



**BRITISH-IRISH
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

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

FIRST ANNUAL REPORT

No. 50 — February 1997

THE WORK OF THE BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY

1. At its meeting at Adare Manor in May 1996 the Body approved a statement by the Steering Committee on its background, aims and principles. In that document, the intention was expressed that each year the Body should produce an annual Report on its activities. Accordingly, this is the first Annual Report which summarises the work done by the Body and its Committees in 1996.

Membership

2. In the course of the year, the Body was saddened by the loss of one of its Members, Mr Barry Porter MP. Mr Porter was replaced by Mr Michael Mates MP, formerly an Associate Member. Mr Neil Blaney TD who had died in 1995 was replaced as a full Member by Mr Tony Gregory TD, a former Associate Member. Dr Norman Godman was also made an Associate Member of the Body.

Plenary Sessions

3. In accordance with the rules and practice of the Body, two plenary sessions were held in 1996, one each in the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The Eleventh and Twelfth sessions took place respectively from 29th April to 1st May 1996 at Adare Manor, Limerick; and from 23rd to 25th September 1996 at the Bath Spa Hotel, Bath. The work done in the course of the year was particularly important in cementing the understanding between Members of the Body at a time when the peace process was gravely affected by the ending of the IRA ceasefire. The sessions assumed added importance because of the potential impact on sessions of the Body of general elections in both countries in 1997.

Eleventh Plenary

4. At Adare Manor, the Body was addressed by the Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dick Spring TD, who also answered Questions from Members of the Body. This was the third appearance by the Tanaiste, himself a former Member, at a meeting of the Body.

5. As has become customary, the main debate of the session was held on a Motion on recent political developments. At that time, the Body was concerned that the opportunity to secure a permanent peace should not be lost and urged all political parties to commit themselves to the principle of democracy and nonviolence and called for an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire.

6. The Body also debated two reports from Committee C on the International Fund for Ireland and from Committee D on Development of Cooperation in Arts, Culture and Sport. Both Reports commanded full support of the Body. A Motion was also passed taking note of the Government responses to the Report agreed at Cardiff in September 1995 on the Delors White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment. The session concluded with the usual debate on the work of the Body

and its Committees. In that debate, the opportunity was taken to approve the Statement on the background, aims and principles of the Body.

7. During the session, the Body also took note of the decision of the Economic and Social Affairs Committee to inquire into matters arising from animal health policies in both islands. This debate enabled Members to discuss a matter of topical concern namely the consequences of the impact on the market for beef resulting from the BSE crisis. The particular importance of the beef industry to Ireland was noted by a number of speakers and the inquiry was generally welcomed.

8. At the meeting of the Body at Adare Manor the customary security was maintained by the Garda Siochana. A short while after the session was over, Det Garda Jerry McCabe of the Limerick Garda, who had been involved in security arrangements for the Plenary session, was killed in the course of an armed robbery by the IRA. On behalf of the Steering Committee and the Body as a whole, the Co-Chairmen wrote expressing sympathy to the widow and family of Mr McCabe and to the local Garda force.

Twelfth Plenary

9. At the Session in Bath, the highlight of the session was the Statement and Question time with the Rt Hon Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Sir Patrick had been invited on several previous occasions to address meetings of the Body but had been prevented from attending the meetings in 1993 because of the clash of that session with the signing of the Downing Street Declaration and in subsequent years by clashes of engagements. He described his eventual attendance as a triumph of hope against adversity. His statement was all the more timely since there had been growing concern following the events at Drumcree.

10. The Body held its customary debate on recent political developments. In the light of the problems occurring in the peace process, the debate provided an opportunity for Members on both sides to bring their different perspectives to bear on the situation.

11. The Body debated a Report from Committee B on the EU Aid Package for Peace and Reconciliation; and approved the Replies of both Governments to reports on Cooperation in Arts, Culture and Sport and on the International Fund for Ireland, originally agreed at the session in Adare Manor.

Steering Committee

12. The Steering Committee met on five occasions in 1996. Two meetings were held in preparation for each of the plenary sessions. The fifth meeting, held on 23 July 1996, was called to enable Members of the Body to consider the situation following the events at Drumcree and Portadown in the height of the marching season in Northern Ireland. The Irish Members who came to London were able to meet a large

number of UK Members of the Body in addition to the formal meeting of the Steering Committee.

13. In a press statement following that meeting the CoChairmen indicated that

We are very much aware of the overall seriousness of the situation following recent events and as we approach the Apprentice Boys march on 10th August. The continuation of the political dialogue at all levels, and particularly at Governmental and Parliamentary level, is vital. The primacy of politics must be reasserted and every effort made to begin substantive political talks between the constitutional parties. Close cooperation between the two Governments is paramount in delivering this desirable end.

We deplore violence from wherever it comes and call upon the IRA again to declare a cessation of violence and upon the Protestant paramilitaries to continue their cease fire and commend them for doing so thus far. All the people of Northern Ireland deserve and require a restoration of the peace they so much appreciated for eighteen recent months.

The Body will be meeting at Bath in plenary session in September when British Ministers will address the Body and be formally questioned by British and Irish parliamentarians alike. The Body has a central and increasingly important role in preserving the dialogue between our two countries at the present time.

14. The Steering Committee has continued to seek an opportunity for the Body to visit Northern Ireland. Clearly the prospect of the Body holding a Plenary session is some way off. But should the peace process make sufficient progress, the Steering Committee will look to find an early opportunity of holding a full meeting of the Body in Belfast, if necessary in addition to the regular plenary sessions.

Committees

15. Reports on the activities of Committee A (Political and Security Affairs); Committee B (European and International Affairs); Committee C (Economic and Social Affairs) and Committee D (Education, Culture and the Environment) follow in the next section of the Report.

Participation of Members

16. The activities of Committees of the Body have been somewhat constrained by the approach of general elections in both the United Kingdom and the Republic. The narrow Parliamentary majorities of both Governments and consequent regular significant votes in both Parliaments have made it difficult for Members to be away from their Parliaments to make visits or hold Committee meetings. Given these constraints, attendance rates of Members have been good.

Prospects for 1997

17. As noted above General Elections must be called in both countries in 1997. As a result, once the House of Commons has been dissolved for the UK election, (which must take place by 22 May 1997) it may be difficult to make firm plans for another plenary session until the end of 1997.

18. In response to this challenge, the Steering Committee decided by bring forward the first (Irish) plenary session of 1997 to the beginning of March in the hope of holding at least one plenary in the course of the calendar year. It is not yet certain that the dissolution of the UK Parliament will be delayed long enough to enable the planned session to go ahead. But Committees are working earnestly to complete their work in time for a session in March.

19. We trust that the Body can be reconstituted on both sides as speedily as possible after the respective elections.

COMMITTEE A **Political and Security**

1. The Committee continued its inquiry into policing matters with a meeting in London in February which gave Committee Members an opportunity to exchange views on political developments following the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire at that time. Although the breakdown of the ceasefire had implications for the inquiry, it was agreed that the inquiry should continue. It was further agreed to raise prisoners issues at a forthcoming meeting with the Northern Ireland Security Minister, Sir John Wheeler.

2. In March the Committee visited Belfast where it met Sir John Wheeler, officials from the Northern Ireland Office, the Committee for the Administration of Justice and Monsignor Denis Faul. The Committee also visited Antrim RUC station.

3. At the Adare Plenary (April 1996), the Chairman of the Committee made a statement on policing and prisoners' issues which outlined the Committee's progress thus far and facilitated a debate on these sensitive matters. Although these issues come under the remit of Committee A for Body purposes, the Committee is always mindful that they are of equal interest and concern to the wider membership of the Body.

4. The Committee met in London on 8 and 9 July to consider a draft report on Policing. Although good progress was made at that meeting, ultimately agreement on a final Report did not prove possible. At the Bath Plenary (September, 1996) the Body debated and accepted a Steering Committee motion which, inter alia, recognised the recent work of Committee A and acknowledged the difficulties that the events of July, 1996 had created for the Committee.

5. The Committee met en marge of the Bath Plenary (September, 1996) and decided to revive the inquiry into policing matters. A meeting with the new RUC Chief Constable has been set for January 1997. Given the difficult and controversial nature of the subject matter it is unlikely that it will be possible to agree a report on policing for the forthcoming plenary session (March, 1997).

COMMITTEE B

European and International Affairs

1. In 1996, the Committee met on four occasions, made one visit to Brussels and two visits to Ireland, North and South, and completed one Report.
2. The Committee's first activity in 1996 was a visit to Brussels on 24 and 25 January in connection with its inquiry into EU aid for peace and reconciliation (the "PEACE Programme"). During this visit the Committee held meetings with the Commissioner for Regional Policy, Commission officials, a group of British and Irish MEPs, and others.
3. At the Adare plenary on 30 April the responses of the two Governments to the Committee's report on the European Union's White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment (which had been presented at the plenary in Cardiff in September 1995) were debated. The Committee also held a meeting at which it gave preliminary consideration to possible subjects for future inquiries.
4. The Committee made a second visit to Ireland in connection with the inquiry into the PEACE Programme from 20 to 22 May. This visit took much the same form as the Committee's previous visit of September 1995, with meetings arranged in Dublin and Belfast as well as in the Republic's border region, this time in Monaghan Town. The purpose of the visit was to gauge the progress which was being made under the PEACE Programme in actually authorising funding, so ensuring that the Committee's report was based on fully up-to-date information. In the course of the visit the Committee held meetings with Government officials and representatives of intermediary funding bodies on both sides of the border, and in Northern Ireland it also met representatives of a district partnership and two community projects in receipt of funding under the PEACE Programme.
5. On 3 July the Committee met in London to agree its report on EU aid for peace and reconciliation. At the same meeting the Committee decided that its subsequent inquiry would be into tourism, following up Committee C's 1992 report into the subject but with particular emphasis on the significance of EU funding for tourism-related activities on both sides of the border.
6. At the Bath plenary, on 24 September, the Committee's report on EU aid for peace and reconciliation was debated. Responses by the two Governments are expected by the end of January 1997, in time to be presented to the March plenary

in Dublin. The Committee has also asked both Governments to provide it with updated information on expenditure under the PEACE Programme at the end of June 1997. At the Committee's meeting in Bath the future course of the inquiry into tourism was mapped out, with the decision being taken to undertake only one visit in Ireland and to agree a report in time for the Dublin plenary.

7. The Committee accordingly made a visit in Ireland from 25 to 27 November in connection with its tourism inquiry. The Committee went to Dublin, Carlingford and Newcastle, meeting officials of both Governments, representatives of Bord Failte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and tourism industry representatives. At a meeting held in the course of the visit, the Committee decided to meet in London on 10 February 1997 to agree its report on tourism.

8. Overall the Committee has had a productive year, and has been greatly assisted in its work by the cooperation and helpfulness of Government officials, statutory bodies, nongovernmental organisations and numerous individuals on both sides of the border. One of the problems experienced by the Committee has on occasion been in maintaining a good turnout of members, both for visits and meetings. The onerous duties of Members of both Parliaments are readily understandable, but it is to be hoped that despite this it will be possible for Committee meetings and visits to be well attended in future.

9. The death of Barry Porter MP this year was a cause of great sadness to the Committee. He was an enthusiastic and popular participant in the Committee's work, and although his views may not always have been widely accepted within the Committee, he was held in respect and affection for the forthright and good-humored way in which he expressed them.

COMMITTEE C **Economic and Social Affairs**

1. The Committee completed its inquiry on the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) with a meeting in Belfast on 6 & 7 February 1996. The Committee met with the Chairman and Joint Directors of the IFI, local authorities, LEDU, non governmental organisation, representatives of the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre and Dr Maura Sheehan who has previously reported on the IFI. The Committee had hoped to meet with the Ulster Unionist Party's Mr Jim Nicholson MEP but, as Mr Nicholson was not available, the Committee met with his researcher.

2. On 30 April 1996 the Committee presented a report on the IFI at the Adare Plenary. The Report, which offers a positive overall assessment of the operations of the IFI, was adopted by the Body. In line with usual procedure the Report was then sent to both Governments for their responses. The Board of the IFI were also invited to offer their views on the Committee's Report.

3. In the light of widespread concern regarding the BSE crisis, the Steering Committee tabled a motion at the Adare Plenary requesting Committee C to inquire into matters arising from Animal Health policies in both islands. The motion was adopted by the Body and at a meeting *enmarge* of the Plenary the Committee decided to proceed immediately to inquire into Animal Health Matters.

4. The Committee met in Dublin on 24 and 25 June 1996. They met with representatives of the Irish Farmers Association, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, the Irish Meat Processors Association, the Irish Veterinary Association, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers' Association, the Consumers Association of Ireland and An Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board). The Committee also visited the Kepak Meat Processing Plant in Clonee, Co. Meath. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Mr Jimmy Deenihan, TD hosted a lunch for the Committee at Leinster House.

5. At the Bath Plenary (September, 1996) the Body was presented with the responses of both Governments to the IFI Report. While both Governments welcomed the Report, some Members were critical of the brevity of the British response. Subsequent to the Plenary the Committee received an appreciative response to its report from the Chairman of the IFI, Mr William McCarter.

6. The Committee continued its Animal Health inquiry with a visit to Belfast on 22 and 23 October where it met with representatives from the Department of Agriculture (NI), the Industrial Development Board and a range of farming bodies, agribusiness representatives and veterinary interest groups. The Committee also visited the premises of John Thompson and Sons Ltd, Animal Feed Compounders, in Belfast.

7. A final visit on Animal Health matters was planned for Edinburgh on 24 and 25 November where it was proposed to meet, *inter alia*, with representatives from the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, the CJD Research Unit at Western General Hospital. Due to the unavailability of a sufficient number of Members, this visit was cancelled. The Committee has sought written evidence from The Scottish Office.

8. It is hoped to present a report on BSE to the forthcoming Dublin Plenary (March 1997).

COMMITTEE D

Education, Culture and the Environment

1. In 1996, Committee D met on six occasions, made 3 visits and completed one Report.

2. In the first half of 1996 the work of Committee D concentrated upon the completion of a Report into NorthSouth Cooperation in the arts, culture and sports.

The Committee met in London on Tuesday, 26 March to discuss the draft report, and it was presented to the Plenary meeting at Adare on Wednesday, 31 April. The Government responses were debated at the Plenary in Bath in September.

3. For its next inquiry the Committee decided to investigate environmental issues affecting the United Kingdom and Ireland, to followup reports made to the Body in 1991 and 1992. In both of these reports, undertakings had been made to report back on certain issues, and these were highlighted as subjects for the new enquiry. It was accordingly agreed that the Committee should seek to visit the Sellafield site to discuss nuclear issues affecting the Irish Sea, particularly waste disposal, with BNFL and with UK Nirex. It was also agreed that Beaufort's Dyke munitions dump off the Ayrshire coast should be considered.

4. On 15 and 16 July, the Committee visited the Sellafield area. They toured the BNFL Sellafield site and were shown the THORP process which had been developed on the site since the last Committee report on the subject. The Committee also visited UK Nirex. The Committee was briefed on work which Nirex were undertaking to develop a rock characterisation facility in order to determine the suitability of sites for storage of low and intermediate level nuclear waste. The Committee toured the sites where Nirex had begun to undertake test drillings. The proposals for an underground laboratory were the subject of a planning enquiry which is awaiting the decision of the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment.

5. On 5 November 1996 the Committee met in Dublin for discussion with Irish Ministers, fishermen and environmental organisations. On 23 December it visited the Marine Research Laboratory in Aberdeen to be briefed on the Scottish Office survey of the Beaufort Channel. It is intended that a report on environmental issues will be presented to the next Plenary session to be held in March in Dublin.