field where Nationalism can co-exist in healthy competition with Unionism; where Nationalists can feel that they, too, are first class citizens, that it is just as respectable to be a Nationalist as a Unionist and where Nationalists can feel that their rights and aspirations have equal validity and enjoy equal respect and recognition to those of Unionists. We are talking about rectifying an imbalance and not about creating a new imbalance.

Meaningful North-South arrangements are essential to the success of this project in terms of giving institutional expression to northern Nationalists' sense of identity and to the North-South strand of relationships. They are of great practical significance as well and, as we conceive them, pose no threat but rather bring the prospect of great mutual benefit. As a Nationalist, and as someone deeply interested in the prosperity and well-being of this island, I believe that the North-South body should evolve over time. I also believe that the underlying economic realities mean that it will do so. However, there would be no question of this happening without agreement, North and South. The watch-word of the whole process of negotiations in which we are engaged is agreement and any development of the settlement which we hope to see emerging from it will be on the same basis - by agreement.

The settlement which emerges from these negotiations will not mean the end of either Unionism or Nationalism. What will have changed, if we get it right, is that neither Nationalists nor Unionists will feel they are playing with loaded dice and that the future is hopelessly prejudiced against them. They will have the absolute certainty that the future is in their hands and theirs alone. Beyond that, nothing is inevitable and there are no predetermined outcomes.

We have all come a long way since the current negotiations began on 10 June 1996 and there is widespread agreement that we have a real chance of securing a historic accommodation between Nationalism and Unionism. However, we have an extra

mile to go. As I indicated, Nationalists are, I believe, ready to go that extra mile. We take heart from President Clinton's wise remark on St. Patrick's Day that concessions that today might seem hard to accept will seem so much less important in the light of an accord that brings hope and peace and an end to violence. However, we cannot make the journey alone. Unionists must join with us in making the hard decisions. As President Clinton said: "No one will be the loser if agreement is reached."

As George Mitchell rightly said last week, the time for decision is now. The Government fully supports the 9 April deadline for agreement, which accords with our own May deadline for a referendum. The talks have been going on since the summer of 1996 and it is hard to believe that anything has been left unsaid - in fact things have been said too many times. It is also a fact of life that things rarely get done without a deadline being set. Above all, we simply do not have the luxury of more time. Time is the enemy in a situation where the opponents of peace are actively seeking to make agreement impossible through the stepping up of violence, and where they will exploit any delay to cast doubt on the credibility of the political process to the benefit of their own nihilistic agendas.

The people of Ireland, North and South, are facing a choice. We can maintain the integrity of the quarrel - some people may find a comfort in this - but most of us take no comfort in bitterness, hatred and violence. We - Nationalist and Unionist together - can negotiate a new deal for a new generation. We can put in place a new harmonious dispensation that will reflect the equal realities of divergent allegiances and identities that will bridge and accommodate all our aspirations for the future as we speedily move to the twenty-first century. There is, in reality, no viable alternative if we want to see peace, reconciliation and stability. We must, and I am confident we will, seize this opportunity. Thank you.

5. QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER

The Chairman thanked the Taoiseach for his address, particularly for sharing his expectations for a positive agreement. He invited the Members to put questions.

The Peace Process

1. Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North): To ask the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on the current political situation in Northern Ireland.

3. Mr Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West): To ask the Taoiseach if he will make a statement about the development of the peace process.

4. Mr Conor Lenihan (Dublin South-West): To ask the Taoiseach if the two Governments will consider putting in place interim institutional arrangements that reflect the three-strand process should there be no agreement by the May deadline; and if he will make a statement.

5. Mr Harry Barnes (Derbyshire North East): To ask the Taoiseach what progress is being made on revising Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution; and if he will make a statement.

8. Senator Mary Henry: To ask the Taoiseach if the Government intend initiating a debate in the Republic of Ireland in the near future on the planned North-South bodies and the Council of the Isles; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North) asked the Taoiseach to confirm the assertion of the Minister for Foreign Affairs that agreement would be contingent on a referendum being passed in both jurisdictions. He drew the Taoiseach's attention to a newspaper article about alleged security force collusion in assassinations in Northern Ireland and asked whether the Irish Government was making representations on the matter to the British Government.

The Taoiseach said that he would take Questions Nos. 1, 4, 5, and 8 together. In reply to Mr McNamara's first question the answer was "yes". There would be two referenda and they had to be passed in both jurisdictions. On the second matter, this was not a new story - it had surfaced many times. He imagined that the British Authorities would examine the matter to see if there was wrongdoing and the Irish Government would raise the matter.

Mr Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) thanked the Taoiseach for his efforts in furthering the peace process. He encouraged the talks participants to make a special effort to reach agreement and not to give in to violence. He asked the Taoiseach to give an indication of the Irish Government's flexibility on amendments to the Irish Constitution to facilitate agreement on the basis of mutual respect.

The Taoiseach replied that the Irish Government was committed to balanced constitutional change and was happy to reflect the principle of consent in the Constitution. They would also have to make other changes and reflect the ability to have North-South bodies. They had discussed their intentions with Unionists and Loyalists and they understand and supported his Government's position. The answer was "yes".

Mr Conor Lenihan (Dublin South-West) asked the Taoiseach to expand on his reference to the indispensability of North-South structures.

The Taoiseach said that in terms of an overall settlement and in an all-island context there had to be a mechanism to deal with the issues agreed between the Governments and the parties. His Government's wish was for powerful, executive bodies with powers to implement policies which would be real and meaningful to everyday life. The bodies should be at the heart of the important interests of Irish life. He was prepared to see bodies for agriculture, trade, tourism and cultural and educational issues: bodies which would then devolve many of their powers to a North-South arrangement, involving the Chairs from the Assembly in the North with Ministers from the South, and which would be able to have meaningful dialogue and

to make decisions and not refer back on minor issues. It was not his Government's position that the bodies should merely be consultative; rather, the more powerful they were, the better.

Mr Harry Barnes (Derbyshire North East) asked with regard to Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution if it would not be peculiar to have a North-South deal on common institutions yet for the South to have a constitutional claim on the North. He referred to a recent newspaper survey indicating general support from Irish people for a package including changes to Articles 2 and 3.

The Taoiseach pointed out that part of the package required the Irish Government to change Articles 2 and 3. After many months of discussions with the British Government and the parties in the North they were fairly close to a wording which would deal with the issue. He accepted that the change was necessary as part of an overall settlement. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the 1973 Act would also be changed. Those developments, together with the establishment of the North-South bodies, represented a balanced constitutional change.

Senator Mary Henry pointed out the existence of many North-South and East-West bodies which could be built upon. She asked that the equivalences between bodies such as the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons in Ireland the UK would be maintained. She referred to a recent Statutory Instrument in the UK which altered the status of Irish postgraduate qualifications there and used phraseology which did not indicate parity of esteem. She instanced this as a legal feature which affected people on an all-island basis and stressed the importance for all government bodies to address issues which cause division.

The Taoiseach agreed about the importance of all-Ireland professional institutions and cultural bodies. He had instructed all Departments and agencies that they should not seek reasons to change, amend, alter or distort good work which was already in place. The medical field represented a great possibility for building upon existing structures, and a good area for North-South bodies.

Mr Michael Colvin (Romsey) referred to the seven points for a settlement that the Taoiseach had outlined but noted that there was no mention of a parliamentary element. He asked if the Taoiseach agreed that for the sake of accountability a parliamentary body was required.

The Taoiseach replied that it had been mentioned in the East-West arrangements that there should be a parliamentary body-which would be the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. He also felt that a consultative mechanism should be created between the Assembly in the North and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Senator Joe Costello, referring to the seven points, indicated that the Taoiseach had mentioned equality of treatment, not "equity" and wondered if a Charter or Bill of Rights was being contemplated.

The Taoiseach said that the discussion had returned to "equality", having been on "equity" for a while. A Bill of Rights was still under consideration and there were many issues on the equality agenda which might be more important—for example, the equality agenda and policing on the ground. There was a package of measures which would, hopefully, be in the final agreement.

Mr Robert Jackson (Wantage) welcomed the Taoiseach's point about East-West structures. He referred to the Taoiseach's points about the North-South structures within a spectrum ranging from meaningful to *ad hoc* and wondered where the East-West structures would be located on the spectrum.

The Taoiseach felt that East-West structures did not present any great difficulties. Many of the Government to Government issues tended to arise in the European domain and the two Governments cooperated successfully at that level on most issues - for example, on animal health.

In terms of the legislation it was a different matter. The North-South bodies were about a more orderly and systematic running of functions for the island on issues such as trade or tourism. East-West structures were different. Last December's document spelt out all the areas of cooperation and mutual interest and the details for future cooperation. He also expected far closer links on such matters in the context of a larger and more powerful Europe. The initial idea that there were few areas for cooperation on an East-West basis had been wrong. There was considerable contact between Ministers and Secretaries of State, and the agreement would make that more structured than in the past. He supported contacts both in Europe and between the two countries.

Mr Austin Currie (Dublin West) stated that the best way to achieve reconciliation between the two traditions in the North was through representatives of the traditions working together in Government to solve the problems. To do so successfully required power and responsibility.

He referred to the 13 "disappeared" in the North who were believed to have been murdered and whose relatives wished to have the bodies found so that they might accord them a Christian burial. He asked the Taoiseach to ensure that the bodies could be recovered as part of a settlement.

The Taoiseach observed that Deputy Currie had been the most persistent advocate in the Oireachtas for the case of the relatives of the "disappeared". As Taoiseach he had taken up the matter on many occasions with all the groups and would continue to do so—it was appalling that, 20 years later in many cases, the relatives had no information on the missing people and had not been able to bury them properly.

More generally, he could not understand why politicians sometimes shied away from a powerful Strand One. The British and Irish Governments wanted Strand One to be powerful and to have the devolved areas under the leadership of the people in Northern Ireland. That was the basis of Strand One. There had been numerous

occasions on which an effort had been made to diminish those powers, but both the Irish and British Governments wanted to see a powerful body.

Demilitarisation of the Border Region

2. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin (Cavan-Monaghan): To ask the Taoiseach to outline both the steps taken by the Irish Government to reverse the militarisation of the Border region, including the dismantling of checkpoints and spyposts and other obstructive military structures, some of which have actually been reinforced during the peace process and the commitments, if any, he has secured from the British Prime Minister in relation to demilitarisation; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin welcomed the Taoiseach and the Members of the Body to County Cavan. He acknowledged the opening of cross-Border roads and, in particular, the ongoing works to open Aughalane Bridge. He gave credit to the communities affected by the closures and who campaigned for their reopening; the roads should never have been closed because their closure served no purpose in preventing armed activity. He asked the Taoiseach to agree that the deployment of the British armed forces has been a source of conflict and that it should be recognised that the threat came from all engaged in armed actions-which must include the British armed forces. Recent exposure of British Army collusion in the killing of Nationalists in the North required an international judicial inquiry and he asked the Taoiseach to seek that an inquiry be established. He stressed the intrusive impact of the British military presence at the Border for the residents of the region.

The Taoiseach said that his Government had regularly raised the issue of the security forces in the Border region through the Intergovernmental Conference-most recently on 5 March. He was aware of the impact of military installations and their associated activities on the local communities and one goal of the talks process was to try to de-escalate of security measures in order to reinforce a widely-acceptable political settlement. He accepted the need for vigilance in response to the threat from groups, like the LVF and the Continuity Army Council, but felt that security needed to be balanced with the wider imperative of establishing a normal peaceful society as soon as possible.

He welcomed the relaxation of certain security measures since the IRA cease-fire last June. He was, however, aware of considerable local concern at the observation towers in south Armagh, the high levels of helicopter activity in east Tyrone and south Armagh and the obtrusive security presence in parts of Belfast and elsewhere. The utmost sensitivity was required from all elements of the security forces, consistent with the fullest possible protection of both communities; after Christmas, many of the elements which had been relaxed had to be quickly put back in place because of the security situation. He looked forward to further de-escalatory measures and would raise with the British authorities the matters to which Mr McNamara referred.

Mr Charles Flanagan accepted that there was a difficulty over the de-escalation of military activity, given that since Christmas there have been 16 deaths and numerous acts of terrorism. He referred to the lack of public discussion of the issue of punishment beatings and the lack of condemnation of them from the talks process. He asked the Taoiseach to encourage those at the talks to make a public condemnation and dissociation from such horrific acts.

The Taoiseach utterly condemned punishment beatings of all forms and by all persons. There had been many victims, and the organisation representing them which visited the Oireachtas to convey the horror of the experiences. He gave credit to the Secretary of State, Dr. Mowlam, for examining new forms of involving the community and seeking to involve community policing co-operation. The work was under way, but would not reach fruition unless there was a reform of policing. Many people in the communities in the North were horrified by punishment beatings and, though policing was probably the bigger issue, punishment beatings had to stop.

Investment in the Border Regions

6. Seymour Crawford (Cavan-Monaghan): To ask the Taoiseach if, having regard to the fact that the Border regions are among the most deprived in the country and are unable to obtain an equitable share of inward investment, he is satisfied that Interreg and other cross-Border fundings such as the International Fund for Ireland and Peace and Reconciliation funding are actually being spent as additional funding in the Border regions rather than in substitution for funds which should be spent by Governments; and if he will make a statement.

10. Andrew Boylan (Cavan-Monaghan): To ask the Taoiseach whether he considers that, in view of the fact that both Northern Ireland and the Border counties have suffered in economic terms over the last thirty years, the Government should now redirect promotional and catch-up funding to enable the economic deficit to be reversed; if he will endeavour to ensure that the Government of the United Kingdom will also engage in such an exercise; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Seymour Crawford welcomed the Taoiseach and the delegates to County Cavan. Referring to the INTERREG, IFI and Peace and Reconciliation Fund funding he mentioned the doubt about Ireland's retention of objective 1 status and considered that unless the money spent was additional to that spent by the State it would not have the desired beneficial effect. An example of the uneven spread of funds was the lower level of increase in expenditure on national and county roads in Cavan and Monaghan.

Mr Andrew Boylan welcomed the Taoiseach and delegates to County Cavan. He considered that the best guarantee the Taoiseach could give for the economic life of region was to ensure it retained objective 1 status. He thanked the Taoiseach for his address to the Body and considered that peace could be copperfastened with an economic uplift.

The Taoiseach pointed out that the Department of Finance was jointly responsible with the Northern Ireland Office for the delivery of the Peace and Reconciliation Fund. Much of the programme under the Fund was distributed by the intermediary funding bodies, independently of Government. The INTERREG Programme focused on the development of the linkages and co-operation of a large proportion of the applications which were cross-Border in nature, addressing disadvantage and trying to assist reconciliation and cross-Border co-operation. There were measures under each programme which were not funded under other programmes and that precluded substitution: funding had to be additional. The monitoring committee kept the matter under constant review to ensure that all spending was additional, and if there were examples to the contrary he would like to know about them.

Since the last meeting of the Body the mid-term review of the programme had resulted in an additional ECU 100 million approved by the EU. It was estimated that the Border region would account for £1.3 billion of expenditure under the Community Support Framework - approximately 15 per cent of the expenditure. For the period 2000-6, under the proposals issued on 18 March that objective 1 status would not be open to Ireland as in the past because it had exceeded the benchmark figure of 75 per cent of European GDP. It had been agreed that objective 1 status would be available for a transitional period between 2000-6. His Government in negotiating would have to make a decision on how it could draw down the maximum, and would do its utmost to help the regions that needed it most, including the Border area.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary

7. Mr Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): To ask the Taoiseach how important he considers change in the structure and make-up of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is to a successful outcome of the peace process; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster) asked the Taoiseach if he agreed this was a vital area in terms of parity of esteem and security. He inquired how far they could get towards effecting change with regard to security and considered that to do so would require a clear sense of direction for the future. He wondered if the Taoiseach could help everyone along that route, referring in particular to the international independent commissions which deal with prisoner and policing issues and whether they are seen as a means of retaining confidence as the referenda approach.

The Taoiseach agreed that those matters would help to give confidence; but a major reform of policing was needed for a settlement to work. The initial changes by the Secretary of State, Dr. Mowlam, were useful but not comprehensive enough, while some of the papers which have been discussed within the talks are helpful. The issue of policing was one of the crucial matters that must be finalised. For the Nationalist community, reform of policing was an essential aspect of a political settlement.

Policing opened up many other issues which would resolve a great deal of discontent and assist over the parades issue. His Government felt that the future police service

in Northern Ireland had to reflect the community in terms of its composition and ethos, with equal esteem to the Nationalist and Unionist traditions. However, the RUC could not become a totally community based police force overnight. It was a difficult and sensitive issue.

The Chairman thanked the Taoiseach for his address to the Body on his plans and programmes. He noted that the Taoiseach had observed that many Members of the Body were involved over the years in searching for peace and prosperity and that there were younger people present who hopefully would take on the challenge. The Taoiseach bridged the past and the future, and his confidence, tolerance and commitment gave everyone confidence. He reiterated his thanks using the Irish phrase - "Céad míle bhuíochas."

Mr David Winnick, Co-Chairman (Walsall North) also thanked the Taoiseach for his attendance. He noted the disappointment of Members who did not have the opportunity to ask questions and considered it a similar situation to that experienced by MPs when trying to ask questions during Prime Minister's Question Time in the House of Commons. He praised the Taoiseach and his predecessor and Prime Minister Blair and *his* predecessor on their efforts to bring about a settlement. Everyone hoped that agreement would be reached in the near future and that the horror, brutality and bloodshed would finally come to an end. The Prime Minister was aware of the strong feeling which existed in the British Parliament for a lasting settlement in Northern Ireland.

The Chairman asked the Taoiseach for written replies to the questions that he had not answered, for inclusion in the report of the meeting.

The Taoiseach said that he would provide those answers. He thanked the Co-Chairmen for the opportunity to attend and members for listening and asking questions, observing that he preferred Question Time in the House of Commons, particularly for the Prime Minister, to the system in Dáil Éireann, where he answered questions for about three hours of questions per week - and it was increasing all the time.

Matters were only a few weeks from conclusion-or returning to further difficulty. Many people have given years of attention and persevered with the difficulties of the Governments and the political parties in the House of Commons and Oireachtas Éireann. He thanked Members for their efforts. There was an opportunity, if a settlement were reached, of the Body being very involved in convincing all that it would the resulting agreement was worthwhile.

The Session was suspended at 11.10 am and was resumed at 11.45 am in private, with Mr Michael O'Kennedy in the Chair

The Session was resumed in public at 12.20 pm.

PUBLIC SESSION

7. AMENDMENTS TO RULES

Motion made, and Question proposed:

That the Amendments to Rules 29 and 30 proposed by the Steering Committee in Document No. 57 be made with immediate effect. **-(Mr Kevin McNamara):.**

Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North) moving the motion, informed members that the amendment to Rule 29 was purely technical and arose because the British side was now being financed through a grant-in-aid and not through the IPU and that it was therefore proposed to remove the reference to the IPU. The amendment to Rule 30 arose from discussions at the Steering Committee concerning ways in which Associate Members could be involved more directly with the workings of the Body. It was felt that by assigning Associate Members to a panel attached to each Committee, circulating them with the papers associated with the Committee to which they were attached, and allowing them to vote and to count towards the quorum of such Committees when they were nominated to attend, they would have a greater involvement in the Body.

The Chairman indicated that the suggestion had the full endorsement of the Steering Committee.

Senator Pascal Mooney sought clarification on the nomination of substitutes.

Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North) indicated that the provision was intended to maintain a party balance.

Lord Merlyn-Rees indicated, purely for information, that Members of the House of Lords did not receive a salary, but only receive an allowance for attendance.

Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North) recognised the problem for the Members of the House of Lords who attended other bodies.

Ordered, That the Amendments to Rules 29 and 30 proposed by the Steering Committee in Document No. 57 be made with immediate effect.

8. SECOND ANNUAL REPORT

Motion made, and Question proposed:

That the Body takes note of the Second Annual Report of the Body (Doc No 56)-**(Mr Michael Mates)**

Mr Michael Mates (Hampshire East) remarked that he considered it a good thing that the Body have an annual report which could be built on over the years and which served as a record of the Body.

Senator Pascal Mooney proposed that the report be laid before both Parliaments to give them an opportunity to debate it.

Mr Michael Mates (Hampshire East) thought it a good idea to place the report in the Parliaments' libraries.

The Chairman referred to the constraints on the Body as it is not a committee of the Parliaments but agreed with the suggestions that it should be laid in the Library..

Senator Pascal Mooney suggested that the Seanad would readily allow for debate on the report.

Mrs Marian McGennis (Dublin Central) agreed with Senator Mooney's proposal and suggested that recent legislation may have considered the Body as a committee of the Oireachtas. Referring to Lord Merlyn-Rees's earlier comment she suggested that attendance at the Body should be recognised for the Lords.

Mr Kevin McNamara (Hull North) suggested it would be useful for bodies interested in British-Irish matters, such as universities, to receive copies of the Body's reports.

Senator Pascal Mooney supported the points made and considered that there should be a greater dissemination of the Body's deliberations.

The Chairman suggested that such recommendations be made in the report of the Body's proceedings.

And the Question being put:- It was agreed to.

Resolved, That the Body takes note of the Second Annual Report of the Body (Doc No 56).

The Session was suspended at 12.45 pm and resumed at 2.30 pm with Mr Michael O'Kennedy in the Chair.

9. THE FUTURE OF THE BODY

The Body proceeded to an informal discussion of the future role of the Body, having regard to the possibility

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North), introducing the debate, noted that the Taoiseach had already touched on the future of the Body earlier. It would be appropriate to consider why the Body came into existence in the first place: as a gathering of parliamentarians, not as a mechanism to try to resolve the situation in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland inevitably loomed large during debates on political motions; but the purpose of the Body was to maintain dialogue between Members of both sovereign Parliaments, in addition to the ministerial contacts which have been built

up over the past ten or fifteen years. The parliamentary tier had been considered necessary as a result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the talks between both Governments in 1981. He regretted that the Unionists had decided to boycott the Body from the beginning. He recalled hesitation in the beginning about discussing sensitive matters. Initially, political motions were debated in private in case bitter controversy arose which could have split the Body but as the Body had become more mature, Members became less hesitant about discussing such matters.

Apart from the intergovernmental council, if the talks were successful there was the possibility of a Council of the Isles which would take in the two sovereign Parliaments and proposed assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. He endorsed the idea in the outline of the Heads of Agreement between the two Governments it was considered that there should be a parliamentary forum comprising representatives from the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Body was not in the business of self-promotion at the expense of any agreement and everyone wanted a lasting settlement, but it would be unfortunate if the ability to work together and to represent different opinions developed over eight years were to cease. If there had been such links in the past, some of the appalling problems of the past 25 years might have been lessened. He expressed the Steering Committee's view that the Body should find ways of continuing its work, and suggested two possibilities: either continuing as at present or possibly acting as a parliamentary tier within the proposed Council of the Isles. These were matters not only for the Body but also for the two Governments. There was no criticism from the UK side of the Body's work and existence, except from the Unionists, and there was a general consensus that such a parliamentary link was useful. He would be surprised if there was criticism on the Irish side.

The Chairman agreed that it was appropriate, given the situation in Scotland and Wales and the possibility of a Northern Ireland Assembly, to discuss the future role of the Body.

Mr Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) said that his upbringing had been bathed in democracy and inter-nation debates. His parents were from Estonia, he was raised in Northern Ireland and was a Welsh MP who was very involved in the assembly referendum debates. Whether the Body should continue or not centred around its role; and he referred to three specific points - East-West arrangements, the Welsh and Scottish dimension and the need to generate a short, medium and long-term strategy for the Body.

The Body should provide the basis for the East-West elements of the Council of the Isles; and Westminster and Dublin should make sure that this was handled responsibly. The remit of the Body might need to be extended to help to define how the Council should operate. The potential for relationships between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales could not be over-emphasised. He referred to his work on the creation of a regional air network in Wales which would have implications for the economic development of the British

Isles and suggested that it might be appropriate for the Committees to take on formal roles to advise the evolving economic and political structures.

It important to remember that the relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland was different from that between the UK and Northern Ireland. He worried that some people felt the Council of the Isles would be the complete solution. The relationship between the UK and the Republic of Ireland was international whereas that between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was intra-national. The Body had to define its role very clearly and ensure that the relationship between the four elements of the UK and the Republic of Ireland developed in a sensible way and with the approval of both Parliaments.

It was important for the Body to develop a clear strategy in order to maximise its contribution to the debate. The Body needed to consider what should be done in the short-, medium- and long-term. In the short-term, as a backbench organisation, its usefulness was great in times of crisis because strong relations between the two Parliaments would help higher level talks if they became strained. He believed it should be made clear that the Body was a tool that others in Government could use to great effect when they needed to overcome an impasse. In the medium-term the Body should put down a marker in terms of its role in the Council of the Isles; and in the long-term it was important to emphasise the belief of some members in a Europe of the regions where regional differentiation would be promoted in providing an economic and cultural diversity. The Body needed to discuss its long-term role even though there were some (with whom he disagreed) who believed that was too long a timescale to consider in today's volatile environment. Finally, he observed that many people forget the importance of Europe in the longer term. The Body had to be clear on its remit, distinguishing between intra-national and international relationships.

Mr Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster) pointed out that this was his maiden speech from the floor and expressed his gratitude to the Labour Party for enabling him to be on the Body.

The Body had had a good debate in Cardiff when it examined its future in the light of the developing peace process. Its role should not be diluted but it might have to be fitted into greater things. It could become a subcommittee of the Council of the Isles, to which he did not object provided that it had a separate identity. If the Body was diluted, its effectiveness and the notice the Governments paid to it would diminish. The Assembly in Strand One spoke for itself and that Strand Two was vital. He noted there would be a ministerial council and an agency with elective and executive responsibility. The implementation bodies would also be important, but the most vital aspect of Strand Three would be the continuation of the conference.

Having spent his parliamentary life on the backbenches, he was engaged in and concerned about the control of the executive by the legislature. and this Body had an invaluable role in that regard. The parliamentary link was not mentioned in the original Framework Document and it was up for discussion in the most recent

framework documents. He stressed the necessity of the Council of the Isles and highlighted the difference between sovereign parliaments being engaged in peace, security and such matters and the necessary regional input. The intergovernmental council and the totality of relationships would broaden the issue in that it would involve the two Governments, the Northern Ireland Administration and those in Wales and Scotland; there were elements involved in the process which wanted this.

The process was far from over; and it was clear that the settlement would be fairly outline in nature. It was the outline institutions that would deliver the eventual peace, rather than the settlement alone. There might be a partial peace, and it would be up to public representatives to develop it into a full peace. There was a definite role for the two sovereign Parliaments and a contributory role with regard to a Northern Ireland Assembly. The sovereign Parliaments would remain the driving force for some time.

Dr Rory O'Hanlon (Cavan-Monaghan) agreed with the Chairman that it was regrettable that the Unionists could not attend this plenary session, the first in an Ulster county. Although there was agreement that the Body should remain, the question was whether there should be one or two bodies - a British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body and a Council of the Isles. He would prefer one body.

He wondered where this Body would fit in. An integrated body would cause problems because on the UK side, there would be the sovereign Government and representatives of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, while on the Irish side there would only be one unit. The new body might accommodate representatives of the regions. He also felt that the two Governments should look at the logistics of having a Council of the Isles, which might be cumbersome-it was important to get the structures right.

Mr Denis Canavan (Falkirk West) said he had before him the document on the Heads of Agreement produced by both Governments on 12 January referring to an intergovernmental council to deal with the totality of relationships to include representatives of the British and Irish Governments, the Northern Ireland Administration and the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales. Within the intergovernmental council there would be representatives of the sovereign Governments, and the Northern Ireland Administration would be the executive body in Northern Ireland. It was interesting that the document did not repeat the word "administration" regarding Scotland and Wales, but referred to devolved institutions. It was ambiguous whether members of the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament who were not members of the associated executive bodies would be eligible for membership of the intergovernmental council.

It was important the Body put forward views on how a parliamentary tier should develop, and there was merit in such a tier being associated with an intergovernmental tier. A parliamentary tier would enable more freedom of expression and a more frank and robust debate; it should comprise members of the Oireachtas, the British Parliament, the Northern Ireland and the Welsh Assemblies

and the Scottish Parliament. He understood that the concept of a Council of the Isles had been put forward by the Ulster Unionists and was referred to as a "Council for the British Isles" by David Trimble. This would cause offence to Irish colleagues; he suggested as an acronym IONA-Islands of the North Atlantic.

He questioned whether there should be one, two or three parliamentary tiers and indicated there was a case for a North-South and East-West parliamentary tier which would be a continuation of the present Body, and for the Council of the Isles which would be a broader and more representative body. He accepted that there might be too much confusion if there were too many parliamentary tiers but that it would be wrong to come to a firm conclusion before the end of the talks. If there were one tier only, it should involve members of the five bodies to which he referred, and not just the two Governments.

HE questioned whether membership should be confined to both Parliaments, since the Body did not have sovereign or executive powers but was a useful forum for the exchange of views and the building of better relations. He asked whether it mattered that membership should be confined to the two sovereign Parliaments; disadvantage of the Body as it operated at present was the absence of the Ulster Unionists, who might find it easier to join a broader parliamentary body-which would be enriched by their presence.

Mr Michael Colvin (Romsey) said that it was a fact of life that the intergovernmental organisation established would be executive and that such bodies needed to be accountable to the organisation they represent. One difficulty would be that they might tend to take nationalistic positions; the value of the Body was that it encompassed more than national or party political outlooks. The new forum should be of the same type; but he was resigned to the fact it might be subsumed into a Council of the Isles at a future date. Committee B had had difficulty getting to grips with precisely what the Nordic Council was about; but it was certainly an example of how a number of countries with differing views could overcome their national differences and agree on common approaches to certain problems. It might be a useful model for a Council of the Isles.

The existence of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation had to be taken into account when deciding the composition of the Council of the Isles because it was established as a result of paragraph 11 of the Joint Declaration which called for the Irish Government to set up a forum where democratically-mandated parties could discuss issues related to the conflict. Membership of the Council of the Isles and what it should do had to be worked out. He acknowledged Mr Öpik's reference to the short-, medium- and long-term. With regard to Iona, he questioned what the people of the Isle of Man might have to say.

Lord Merlyn-Rees considered that it might be instructive to look at the reports of annual conferences of political parties in the Republic and Great Britain over the past years to see what they talked about. Their outlook was transient by nature because they were influenced by a constantly changing society. He believed that the change

in Scotland was much more powerful than in his native Wales where there would be an Assembly. Nationalism in Wales was weak and was more of a cultural phenomenon than in Ireland. He stressed the need for caution because we did not know whether the talks would succeed. Mr Canavan's analysis of the structures which might appear was very instructive. He wondered what type of structure would appear in Northern Ireland and said he would like the Unionists to join the Body.

There should only be one Body. If the peace process came to fruition there might be a security problem which could not be ignored. It would be best to wait to see what emerged from the peace process.

Mr David Winnick took the Chair as Chairman

Senator Pascal Mooney hoped that such a security problem would not arise. He echoed the sentiments of Members about the absence of Unionist parliamentarians; their presence at the Body would be very useful. He shared the view that the Body should remain in existence, whatever arose from the talks, and that with the great changes taking place for Scotland and Wales the Body should remain pre-eminent as it represented the two sovereign Parliaments. The agenda of the Body invariably concerned Northern Irish or North-South issues; and he wondered how that would be affected with a settlement in the North. Perhaps the work of the committees was the way forward. He referred to the shared and common heritage of the people of Ireland and Britain and saw a development of the relationships in the European context. The uniqueness of the Body was founded in its non-executive nature.

Mr Michael O'Kennedy resumed the Chair

Mr Gerry Bermingham (St Helens South) pointed out that the British Members of the Body were inevitably chosen for their independent-mindedness. The Council of the Isles was a very good idea, particularly given the common heritage of the people of the islands. As a person who considered himself a part of the communities on both islands he saw prejudice as the greatest enemy to living in peace and creating a society to benefit all.

Mr Robert Jackson (Wantage) considered the issue of East-West structures as an important element of the negotiations and that the Body must wait to see what agreement emerged and remain ready to assist that process. It would be sensible to consider the possible functions of East-West bodies. He shared Mr Canavan's analysis that a Council of the Isles should not be a purely executive body but should have a parliamentary element and that such a membership would have to be broader than the Body, representing a possible five assemblies. He saw a role for the Body in the broader context.

Mr David Tredinnick (Bosworth) recalled his visit to Northern Ireland as a soldier in 1969 and the difficulty of relationships between communities at that time and noted the sharp contrast with the friendly relationships that had developed since then, and which the Body demonstrated so well. There was no need to disband or even alter

the Body and considered that it would be a mistake to alter its status: in short, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".

Mr Conor Lenihan (Dublin South-West) agreed with the views expressed by Lord Merlyn-Rees and Mr Tredinnick. The proposed Council of the Isles was a very good idea as an interregional body. In future, the Body should focus on economic matters, particularly Irish/British trade. He also suggested that the Body might broaden its membership to include affiliate members from the business community.

Mr David Winnick took the Chair as Chairman

Mr O'Kennedy (Tipperary North) recalled the atmosphere of suspicion at the beginning of the Body's existence which had stemmed from a lack of contact between Members of both Parliaments. However, since that time the Body had developed into an irreplaceable asset of knowledge and understanding. The Body could claim a contribution in having developed an atmosphere in which the two Governments had been able to come together. Composed as it was of elected representatives, the Body reflected the views of the people in providing support for the actions of the executive powers. The Body should be developed, and the work of the Committees has already extended its role to a degree. Whatever the outcome of the talks, the Body would still have an important role to play. With regard to the Body's future, he referred to the Taoiseach's indication earlier in the day that the parliamentary tier that might emerge from the talks would most likely be the Body.

Mr Roger Stott (Wigan) said that it was refreshing to hear the comments made by Mr Tredinnick. He recalled that when speaking at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation he had emphasised the role of the Body in promoting friendship and understanding between Members of both parliaments. The Body did not set agendas; rather, it provided a vehicle for the development of contacts between the Parliaments.

The Chairman said that whatever structures might emerge from the peace settlement, Members should seek to continue their working relationships. He saw a strong case for the Body to continue to function as a link between the Parliaments and a place to air opinions. He stressed that the Body was not simply in the business of self-preservation but should continue as a valuable link between the Parliaments.

He echoed Lord Merlyn-Rees's point that the Members did not know what might emerge from the talks process and what would develop from it. It was certain that those who did not want an agreement would seek to destroy it; moreover, any final arrangements might be some way from the initial settlement. As regards the points put by Mr Canavan and Dr. O'Hanlon that a Council of the Isles might lead to duplication of the Body's activities, he advised that the Body should wait to see what may emerge from the talks. His view was that the Body should continue to function, especially to carry out the useful work of the Committees. He also referred to Mr Canavan's point about parliamentary accountability and considered the Body useful in that regard. His own view was that there was a danger of being submerged in the

new arrangements, and the important East-West issues might be somewhat obscured.

Mr Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) clarified his point that the Body might not continue in its present form and he shared the view that the best form of developing it may be in a more inclusive format.

The Chairman said that the consensus was that the East-West dialogue should continue. He thought that the majority view was that the Body should continue and accepted that there were some Members who considered that it should do so under a wider umbrella.

Mr Robert Jackson (Wantage) said that it would be a mistake to think that East-West relations in the future would just be between the UK and Ireland; the significant changes taking place in the governance of the UK had to be embraced.

Mr Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster) agreed with the points made by Mr Canavan and Mr Jackson. There were two main issues: the enlargement of the Body to include the devolved assemblies, the idea of a council similar to the Nordic Council but which would retain the bilateral aspects. He also noted that if the Body was to continue as one institution inevitably there would be difficulties with the composition on the British side with a mixture of sovereign and devolved assemblies.

Senator Pascal Mooney stressed that the devolution debate was a matter for the British side. In order not to dilute the Body, the British representation would have to come from the existing arrangements, with a small representative group from the devolved assemblies..

The Chairman summarised the debate, noting that no Member had suggested that the Body should not continue and that there was agreement on the importance of its continuing its work. If there were differences of opinion, they were on other issues. He concluded that future developments would determine the continuation and the form of the Body in the future.

The sitting was adjourned at 4.15 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. tomorrow.

TUESDAY, 31 MARCH 1998

The sitting was opened in public at 10.30 a.m. in the Slieve Russell Hotel, Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan, with Mr Michael O'Kennedy in the Chair.

1. RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Motion made and Question proposed:

That this Body records its deepest appreciation of the commitment and hard work of all those involved, including the Independent Chairmen, in the multi-party talks which are now in their concluding and most critical stage; urges the participants to

take, in a spirit of reconciliation and generosity, the final steps to a just, comprehensive and balanced statement within the three strands of the present talks; expresses its appreciation for the continuing goodwill and support internationally for such a settlement; recognises the need for all parties to continue to adhere to the principles of democracy and non-violence which have underlain the talks; and looks forward to a successful outcome to the talks and the support of the people in the referenda, North and South.-(**Mr Charles Flanagan.**)

Mr Charles Flanagan (Laois-Offaly) said that the Steering Committee recorded its deepest appreciation to all those involved for their recent efforts and, more critically, as the last nine days approached. He regretted that yet again a plenary session of the Body took place without any Unionist presence from Northern Ireland. He recorded his appreciation of the involvement of people from the US in attempting to forge agreement, particularly President Clinton, who had maintained a keen interest in Northern Ireland and George Mitchell whose contribution had been immense. He also referred to the involvement of the US Ambassador to Ireland, HE Mrs Jean Kennedy-Smith, who was to depart later in the year.

The peace process had gone down a rocky road since the last Plenary Session but that the next nine days were critical. He regretted the re-emergence of violence throughout Northern Ireland. He outlined recent events on both sides of the Border and thanked the Gardaí for its efforts. The level of progress on demilitarisation was disappointing but unsurprising given current circumstances. There was frustration in rural areas about military activity caused primarily by Republicans.

Punishment attacks were nothing short of fascist intimidation, and although some had sought to justify them by reference to crime, there has been no reduction in crime. He was disappointed that in spite of intense negotiations at the talks there was not greater condemnation of these atrocities. The Mitchell Principles should be rigidly applied and there should be no halfway house between democracy and violence. Ending punishment attacks and other atrocities was fundamental to peace and should be as high on the agenda as the prisoner issue.

Decommissioning was a closely-related issue on which there had been no new developments. He wondered whether the April 9 deadline was realistic and whether something quick was wanted or something right. He believed that the outline of an agreement would be achieved but that those involved would have a huge task in preparing for a referendum at the end of May. The Body had a role to ensure the issues were put to the people in the form of a campaign; he wanted the Irish members in particular to take a strong and positive line. A settlement would only work if each party made a mammoth effort to address the agendas of the others as a priority. A peaceful future had to be based on a fair and balanced settlement; nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed. He recalled the Taoiseach's outline of the basis of a settlement. It behoved all parties involved to make the final effort.

The issues of self-determination and consent were fundamental to a settlement. There would be balanced change to Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic of Ireland's Constitution and if there was peace on the island that would not be an issue, because constitutional change had been accepted for many years along with an acknowledgement of the two traditions on the island. Given European advancement and movement away from the nation-state theory, there should be no difficulty changing a Constitution agreed before the Second World War.

He wished everyone involved in the talks success and good fortune.

Mr Kevin MacNamara (Hull North) raised the issue of Strand Two, which had been at the centre of many problems for the past 30 years. He recalled the failure of the Sunningdale agreement and prior proposals. Yet again in these talks it was the desire of the Unionists to seek an internal settlement without reference to a North-South aspect that lay at the root of problems. The Unionists had a deep fear that if they made any concessions would be on a slippery slope to a united Ireland. Many regarded the Unionist fear of the Republic as irrational and without foundation and felt that the Republic had been generous in its attempts to put Unionists minds at rest. Nevertheless, the fear existed and it would be the crunch issue. It was up to everyone to convince Unionists that this was the best chance for agreement in Northern Ireland for both communities and those in England and it was equally important for everyone not to be blinded by their hopes and aspirations.

The spirit in which the agreement would be implemented would be of equal, if not greater, importance than what it contained. He believed that the impending agreement would be a skeleton requiring much fleshing- out to make it work. The equality, intimidation, policing and prisoners issues could easily throw an agreement off course, as with Sunningdale. The agreement would be a start, not a conclusion.

Senator Joe Costello believed that the Taoiseach had put it in a nutshell when he identified compromise as the key element in forming the final resolution. There had been a number of failed agreements; and he concurred with Mr McNamara's comments. He referred to Mr Peter Brooke's three stranded approach in 1991 and the totality of relationships which had been the thrust of all negotiations since then.

Constitutional change on the claims to territorial jurisdiction was a sticking point for Nationalists, North and South, and could be achieved in a referendum only on the basis of a satisfactory *quid pro quo* from the UK that would leave intact the Nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland but would qualify it by the principle of consent. The proposed internal Northern Ireland executive and legislature had to be based on the principle of proportional representation and must be seen to share power and responsibility between both communities. The present forum and peace talks arrangements- whereby parties and groupings which did not receive a critical mass of electoral support were included because they reached an agreed threshold of community support-should be retained. A North-South ministerial council with implementing bodies was a sensitive but necessary dimension which could become the success story of any new structures.

He welcomed the proposal to establish an East-West intergovernmental council. The Body should be the model for, and parent body of, the new legal entities being developed in Scotland and Wales and at the discussions on Northern Ireland. The quality of life for people in Northern Ireland was paramount. and any internal structures should be underpinned by a Bill of Rights. The issue of policing had to be speedily resolved, and that of prisoners must be given priority. He hoped for a new deal for the new millennium for Northern Ireland.

Lord Rathcavan confined his remarks to the issue of North-South bodies, which he believed would be the most contentious in the final stages of the talks. He noted that the Taoiseach had watered down the previous description of "executive bodies" to one of "implementing bodies with meaningful powers", but he also used the words "powerful bodies" which might be a bit strong to those in the North. Such bodies should operate under a remit handed down from the legislatures. The use of the words "executive powers" or "powerful" had been too emotive, and it would be helpful if the Governments indicated their positions in more detail on the proposed structure and checking mechanisms of North-South bodies.

He had personal experience of cross-Border co-operation on a large scale through the organisation which developed a single "Brand Ireland" operated by a central executive in which he played an active role during his eight years as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The project had been successful and made great commercial sense to those working in tourism; unfortunately, the new Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation in Dublin had decided without consultation to change Bord Fáilte's logo and had unnerved Northern opinion on how these new North-South bodies would function.

The new bodies had to be accountable to the new Assembly and to the Dáil, should be focused and objective, should not have wide-ranging powers, and should be operated by independent professional staff and directors, not by politicians. Such new North-South bodies would make a stronger case for the continuation of the Body with its welcome knowledge of all-Ireland issues and affairs.

Mr Brian O'Shea (Waterford) said that deadlines were important because they focused minds on solutions and that compromise was the key in reaching workable agreements. Mr McNamara had rightly said that there were difficulties for the Unionist community and it was regrettable that they did not attend. Settlement proposals would not be implemented without real political support, and bringing the settlement to fruition would be important. Grudging support for a settlement would be unhelpful.

The chairman of the talks would play a pivotal role in the days ahead and that the support of the US President was important. Some took a simplistic view that once settlement proposals emerge, there would be no problem selling them, particularly those concerning to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. Sometimes it was mistakenly said that it was those with republican views who most strongly supported Articles 2 and 3; but support went much deeper than that for a variety of

reasons. It was incumbent on politicians in the South to quell fears and cultivate a spirit of generosity. The majority of those on the island had had enough of the bomb and the bullet and wanted to rid Irish politics of violence. The positive elements in society had to be brought together and we needed to rid ourselves of adherence to symbols of the past which were no longer relevant.

Some elements, no matter what decision was reached and however overwhelming the democratic mandate, would use unlawful means to thwart implementation of the agreement. The stronger the mandate on both sides, the more such people would be isolated and it would become clear to them that they had no support in a new, peaceful Ireland.

Mr Michael Colvin (Romsey) said he would not be in politics if he were not an optimist. If there was a settlement there would be implementation bodies; but the process of implementation would need to be monitored by an organisation which was seen by all to be impartial, particularly on human rights and policing. If the monitoring task was undertaken by the respective Governments, impartiality would be impossible to achieve. The Council of Europe had demonstrated its effectiveness in monitoring political activities in member states, impartially and effectively, and it included the United Kingdom and Ireland. Countries of central and eastern Europe could benefit from involvement in the monitoring of a settlement in Ireland because of the political upheavals they had experienced during their own troubled histories. Committee B on European and International affairs, of which he was chairman, had that suggestion on its agenda for further consideration and would welcome comments. The Committee had agreed that there should be a special plenary meeting of the Body as soon after the end of the multi-party talks as practicable, but after any referenda.

The Chairman said the last suggestion was one which the Steering Committee could consider if the occasion arose.

Dúirt **Mr Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin** (Cavan Monaghan) gur mhaith leis tacú leis an rún agus a rá go bhfuil Sinn Féin ag obair go dian leis na páirtithe eile chun socrú daonlathach a bhaint amach.

Mr Michael Mates (Hamshire East) interjected to ask if Mr Ó Caoláin could speak in a language British Members could understand, and wondered if he was addressing the Body or the television cameras.

The Chairman suggested that Mr Ó Caoláin might be addressing others who understood him.

Mr Ó Caoláin (Cavan-Monaghan) said that the interruption was regrettable and showed a disrespect for the Irish language. His opening address would be in Irish and he would continue in English to facilitate the Mr Mates and others who did not understand Irish.

The Chairman asked the Deputy to be brief, as it was important that every Member understood what he had to say.

Mr Ó Caoláin (Cavan-Monaghan) said that he intended provide a translation and suggested that the interruption showed a need for simultaneous translation services.

Dúirt an Teachta go raibh deacrachtaí móra ann ach go raibh Sinn Féin ag obair fós chun síocháin bhuan agus cothrom na féinne don phobal uile a chur ar bun.

He supported the motion and reiterated Sinn Féin's commitment, as demonstrated in the all-party talks, to find an agreement on a democratic settlement which could form the basis for lasting peace and justice and a new relationship of trust between the two islands. Sinn Féin was committed to Irish reunification and the establishment of national democracy on a 32 county basis; but that did not mean it did not wish to be part of an agreement falling short of that objective. He directed his comments at those who alleged Sinn Féin had an exit strategy in the negotiations and insisted it remained strong in its commitment to its peace strategy.

While Nationalists and Republicans were willing to play their part in the search for agreement, they were not prepared to see the opportunity for a lasting peace reduced to a narrow agenda. Political and constitutional change must emerge from negotiations and must happen in the context of progress on justice and equality. The British Government was not a neutral force or facilitator in this process. A new type of Stormont or arrangement copperfastening partition would not be acceptable and there could be no return to Unionist domination. An agreed settlement needed to deliver progress in four areas: powerful all-Ireland bodies, constitutional and political change, equality and justice, and demilitarisation.

He reminded Members that the Body was meeting in the 200th anniversary year of the 1798 revolution in Ireland, a time of tragedy and hope; at that time, Irish democrats had made common cause with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) said that he found it hard to take lectures from a representative of Sinn Féin on the subject of justice and goodwill at a time when punishment beatings continued and when so many deaths had occurred. The time had come to look forward, and he wholeheartedly supported the motion. There had been political developments in Great Britain, in that the people of Scotland had voted overwhelmingly for home rule within the UK. The nature of the UK itself was changing and he hoped that the people of Northern Ireland would move with history. Voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic would have an opportunity to move matters forward in referenda. That said, however, nobody had any illusions about the risks and dangers of the coming months.

He asked Members to consider the case of two Scots Guards who had been in Maghaberry prison for six years. They had made a terrible mistake when they thought they had intercepted a terrorist whom they challenged but who ran away

and whom they had shot dead. They were now serving life sentences for murder, but the act had not been premeditated. It was not just to keep them in prison in Northern Ireland when convicted terrorists had been transferred to prisons in their home countries. He acknowledged that it was a difficult case for the Secretary of State to review but he wondered if his Irish colleagues could support the case for their transfer to Scotland, in the spirit of reconciliation and parity. The two young men were victims of a conflict which everyone was trying to bring to a close. He added that he had consistently supported the case for transferring Irish prisoners to serve sentences in Ireland.

Mr Conor Lenihan (Dublin South-West) welcomed Mr Ó Caoláin's contribution which rejected the myth that Sinn Féin was pursuing an exit strategy in the talks and which provided an assurance that his party was serious in pursuing peace. He also welcomed Mr Ó Caoláin's assertion that Sinn Féin was prepared to accept something short of the unity which it and his own party, Fianna Fáil, sought. He welcomed Senator Costello's contribution on the Nationalist aspirations in Articles 2 and 3. Mr O'Shea had pointed out that to undermine that objective would have a negative implications and would undermine the peaceful Nationalist and Republican parties. He supported Mr Colvin's idea for a special meeting of the Body in the event of an agreement, in order to reaffirm the Body's determination to sell such an agreement.

Members of the Body should commit themselves to campaign for agreement. He noted the opinion of a former Irish Attorney General, Mr John Rogers SC, that constitutional change in Ireland had failed in the past due to politicians not campaigning for a measure they proposed. The issues in this case were too important to allow such an approach. Issues of national sovereignty and frontiers were now considered differently than in the past; this was an important point in relation to a balanced constitutional change for securing agreement.

There were still armed elements determined to wreck a peace or any peace process with violence; and the Body should reaffirm that such elements would be dealt with ruthlessly. He instanced the negative impact of delay in the Middle East peace process, leading to further loss of life there. The goal of any peace process must be to save life; and that the process had to be a triumph for the pursuit of aims by political means. He supported Mr Colvin's proposal that the Body should signal its support for any agreement with a special meeting.

Mr Harry Barnes (Derbyshire North East) focusing on the Unionists, pointed out that if the scope and powers of the North-South bodies interfered with what they considered legal sovereignty they would be placed in considerable difficulty. There was a distinct difference between political and legal sovereignty, given the influence in any system of a range of international and economic influences. Any economic and social developments which occurred on a North-South basis as a result of a settlement would result in a *de facto* move toward a united Ireland. People might therefore wish, over time, to reshape institutions. It was his view that if as part of a settlement the bodies to be established had executive powers it might be a step too far for Unionists, but that was not to say that the institutions could not be significant

in their functional areas. There might be a need for a fast-track ratification procedure in the UK or Republic of Ireland or with in the Northern Ireland Assembly for decisions made by the bodies. Not having some mechanism to maintain legal sovereignty would be to push Unionists too far. Whatever the arrangements made, Nationalists could still retain their aspirations to a united Ireland.

Senator Paddy McGowan expressed his strong support for the motion. He emphasised to the Body the gravity of the tasks in hand and the great importance of ensuring a settlement for the sake of small farming communities in the Border region who had borne the brunt of the conflict. He appealed to Mr Ó Caoláin to use his influence with Sinn Féin to ensure that they would make it easier for the Unionists to reach agreement. He appealed to all who had influence to use it to promote peace and save lives. The peace process was not a "dry-run" but the real thing. He talked of the cross-Border business arrangements which have been very successful and which could be built upon. He complimented all those who have been courageous enough to date to go the extra mile for a settlement.

Mr Andrew Boylan (Cavan-Monagan) began by acknowledging the role of Senator George Mitchell in chairing the talks process and the courage of those who had participated in the talks and who had persevered despite intimidation. Referring to the air of expectation and support for a settlement, he hoped that there would be no delay in putting proposals before the people. Violent elements would attempt to disrupt the democratic process; moreover, the efforts of the police in Northern Ireland to address murders in the Nationalist community had been inadequate. Given the level of intelligence and co-operation that existed, it was not acceptable that men of violence roamed on both sides of the Border.

He agreed with Mr McNamara that after the agreement there would be the skeleton of a peace on which to build with investment in the Border region and Northern Ireland. Extra milk quota was needed for the farmers of the North and the six Border counties; this proposal had cross-Border support and would help to secure a living for many small farm families.

Senator Paschal Mooney, referring to the case raised by Mr Home Robertson, expressed his support for the transfer of the prisoners involved and undertook to communicate with the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the matter. One could not be selective about one's allegiances in matters of human rights.

The debate was taking place in the context of the ever-present spectre of violence. He expressed concern at the split which might take place in the Republican movement and surprise that Mr Ó Caoláin had made no reference to it because Sinn Féin's view on the matter would have been instructive. He accepted that Sinn Féin as a political party could only go so far in discouraging violent action on the fringes of Republicanism. He thought it important that the Body should highlight the matter. The majority of those killed in the North in the past few months had been from the Catholic/Nationalist community and had been killed for that reason alone. It was his strong view that sectarianism was the main evil to be rooted out by the peace

process. There was a widespread perception among Nationalists that the RUC had not been active in following up the murders-which was surprising, given the numbers of security forces in Northern Ireland and the vast resources at their disposal.

The Body must encourage the two Governments to reassure both communities in the North on issues such as equality and heritage. He urged the Unionists and Nationalists to go the extra mile in search for peace.

He complimented Senator McGowan on his long-standing work in initiating cross-Border contacts with Unionists. As it was possible to have successful cross-Border co-operation in business matters, for example, it must be possible to work together at other levels. With regard to tourism, he referred to the decision taken by the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation, Dr. McDaid, on tourism branding and hoped that it would not be misconstrued as a breach of faith in North-South relations.

In the context of an overall settlement and demilitarisation in Northern Ireland, he hoped that the GAA would encourage a change in its rule 21 which prevented RUC and British Army personnel from participating in Gaelic games. He noted that association football was probably the only sport not organised on all-Ireland basis and urged the two associations to reopen discussions on an all-Ireland league. It was to be hoped that there might ultimately be an all-Ireland international team.

Mr Roger Stott (Wigan) pointed out that difficult decisions were to be made in the near future and noted that all Members hoped for a resolution of the problems in the North as a result. In that context he supported Mr Colvin's proposal for the Co-Chairmen and the Steering Committee to consider reconvening the Body for a special Plenary Session before the referenda took place.

Mr Seymour Crawford (Cavan-Monaghan) expressed his support for the motion. He referred to the recent shootings and bombings and stressed the importance of consent as the basis for any agreement. He agreed on the importance of and the need for meaningful North-South bodies. There was already a range of North-South bodies working successfully in farming, business and some social areas such as health and education. He referred to the importance of the prisoners issue but stressed that the victims of the atrocities should not be forgotten in the context of an overall settlement. He also emphasised the importance of ensuring that the middle ground the North was convinced that there is a future in the agreement sought. The hard-liners needed to get down to the real work of negotiation in the effort to seek the best possible deal for all. All parties had to be prepared to go the extra distance because for the Border communities the prospect of failure was unthinkable.

Mr Peter-Temple Morris (Leominster) complimented Lord Rathcavan on putting forward a Northern Ireland viewpoint in such a civil and reasonable way. His contribution underlined the need for a greater Northern Ireland presence at the

Body, particularly from Unionists. He expressed support for the views of Mr Colvin, Mr Lenihan and others with regard to a special session after a settlement emerged. He reminded Members that the Body had considered holding a special one-day conference in the past, although it had not gone ahead and hoped that if a one day session were to be held that it might be possible to hold it in the North, after appropriate consultation.

It was very important that the case for the Body should not be lost or blurred in the rush to a settlement. With regard to the constitutional arrangements, he did not want the Body confused with a Council of the Isles. Although he expressed delight at the Taoiseach's indication to the Body of its future at the previous day's session, Strand Three, the East-West arrangements, was becoming very crowded. The Body's role should be the parliamentary coverage of the intergovernmental machinery. The development of a Council of the Isles or regional arrangements on the basis of variable geometry would blur that role and diminish the Body's effectiveness. If there were to be two parliamentary groups, one to cover the Council of the Isles and one for the intergovernmental mechanisms then so be it, but if there were to be but one, Northern Ireland MPs should take their places as Westminster MPs and there might be a limited representation for the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. The Body would be needed more than ever after a settlement.

Mr Michael Mates (Hampshire East) reflected on the palpable difference in atmosphere in the debate on this motion to the first debate conducted in London when, at that time, there was a deal of mutual suspicion. The friendliness of the debate that had just taken place indicated the importance of the Body and the extent to which it has developed in a short period. Senator McGowan's remark, that the peace process was not a "dry-run", had been the most potent point made.

All Members wished to see a meaningful settlement; and he urged all to be careful not to lessen the chances of a successful outcome. He agreed with Mr McNamara that putting flesh on the bones of the settlement would be a difficult task and would only have value in its implementation. He agreed with Members that the North-South strand would be the most difficult of the problems to be faced. He agreed with Senator Costello that the key issue would be one of finance. He noted that it was not planned for that body to have any fund-raising powers, although it may have some spending powers for moneys allotted to it. That was a real problem to be faced by the Governments.

Referring to the prisoners issue, he noted in particular the points made by Senator Costello and Mr Home Robertson. Having been a Minister at the time of the case referred to by Mr Home Robertson, he pointed out the difficulties. He hoped that the sentiments underlying Senator Mooney's generous response would help the prisoners and their families.

While he understood that the prisoners and their families had been victims of the Troubles, he stressed the importance of remembering not only the victims who were killed, but those who were almost killed. He referred to a case with which he dealt

when in the Northern Ireland Office of a prisoner who was coming up for possible release before the review body and who was serving a life sentence for an attempted murder in which a police officer had lost both legs and been severely disabled in other ways. The difficulty in that case was that had the man been released he would have gone to his home-which was three or four doors away from where the police officer still lived. He cautioned against making hasty judgments about prisoners being victims of the violence and their release without considering the cases of those victims of violence who were still alive and who had suffered greatly, and warned that the consequences could flow through the communities in which those victims live. He admitted that the case referred to presented him with one of the hardest decisions he had made in his time as Minister.

He welcomed the forthcoming referenda and did not foresee a problem in the Republic of Ireland. He was aware of the sensitivities about Articles 2 and 3 but considered that a comprehensive settlement required that they be addressed. He hoped there would not be an anti-referendum campaign in the North and that whatever was hammered out would be approved. He advised strongly against holding a Plenary Session between an announced settlement and a referendum as it might attract the criticism of trying to influence the outcome of such a referendum.

It had been a pity that Mr Ó Caoláin had not referred to Republican violence or the splits in that movement. He agreed that there must not be a return to Unionist domination, but asked Mr Ó Caoláin to remember that while domination was wrong, the wishes of the majority were paramount in a democracy and that those who had come late to the democratic process should realise that the majority community in Northern Ireland which had to approve and live with the proposals was the Unionist community.

Referring to Senator Mooney's point about the GAA, he was happy that the Senator had advocated the removal of rule 21. Gaelic games were great fun and should be open to all. He agreed strongly with Senator Mooney's points about association football and considered the Irish rugby team a shining example of co-operation. He vowed to support the Irish rugby team-except when it played England.

The Chairman considered that the debate had been significant. He wished that those who had inhibitions or suspicions had been present because they would have been reassured and encouraged. The spirit of generosity and determination displayed in the debate had been the hallmark of a significant moment in the Body's history. The Body had the potential to play a continuing and major role in the evolution of a permanent peace.

With regard to Mr Home Robertson's suggestion about the two Scots Guards prisoners, he considered it only fair and consistent to make a case for those prisoners as had been made by many for other prisoners. If necessary, Mr Home Robertson's proposal could be discussed more formally at the Steering Committee.

He considered that there was a consensus on Mr Colvin's proposal for a special meeting of the Body so that it might continue to play a role by way of encouragement and influence. The appropriate time would not be before the referendums, and a one-day conference, as suggested by Mr Temple-Morris, might be the appropriate means. He asserted that the Body's role would be positive and significant when the forthcoming element of the peace process was concluded.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) agreed that if there was a powerful feeling that the Body should meet in emergency session it should be considered very carefully.

The Question being put it, was agreed to.

Resolved, That this Body records its deepest appreciation of the commitment and hard work of all those involved, including the Independent Chairmen, in the multi-party talks which are now in their concluding and most critical stage; urges the participants to take, in a spirit of reconciliation and generosity, the final steps to a just, comprehensive and balanced statement within the three strands of the present talks; expresses its appreciation for the continuing goodwill and support internationally for such a settlement; recognises the need for all parties to continue to adhere to the principles of democracy and non-violence which have underlain the talks; and looks forward to a successful outcome to the talks and the support of the people in the referenda, North and South.

The Session concluded at 12.30 p.m.

2. ADJOURNMENT

Motion made, and Question proposed:

That the Body do now adjourn - **(The Chairman):**

Mr David Winnick, Co-Chairman (Walsall North) took the opportunity to thank the Chairman, Mr Michael O'Kennedy, for the manner of his chairing of the conference at this historic time.

The Chairman thanked Members for their attendance and contributions. He expressed thanks to the Slieve Russell Hotel for their efforts and facilities. He also expressed his thanks to the staff of the Body, especially for persuading the Co-Chairman to host dinner in Castle Leslie, which had proved to be a special experience. He extended particular thanks to Niamh Ryan, Veronica Carr and Rosanna Losty and to the Joint Clerks, Frank Cranmer and John Roycroft and to Breandán Ó Caollaí, Secretary to the Body. Having expressed a general thanks to the Members in Irish he bade farewell with the adage "Go mbeidh toradh bhúr saothar agaibh" - "May you have the reward of your efforts".

And the Question being put:- It was agreed to.

Resolved, That the Body do now adjourn.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Discoveries of weapons

9. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) To ask the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on recent discoveries of weapons, explosives and related materials connected with terrorist organisations.

An Taoiseach: Since the beginning of the year, the Garda Síochána have made a number of very significant discoveries of explosives and weapons linked to republican paramilitaries. I am thinking of the finds at Howth, Co. Dublin on 8 January, Redhills, Co. Cavan on 23 February, Hackballscross, Co. Louth on 2 March, Mullagh, Co. Cavan on 10 March and Castletown, Dundalk on 21 March.

Naturally, I welcome these developments. There is no doubt that the devices in question were almost ready for use to cause carnage destruction in towns and villages in Northern Ireland. I congratulate the Gardaí on their work. The importance of their success in this area cannot be underestimated.

These arms finds are a chilling reminder that there are those out there who are intent on wrecking the prospects for peace. We cannot let them succeed.

Parades

12. Dr Rory O'Hanlon (Cavan-Monaghan): To ask the Taoiseach if he believes that a formula can be found which will avoid further confrontation during the marching season this year; and if he will make a statement.

An Taoiseach: I hope that the will now exists in Northern Ireland for this year's marching season to be conducted without the confrontation which has become a characteristic of this period over the last number of years.

The Parades Commission has now been established on a statutory basis with determining powers as recommended in the North Review of Parades and Marches. The Government have broadly welcomed the establishment of the Commission. At the same time, I am acutely aware of the negative reaction in the Nationalist community to recent appointments to the Commission. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. David Andrews, T.D., raised these concerns with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the most recent meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 5 March 1998.

For the Commission to succeed, it is essential that it approaches its task in an even-handed way and is seen, in its decisions, to be fair and impartial. As I have said previously, the real test of the Commission's fairness will be in its decisions.

A balance must be struck between the rights of those who wish to march and equally valid rights of the residents in the area through which they seek to march. The Government continues to believe that accommodations on contentious parades can

most effectively be reached through local dialogue and agreement, based on mutual respect.

Transfer of prisoners

13. Tony Killeen (Clare): To ask the Taoiseach what is the present position regarding the transfer of the Balcombe Street siege prisoners to a jail in the Republic of Ireland; and if he will make a statement.

An Taoiseach: The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform has recently consented to the transfer of the prisoners referred to, and the necessary documentation as required under the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced persons has been returned to the United Kingdom authorities for their further consideration. The consent of the Home Secretary and the formal consent of the prisoners is now awaited. On receipt of same, arrangements will be made to apply to the High Court for the necessary warrants authorising their transfers and their continued detention here.

The Deputy may wish to note that considerable progress has been made in the area of prisoners transfers to Ireland, in line with provisions of the Convention. Eleven republican prisoners have been transferred to Ireland from the UK since 3 December, 1997 under the provisions of the Convention. This brought the total number of republican prisoners transferred to date from the United Kingdom to Ireland to seventeen.

I can assure the Deputy that every effort will continue to be made to process all such applications for transfer here as expeditiously as possible.