



**BRITISH-IRISH  
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

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

**THE FIRST TEN YEARS**

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## **Introduction**

Prior to the late 1980s there had been relatively little contact between the *Oireachtas* (the collective name for the bicameral Irish Parliament) in Dublin and the Parliament at Westminster. Members of the two parliaments met each other occasionally at the Plenaries of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Council of Europe, and Clerks sometimes found themselves working together at inter-parliamentary assemblies, but there was very little in the way of bilateral relations between the two institutions. Much of this mutual ignorance was a product of the history of relations between Great Britain and the island of Ireland, and the distance was probably increased by the decision of Ireland to leave the Commonwealth in 1949.

The initial proposal for such a forum (which arose from a Joint Studies Report made to the meeting of British and Irish Heads of Government in 1981 which suggested an East-West "parliamentary tier") was made in 1983 by Mr Peter Temple-Morris, MP for Leominster and Mr Jim Tunney TD, *Leas Cheann-Comhairle* (or Deputy Presiding Officer) of *Dáil Éireann* (the Lower House of the *Oireachtas*).<sup>1</sup> But it was not until 1990 that the Body was established, at first under the auspices of the British and Irish Groups of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It met for the first time in Committee Room 14 at the House of Commons on 26 February of that year.

The aim of the Body from the outset has been to promote mutual understanding and respect between Members of the two parliaments; for that reason the social side of the Body has been almost as important as the parliamentary side. Inevitably, much of the work of the Body since its inception has been set in the context of the situation in Northern Ireland and the various peace initiatives to bring an end to the conflict. Relations between the two Governments in London and Dublin are a crucial part of that process, and the Body has seen its role as providing support – though not always uncritical support – in those endeavours.

## **The organisation of the Body**

As at present constituted the Body consists of twenty-five Members from each parliament, with twenty Associate Members from each side who may replace Full Members either at Plenary sessions or at Committee meetings. The delegations are nominated with a view to maintaining balance between the various political parties but the Unionist MPs sitting for constituencies in Northern Ireland have never chosen to take up the two seats to which they are entitled.

From its inception the ethos of the Body has been to act as an organic whole; in the Plenary, Members sit in alphabetical order rather than as delegations of their respective legislatures. National representation is only relevant for the purposes of the quorum and the tabling of certain motions and amendments; and there has never been an occasion on which the two delegations voted along national lines. The running of the Body and the control of its business is in the hands of a Steering Committee consisting of three Members from each parliament: two Co-Chairmen

(currently Mr Michael O'Kennedy SC, TD and Mr David Winnick MP) and four Vice-Chairmen.

The Body is funded by grant-in-aid from the Treasury in London and the Department of Finance in Dublin. The day-to-day administration is carried out by the two Clerks, one from Dublin and one from Westminster, with the generous assistance of several of their colleagues from both jurisdictions.

There are normally two Plenary sessions every year, of a day and a half or two days each, which provide a forum for the mutual exchange of views between parliamentarians. The normal practice is to alternate Plenaries between the two countries and they are usually held at venues other than Dublin and London. Unlike, for example, the Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Body has no responsibilities as yet under any international treaty. However, in an area as delicate as British-Irish relations even the regular exchange of views between Members of the two parliaments is itself a task of considerable importance. It is made more so by the fact that each Plenary has a Question Time at which a Minister from the host country answers Questions (of which notice is given in the Programme of Business) put by Members of *both* parliaments – which can lead to a Minister from one jurisdiction having to deal with extremely probing supplementaries from Members from the other. When the Body meets in Britain it is usually addressed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, while at the Fifteenth Plenary in County Cavan in March 1998 Questions were answered by the *Taoiseach* (the Irish Prime Minister).

Apart from the Ministerial Statement and Questions, the main business is always a debate on a motion on Recent Political Developments. At first, those debates were held in private on the grounds that politicians from Ireland and Great Britain would feel inhibited about discussing sensitive issues with journalists in attendance. Once the Body found its feet, however, it became routine to hold all debates in public, even those on sensitive security issues; and a private sitting is now a very rare event – and then only to discuss domestic, organisational matters.

The *Rules for the Conduct of Business* are relatively brief and based on the practice of the House of Commons and *Dáil Éireann*. They are supplemented as necessary by the practice of the two Houses; fortunately, their practice and procedure have much in common. As an example, at the Extraordinary Plenary in Dublin on 15 May 1998, in advance of the two referendums on the Belfast Agreement<sup>2</sup> on a power-sharing Executive and Assembly for Northern Ireland, the Co-Chairmen allowed a closure of the debate so that the Body could come to a decision on the motion before it while it was still quorate. There is no provision for the closure in the Rules, but because it is a familiar part of the procedure both of the *Dáil* and of the Commons everyone agreed that it was a helpful innovation in the practice of the Body.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the two parliaments is the style of debate. At Dublin, as at Westminster, Members speak from their places and are discouraged from over-indulgence in speaking-notes, with the result that the Body is probably the only inter-parliamentary organisation where there is genuine debate

and exchange of views, rather than a series of unconnected set speeches by delegates. Where the two parliaments differ is, of course, the language of debate. Because the Body has no translation facilities, its language of debate is English; but the Co-Chairmen have been content for Members to speak briefly in Irish providing that they then translate their remarks.

## **Committees**

As noted above, the primary function of Plenaries is to provide a forum for debate and the exchange of views, while the day-to-day work of the Body is carried out through its four Committees: Committee A deals with Sovereign (ie East-West) Matters, Committee B covers European Affairs, Committee C is concerned with Economic Affairs, and Committee D with Environmental and Social Affairs. Each Committee has a Chairman from one delegation and a Shadow Chairman from the other, so that the British and the Irish each have two full Chairmanships. They are supported by four Clerks from Westminster and, from the Irish side, two officers from the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Steering Committee assigns each full Member of the Body and each Associate to one of the four Committees, normally by agreement with the person concerned, and with an eye both to party-political balance and equality of representation from the two delegations.

The four Committees conduct inquiries on matters of common concern. They meet regularly throughout the year and take oral and written evidence from interested parties – including the two Governments – on which to base their Reports. An important part of their work is to travel around both countries (including Northern Ireland) to conduct hearings relevant to their work. Committees also pay regular visits to Brussels and maintain contact with both the European Parliament and the wider international community. During the ten years of the Body's existence, its Committees have issued thirty Reports on matters as various as The Future for Small Farms in the Rural Economy, Education and Inter-Community Relations, International and European Involvement in the Peace Process, Road and Rail Links on the Island of Ireland, and Pensions and Associated Benefits.

There are two principal differences between Committees of the Body and Committees of the parent parliaments. The first is the time-scale of the inquiries. The complexities of negotiating a Committee programme against the background of two lots of parliamentary recesses and four different legislative programmes (because the membership of the Body includes Senators and Peers as well as TDs and MPs) means that Committee inquiries take a long time to complete, and it is relatively rare for a Committee to produce more than one Report in a calendar year. The other difference is that the Committees operate against the background of changing events in Northern Ireland. The last two years have seen the negotiation of the Belfast Agreement referred to above (under which a range of measures was agreed, including the establishment of a devolved Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland, a North/South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council bringing together representatives of *all* the Governments in these islands), referendums in both the North and the South approving that Agreement, the

establishment of the Assembly and Executive, and their subsequent suspension. In these circumstances the Committee on Political and Security Matters has chosen not to make written Reports to the Plenary: instead, the Chairman has made oral Reports in the light of the changing situation.

In line with the practice in both Westminster and Dublin, Committee Reports are drafted by the Committee Clerks in consultation with the Chairmen and Members of the Committee and published together with the Evidence that the Committee has received. After a Report has been debated in the Plenary it is sent to the two Governments for a formal Response from each of them, and these Responses are also debated by the Plenary. Nor are these debates a formality: at the 20th Plenary in February 2000, on the proposal of the Chairman of the Committee European and International Affairs the Body asked for a further response from the British Government on that Committee's Report on Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy because it regarded the initial Response as inadequate.

### **The future**

Over the last three years the United Kingdom has seen great constitutional change. The Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales both began work on 1 July 1999. The Northern Ireland Assembly (initially designated the New Northern Ireland Assembly) began meeting on 1 July 1998, assumed full powers on 2 December 1999, and was suspended temporarily by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 11 February 2000.

As noted above, the Belfast Agreement provides for a British-Irish Council which is intended to bring together Ministers from Dublin, Westminster, the devolved institutions in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, and the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. The question for the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body has been in what way its role might be developed in order to facilitate the establishment of inter-*parliamentary* relations between the various political institutions in these islands, as a counterpart to the new inter-governmental relationship. In addressing this question, the Body is conscious that it is specifically referred to in the Belfast Agreement itself. Paragraph 11 of Strand 3 of the Agreement, on the subject of the British-Irish Council, states that:

*The elected institutions of the members will be encouraged to develop inter-parliamentary links, perhaps building on the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.*

Thus far, the Body has proceeded cautiously and allow the new devolved institutions to establish themselves. But contacts have been made, and Members from the various devolved institutions and the Crown Dependencies have already attended recent Plenaries as observers. For some time the future of the Body has been under consideration by a specially-convened Working Group; and the Body is in the process of evolving the appropriate mechanisms for bringing parliamentarians throughout the islands closer together.

<sup>1</sup>*Op.cit. p.68.*

<sup>2</sup>*The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland - Cm 3883 April 1998.*