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24 March 2023

Senator Emer Currie,
Chair, BIPA Committee A

Dear Senator Currie,

Thank you for your Committee's report of its inquiry into 'Consolidating the Bilateral Relationship between the UK and Ireland'. While I was unfortunately unable to give evidence myself, I was delighted to be involved in the BIPA plenary last October.

I agree that it is of great importance to both countries that British and Irish Governments, institutions, and politicians are able to work together in a spirit of friendship, understanding, and cooperation. Engagement between British and Irish parliamentary colleagues, and between parliamentarians and Ministers, makes an important contribution to that. In recent months it has been my pleasure to meet BIPA Co-Chair Brendan Smith TD, as well as the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and the Committee on EU Affairs.

The UK is committed to building a stronger, more prosperous relationship with Ireland. While any pair of friends and neighbours faces the occasional challenge in their relationship, I am confident that the UK and Ireland are firmly on an upward trajectory. As we continue on that path, I agree that we can make better, broader use of the existing formal structures, including for greater personal engagement between Ministers. I note your recommendation that the BIIGC meet at leader level, which we will consider further.

UK officials are considering how we might maintain a strategic and proactive, yet flexible, approach to advancing the East-West relationship; the Committee's detailed recommendations provide helpful food for thought. As part of that ongoing approach, I am pleased to confirm that meetings between the heads of UK and Ireland's government departments continue, with the next due in London in May.

I welcome BIPA's extraordinary Plenary Session to mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The Agreement is an achievement of historic proportions that provided the space for peace and progress. It has broken down boundaries and brought people together, leading to continued stability and prosperity in Northern Ireland. The anniversary offers a real opportunity to bring all communities together and recognise this shared achievement, while looking to the future and considering how we can build on the remarkable progress Northern Ireland has made.

I look forward to working closely with BIPA to build on the UK's deep and unique relationship with Ireland.

I am copying this to Karen Bradley MP and Brendan Smith MP.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Leo Docherty', with a small blue dot to the right of the signature.

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Senator Emer Currie
Chair, Committee A (Sovereign Matters)
British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA)

Our ref: MC2022/24784

4 September 2023

Dear Senator Currie,

Thank you for your letter of 16 May, following up on my response of 24 March to Committee A's report '*Consolidating the bilateral relationship between the UK and Ireland*'.

Please see below responses to each of your additional questions.

What steps your Department is taking to increase opportunities for Ministers and officials in the UK Government to build stronger working and personal relationships with their Irish counterparts.

- As part of our commitment to a strong partnership with Ireland, Ministers and officials continue to meet and exchange on a fluid, friendly basis.
- There have been several high-level engagements this year. The Prime Minister and Taoiseach spoke on 19 April in Belfast at the Gala Dinner to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the BGFA. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (SOSNI) and I also attended. The Foreign Secretary last met with the Tánaiste at the Ukraine Recovery Conference on 21 June, while SOSNI saw him at the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) on 19 June. The Home Secretary also met with the Minister for Justice on 11 May.
- Engagement at senior official level is also strong. For example, the Cabinet Secretary hosted the annual UK-Ireland Permanent Secretaries/Secretaries General Conference on 18-19 May. The focus was on building and strengthening relationships, but officials also considered areas that would benefit from enhanced bilateral cooperation.

What steps your Department is taking to ensure that the institutions of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement are used to their full potential by all stakeholders;

- The 2021 Integrated Review set out the UK's foreign and security priorities, which included our shared responsibility with Ireland for upholding the BGFA, ensuring prosperity and stability in Northern Ireland and protecting the hard-won gains of the peace process.

- Since the suspension of the NI Assembly and Executive in February 2022, the BIIGC has met four times. On each occasion, Ministers have discussed the need to restore the Strand 1 institutions. Ministers have also noted the important function of Strand 2 institutions, such as the North-South Ministerial Council. Outside BIIGC, there is regular engagement between UK and Irish Government officials and ministers on efforts to restore the NI institutions.
- BIC meets twice a year at Summit level, with the Prime Minister attending in November 2022. The 11 work sectors meet 2-3 times a year at official level and at Ministerial level every 12-18 months to update on progress and agree strategic work plans.

Whether the UK Government plans to seek modifications in the operation of (a) the British-Irish Council (BIC) and (b) the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) in the manner proposed by the Committee, including by:

Holding at least two meetings of the BIIGC each year;

- The BGFA provides for “regular and frequent meetings” of the BIIGC, which has met nine times since July 2018, and six times between June 2021 and June 2023. We do not plan to formalise the regularity of meetings further.

Introducing a consistent pattern of Ministerial meetings outside of the BIIGC;

- We have no plans to formalise a schedule of meetings; UK Ministers will continue to discuss matters of shared interest regularly and fluidly with Irish counterparts.

Ensuring that the BIIGC engages with a broad range of issues, and not just crisis issues, and that the BIC holds more regular meetings that have a greater emphasis on a wider array of thematic issues, including economic issues;

- We will continue to work closely with the Irish Government on broadening the BIIGC agenda. In January, Ministers discussed bilateral cooperation in cyber and energy security with their counterparts. At the June BIIGC, there was a particular focus on education cooperation, underlining the importance of integrated education and of tackling educational disadvantage.
- Several BIC work sectors relate directly to economic issues (e.g. energy, housing, creative industries and transport). Recent Summits focussed on economic regeneration and housing.

Assessing whether the secretariats of the BIC and BIIGC require increased resources.

- NIO considers its UK-Ireland team, which provides secretarial support for the BIIGC, to be adequately resourced.
- All member administrations jointly resource the BIC Secretariat, and regularly review its support to the BIC. We currently consider the Secretariat to be adequately resourced.

What arrangements your Department has to record the (a) number and (b) substance of bilateral meetings between Ministers and officials in the UK Government and their counterparts in the Government of Ireland.

- Exchanges between UK and Irish ministers and officials are regular and fluid, as befits the close relationship between our countries. The FCDO does not seek to log all such contacts across HMG, although departments routinely maintain records of bilateral meetings.

It remains of great importance to both countries that British and Irish Governments, institutions, and politicians are able to work together in a spirit of friendship, understanding, and cooperation. I would like to thank the members of BIPA for all the work they do to help strengthen the relationship and deepen cooperation.

Yours ever,



Leo Docherty MP
Minister for Europe