

THE BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY, 1990-2015

Thank you, co-chairs, for the invitation to address the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly on the occasion of its 25th anniversary. It is indeed an honour to be asked to help mark such an important occasion in this way.

When the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, as it then was, held its initial meeting on 26 February 1990 in Westminster, public reaction was positive, though the press noted the absence of Northern Ireland unionists from the meeting, an absence that lasted for almost two decades. The challenge faced by the Assembly was a profound one. Just how profound is illustrated if we take a long historical perspective.

In that other body which brought Irish and British parliamentarians together for 121 years, the parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the first generation of Irish MPs took some time to settle. Though made up entirely of Protestant Anglo-Irish gentry, they represented an unwelcome challenge to some of their British counterparts. As the MP for Bristol, Lord Sheffield, put it bluntly in private correspondence at the time, he was opposed to “the admission of 100 wild Irish”, as proposed in the Bill of Union. He warned against a potential Irish political influx: “the intrusion of 80 is rather too much, 75 would be sufficient ... I do not think any of our country gentlemen would venture into parliament if they were to meet 100 Paddies”.

The new United Parliament, however, survived the shock of the admission of 100 “paddies”, if that label can be applied to such stalwarts of the establishment as Denis Browne, MP for Mayo, George King, MP for Roscommon, or James Butler, MP for Kilkenny. But the UK parliament could not withstand the shock of the election in December 1918 of 73 “paddies” of a quite different kind, representing a new radical nationalist movement, Sinn Féin. The clash between Sinn Féin and the British government, though halted by a settlement in 1921, left a range of unfinished issues which re-entered politics from 1968 onwards.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly was, then, born against this tempestuous political background. It drew its impetus from a set of negotiations in 1980-81 between the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and successive Irish governments headed by Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald. Though first envisaged in the FitzGerald-Thatcher summit of 1981, the matter was not pursued in the tense political atmosphere of the early 1980s. Some discussion did take place from 1983 onwards, however, between Irish and British delegates to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 sought to give impetus to the process: the two governments agreed to support any joint body that might be established by the two parliaments.

Finally, following the recommendations of a planning group under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, headed by Peter Temple-Morris, MP, a tireless supporter of this form of cooperation as a mechanism for enhancing mutual understanding

across the Irish Sea, and the late Jim Tunney, veteran politician and Leas-Cheann Comhairle of the Dáil, the new body eventually came into being in February 1990.

At a purely mechanical level, it is easy to assess the achievements of the British-Irish Parliamentary Body (or Assembly, as it was renamed in 2008). Of its 50 meetings to date, 26 took place in Ireland (often rather far from Dublin, at venues such as Killarney, Clonakilty and Bundoran); 17 took place in England (typically in a regional venue rather than London); three in Scotland; two in Wales; and historic “firsts” were recorded when the body met in Belfast (2006) and in the Isle of Man (2010).

In addition to debating important issues in plenary sessions, the Assembly, like other parliamentary bodies, conducts much of its work through committees. Its committee structure has remained substantially unchanged since 1991, apart from the renaming of each committee in 2000 to take account of enlarged membership and to reflect more accurately their actual priorities as they had by then developed.

The division of material between the four committees groups very broad areas. Committee A, dealing with sovereign matters, of course stands apart from the others, given its focus on sensitive political and security matters of particular interest to the sovereign governments. While committees B, C and D focus respectively on European affairs, economic affairs and environmental and social issues, in practice they range widely in subject matter, with some overlap across committees.

An outsider can assess the work of the committees from what they report themselves, notably through the Assembly’s web site. This lists 37 reports produced since 1999 (almost half of them by Committee D), and 20 formal responses to these by governments (two thirds of these in respect of Committee D). At a minimum, the committees have helped to inform the policy process and, in particular, to sensitise members from different political entities to the cross-jurisdictional complexities of many of the items on the agenda.

It seems clear that the Assembly has maintained an active and relatively visible presence since its establishment in 1990. But how are we to evaluate its effectiveness? Early assessments by academics such as Patrick Buckland, Harvey Cox, Robert Hazell and Mats Qvortrup judged it to be a useful but unexciting initiative. Others, such as Nick Taylor and Clive Walker, have pointed to its very important symbolic role in providing a bridge over the turbulent historical waters of the British-Irish relationship.

After 25 years in operation, it is worth reviewing the overall achievements of the Assembly. While it has no legislative role and a strictly limited advisory one, the Assembly constitutes an important forum in which parliamentarians can formally question ministers from the host jurisdiction. Many committee reports may go unanswered, and those to which governments do respond may have limited impact. But the value of a body where parliamentarians of such different backgrounds may

highlight potential approaches to shared problems, or suggest that a uniform approach might *not* be appropriate, is clearly of great value.

As well as formal dialogue during plenary sessions and elsewhere, meetings of the Assembly offer an important opportunity for informal networking, as the two clerks who steered the body through its early years, Frank Cranmer and John Roycroft, pointed out 15 years ago. The value of this forum for building trust in relationships between neighbours, where it is truly needed, can scarcely be overestimated. But there are other respects in which the Assembly has shown remarkable capacity to reinvent itself and to ensure its continuing relevance.

There has been a seismic shift in the character of relations in these islands since the Assembly first saw the light of day 25 years ago. Back in 1990, the focus of governments was on the catastrophic consequences of the Northern Ireland conflict, and differences over such issues as the Falklands war embittered the Anglo-Irish relationship. Scotland and Wales did not possess the independent voice we now take for granted, and the three island jurisdictions, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, were largely ignored in the politics of the two sovereign states.

By the time the Assembly celebrated its tenth anniversary at the end of the twentieth century, though, a complex package designed to stabilise Northern Ireland had been agreed. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the inter-communal division in Northern Ireland has been overshadowed by much larger geopolitical questions, such as Scotland's relationship with the UK, and the UK's relationship with the EU.

These changes were reflected in a significant reconfiguration of the structure of the Assembly. The original body consisted of an equal number of members from the two sovereign parliaments—25 from each. The Good Friday agreement of 1998 raised an existential challenge for the inter-parliamentary body. It set up an inter-governmental British-Irish Council, an eight-member body including the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as the three island jurisdictions. This raised questions about the need for a parallel inter-parliamentary tier, to which the agreement also committed itself.

A combination of proactive thinking by the leadership of the existing British-Irish Interparliamentary Body (which produced three thoughtful discussion documents on the future of the body between 1998 and 2000), and decisions by political leaders themselves, resulted in an extension of the body's membership in 2000, to include the three new devolved legislative bodies (with five members each) and the three island assemblies (with one each)—the present position.

The Assembly in many ways resembles the Nordic Council, though with three important differences.

First, the membership structure of the Nordic Council is relatively symmetrical, with equal representation for four large countries of comparable population (and a

reduced presence for several smaller jurisdictions). The British-Irish Assembly gives equal weighting to the British and Irish parliaments, with additional representation for six second-tier British entities. In reality, though, the UK, because of its dominant demographic position (93% of the population of these islands) and corresponding political resources, is likely to continue to overshadow its smaller Irish partner—not within the Assembly itself, but in the world of real politics outside it.

Second, the budgetary positions of the Assembly and the Nordic Council are utterly different. The modest running costs of the Assembly allow little scope for any kind of other funding initiatives; and the parallel British-Irish Council also has a tiny budget (about £61,000 in 2012). The Nordic Council, by contrast, together with the parallel Nordic Council of Ministers, has a budget of about one billion Danish kroner (about a hundred million pounds sterling). It is thus able to fund a range of influential cultural and other institutions at a level that is inconceivable in the current British-Irish context.

Third, as the Assembly's Committee B itself pointed out in 2004, the privileged position of the Nordic Council is greatly reinforced by its close links to the Nordic Council of Ministers. By contrast, relations between the Assembly and the British-Irish Council continue to be tenuous, though their agendas overlap and their members represent exactly the same jurisdictions—an issue that might be worth addressing.

Given the challenges facing these islands in the years ahead—the UK's Scottish question, the EU's UK question, and Ireland's resulting dilemma—the Assembly may well find a place for itself in new domains. It might, for example, seek to emulate the role of the Nordic Council in assisting transition in constitutional relationships in this corner of Europe. Ironically, institutions created in response to a conflict in a small disputed territory may end up forming a bridge to deal with troubled relationships on a larger scale.

The experience of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly over the past 25 years, especially when set against the much slower progress in establishing a similar North-South body (which eventually took shape in 2012 as the North/South Interparliamentary Association), suggests that cross-jurisdictional contact plays a significant role in enhancing political relationships. But inter-parliamentary dialogue is more likely to flourish precisely when such political relationships are already good in the first place. In any case, the Association's experience since its inception suggests that the fear of Lord Sheffield at the time of the Act of Union of 1800 about the risk of disharmony between Irish and British MPs may be well and truly laid to rest.

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