



BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SIXTY-SEVENTH PLENARY SESSION

Monday 13 and Tuesday 14 October 2025, Weybridge

Official Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLENARY BUSINESS.....	2
NEW MEMBERS	3
PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS	4
DEVELOPING THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP.....	6
UK-IRELAND 2030: DEVELOPING RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SKILLS ACROSS BIPA JURISDICTIONS	23
UK-IRELAND JOINT STATEMENT IN THE ASSEMBLY'S JURISDICTIONS	37
SECURITY AND DEFENCE CO-OPERATION	47
COMMITTEE B REPORT: "UK-EU DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION POST-BREXIT"	67
SECURITY AND DEFENCE CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE	70
ANNUAL REPORT	85
COMMITTEE REPORTS ETC.	86
PROPOSED JOINT FRAMEWORK ON THE LEGACY OF THE TROUBLES.....	90
ADJOURNMENT	105

BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
SIXTY-SEVENTH PLENARY SESSION

Monday 13 October 2025

The Assembly sat at 9.38 am.

PLENARY BUSINESS

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Order. The Assembly is now in public session. To start with, can you speak up when you are using your microphones, if you choose to ask questions or if you try to catch my eye? Also, you need to press the button to speak on your microphone, and it is really important that at the end of that, you turn it off. Otherwise, we will have lots of background noise.

Good morning, everybody. It is really good to see you all here. I remind you to turn off your mobile phones if you have not already done so. I also ask Members, when invited to contribute from the Floor, to state clearly their name and legislature. Finally, I remind Members that the proceedings of this body are held in public and do not attract parliamentary privilege.

NEW MEMBERS

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Members, I welcome you all to Surrey and to the 67th session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. This is our first plenary since April 2024, and since then we have had a significant change in membership, given the recent general elections in both jurisdictions. I welcome all our new Members, as well as returning Members, and look forward to engaging with you in the coming days. An up-to-date list of the BIPA membership has been circulated to you all in your briefing packs. I inform the Assembly that, in accordance with rule 2A, a number of associate Members have accepted the invitation of the Steering Committee to assume the powers and responsibilities of Members for the whole of this session. The British Clerk will read out the names.

The British Clerk (Martyn Atkins):

Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard, Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill, Baroness Hooper, Malcolm Byrne TD, George Lawlor TD, Senator Joe O'Reilly, Senator Diarmuid Wilson and David Honeyford MLA.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We have received apologies for not being able to attend the plenary session from a number of Members. The British Clerk will read out the names.

The British Clerk (Martyn Atkins):

Tonia Antoniazzi MP, David Baines MP, Gregory Campbell MP, Liam Conlon MP, Graeme Downie MP, Colum Eastwood MP, Lord Godson, Seamus Logan MP, Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick and Rosie Wrighting MP.

From the Oireachtas, Senator Manus Boyle, Senator Robbie Gallagher, Erin McGreehan TD, Conor Sheehan TD and Mattie McGrath TD.

From the devolved and island state jurisdictions, Emma Harper MSP, Tess White MSP, Carolyn Thomas MS, Steve Aiken MLA, Kate Nicholl MLA, Maurice Bradley MLA and Juan Watterson, Speaker of the House of Keys.

PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all today, as Gill has already done, to Oatlands Park Hotel, Weybridge. Members will have received a copy of the programme of business. During this plenary, we will be focusing some of our discussions on developing the bilateral relationships, developing research, innovation and skills and security and defence co-operation, all of which are of great importance to all our jurisdictions.

To begin proceedings, Her Excellency Kara Owen, the ambassador-designate of the United Kingdom to Ireland, will address the Assembly. His Excellency Martin Fraser, ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain, will then address the Assembly. Both ambassadors will be available to respond to questions. Later in the morning, James Lawless TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, will address the Assembly and respond to questions.

The morning session will conclude with a debate by Members on “The UK-Ireland Joint Statement in the Assembly’s Jurisdictions”. The text of the proposed motion is on the order of business, which is before you. Copies of the joint statement were circulated before the plenary session and are available before you. The text of the motion is as follows:

“That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly welcomes the 2030 Joint Statement of the UK and Irish Governments issued in March 2025 which marked a moment of renewal for an ambitious programme of co-operation through to 2030; and commits the Assembly to supporting and encouraging the work needed to make those ambitions a reality, in pursuit of the Assembly’s foundational aim of promoting co-operation between political representatives in Britain and Ireland for the benefit of the people we represent.”

Monday afternoon’s session will begin our discussion on security and defence co-operation. Neale Richmond TD, a Minister of State in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, will address the Assembly. Unfortunately, Stephen Doughty MP, the Minister of State responsible for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories in the UK Government and a former Member of this Assembly, is unable to attend and address the Assembly and sends his apologies. That is due to commitments that have arisen in Westminster. Minister Richmond will respond to questions. We will then hear from the Chair of Committee B, Darren Millar MS, who will present his Committee’s report, “UK-EU Defence and Security Cooperation Post-Brexit”, for consideration and adoption by the Assembly. Copies of the report will be provided to you.

The afternoon session will conclude with a debate by Members on a motion on security and defence co-operation in Europe, which will be put to the Assembly. The text of the proposed motion is on the order of business, which is before you, and is as follows:

“That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly recognises the vital importance to all BIPA jurisdictions of effective measures taken by governments to ensure their security and defence; appreciates that global trends and events pose significant threats to that continued security; welcomes the agreements concluded between the UK and Ireland in March 2025 and the UK and the European Union in May 2025 which provide for practical cooperation on matters of security, defence, intelligence sharing and cyber security; and recommends that the British and Irish Governments continue to work closely together and with European partners to enhance security measures, in particular in the fields of critical marine infrastructure, energy security, cyber security and irregular migration.”

We expect this afternoon’s session to conclude not later than 5.30 pm. On Tuesday morning, the Assembly will receive the annual report of the Assembly’s activities in 2024. The Co-Chairs will provide a progress report from the Steering Committee; then

we will hear progress from the Chairs of Committees A, B, C and D.

9.45 am

Tuesday will conclude with a debate by Members on a motion on the proposed joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles. The text of the proposed motion is on the order of business, which is before you. Copies of the joint framework proposed by the two Governments were circulated before the plenary session and will be available to you. The motion is:

“That this assembly take note of the legacy framework to enable truth for families of the Troubles which was announced by the UK and Irish Governments on September 19, 2025.”

The Assembly will adjourn no later than 12.25 pm on Tuesday.

I will now ask Andrew Rosindell MP to formally move that the adoption of the proposed programme of business be agreed to.

Andrew Rosindell MP:

Good morning, Co-Chairs. Thank you for your warm welcome back to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. It is a pleasure to be among you again. I formally propose that the adoption of the programme of business for the 67th plenary session of BIPA be formally agreed by the Assembly this morning.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Is that agreed?

Programme of Business agreed.

DEVELOPING THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you. I am pleased to welcome Her Excellency Ambassador Kara Owen CMG and His Excellency Martin Fraser. I would like to congratulate Ambassador Owen on her appointment and wish her all the best in her new role. We are looking forward to hearing their speeches this morning. We will hear from Ambassador Owen first, followed by Ambassador Fraser, and then we will take questions and answers jointly. Kara, you are very welcome.

HE Kara Owen CMG:

Good morning, everybody.

Go raibh maith agat. A Pharlaiminteoirí, a chairde. Is mór an onóir liom bheith anseo inniu i bhfeidhm Ambasadóir nua na Breataine chun na hÉireann. *[Parliamentarians, my friends, it is a great honour for me to be here today as the new British Ambassador to Ireland.] [Applause.]*

You are going to have to test me harder later.

It is a real honour to be here with you today. This is my first public event, and my first speech, as ambassador-designate to Ireland. If I was going to kick off with anything, this is a pretty intimidating audience. Not only is it full of erudite parliamentarians and orators, I also have the honour of sharing the stage with diplo-star Martin Fraser who is highly respected in the UK for his expertise, strategic insight, network and human decency. You set a high bar for diplomacy that I hope I can meet in Ireland.

I'd like to start by paying tribute to the role that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has played over many years in building relationships across these islands. I'm glad Ministers James Lawless and Neale Richmond are able to join us today, and I'd like to thank the co-chairs, Brendan Smith and Gill Furniss, and before her Karen Bradley, for their stewardship and for their tireless work in bringing together delegates of all the representative assemblies.

I am privileged to live in a vibrant – sometimes messy – democracy and seeing so many parliamentarians here today makes me feel confident that the deep understanding and collaboration critical to any good relationship is alive and well at the very heart of what makes us us.

Often new Ambassadors tell a crowd they've always wanted their new job. It can sound trite. But in my case it's true. This is, quite literally my dream job.

This is a truly unique relationship. Nearest neighbours; our history is as deep as it is complex, and our relationship touches on all parts of the daily lives of our citizens, from security to prosperity, education, health, science and everything in between. What happens in each country has an immediate impact on the other – and that makes for fascinating work as diplomat.

And the UK-Ireland relationship starts at home for me too – about 160 years ago my mother's great grandparents left Newtonards in Down and Castlemacadam in Wicklow for West Cumberland. I went all the way to Aceh in Indonesia to meet the Irish Defence Forces officer who would become my husband. We've lived as a family and in Dublin

over the years between overseas postings. Moving into my residence Glencairn was probably the shortest move that any British Ambassador has ever made.

I am fortunate to start the job at a really positive time in the UK-Ireland relationship. I pay tribute to my predecessor. As if you were not intimidating enough, I also have my predecessor, Paul Johnston, sitting at the back of the room—a man who found it easier to leave the Foreign Office than he did to leave Ireland. He is with us today in his new role leading the Irish Universities Association. I heard all the time in preparing for this job, and now having started, how highly people regard him and appreciate all the work he put into making this relationship as good as it possibly can be. As a friend and colleague, that makes me incredibly proud.

Our Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has prioritised the improvement of UK-Irish relations, and has hailed this as a new era at the inaugural summit with An Taoiseach in March. Since Sir Keir's election he has met five times with either Simon Harris or Micheál Martin in their roles as Taoiseach. That is an unambiguous signal of my Government's deep political commitment to the relationship. The bedrock of this is the UK's unwavering commitment to the Good Friday agreement, in both spirit and letter. I know that is shared with the Irish Government as co-guarantors, and by everybody in the room today.

Last month we made a real breakthrough announcing a way forward on the legacy of the Troubles—something that eluded the brilliant architects of the Good Friday agreement themselves. *[Interruption.]* Excuse me; I am going to abandon my technology. I thought I was going to be a 21st-century techno diplomat, but I am giving up.

As Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, said, we have sought a process that is a shared endeavour with the Irish Government, capable of commanding support across all communities. The agreement will see the UK establish a reformed Legacy Commission, with full co-operation from Irish authorities, to investigate all unresolved Troubles-related incidents in Ireland. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the officials and the Ministers who worked so hard to craft that approach, and to the many impacted people in the communities who shared their insights with them along the way.

I am proud that the Foreign Secretary and the Tánaiste, with the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland, were able to share our experience of peace and reconciliation with western Balkans partners at Hillsborough castle last week. We can and must share our hard-won progress and all that we have learned where it can help and support others.

Peace is the foundation stone on which everything else that is good in this relationship is built. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach's joint statement from the summit in March outlined a really ambitious programme of work to 2030. It spans security, climate and energy, trade and investment and our cultural and people-to-people links.

We also have representatives here from the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments, and from Northern Ireland. Strategic relationships between Ireland and Scotland and Wales are both codified and ambitious, with clear commitments agreed between both Governments.

It is absolutely brilliant that you have reshaped your Committees within BIPA to reflect the UK-Ireland summit's four pillars, because in all four of these areas our two countries are driving in the same direction and there is more that we can do together. However, the more that we can get a coalition of the willing to help to drive that process on, the more successful we will be.

I will touch on a couple of areas that were in the joint statement and talk about how we see those developing. First, the UK Government have worked to reset our relationship with our European partners. The UK-Ireland relationship is of its own self, but it also exists within a broader context.

We are living in a more difficult and dangerous geopolitical environment than we have seen for decades. Russia continues to wage war on Ukraine and threatens our security in Europe. Facing this threat has brought us closer together with our European friends. The Taoiseach called the Prime Minister "a centre of gravity" in Europe on supporting Ukraine.

We were glad to take the historic step last month of recognising the state of Palestine, alongside European partners, which is a step that Ireland took last year. And we share the same commitment to ensuring that the fledgling peace deal is given the chance to take root. The peace deal has absolutely dominated the airwaves this morning, and I think that both Governments will work really hard to make sure that it sticks.

The high point to date of our reset with Europe was the common understanding, announced in May at the summit between the UK and the EU. Both sides have committed to agree deals to smooth trade and co-operation, including a vital sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, alignment on emissions trading, electricity, and security and defence.

We appreciated the warm welcome that the summit received in Ireland. Actually, you could see that across the political spectrum, which I guess is not something that you normally see. You are very welcome.

The UK and Ireland both want to see these engagements being swiftly implemented. In particular, a SPS deal will make a big difference, removing checks and procedures for animal and plant products moving between the UK and Ireland. I was really pleased to hear the positivity around that of EU Trade Commissioner Šefčovič when he was in Dublin last week. Of course, we remain fully committed to the implementation of the Windsor framework.

I will also touch on trade and investment. We are really hopeful that we can unlock further growth opportunities for both our countries through an approved trading arrangement. Trade between the UK and Ireland is already worth a whopping €2 billion per week, supporting the jobs of 400,000 of our citizens.

I have been speaking to businesses on both sides that are optimistic about the prospects of this trade improving. Irish businesses announced an additional £185 million of investment into the UK at the March summit, and the UK's new 10-year modern industrial strategy will add an additional framework to drive forward growth in our collaboration. Whether you are innovating in clean energy, a disruptive tech company or scaling life sciences, our industrial strategy can help you in making your investments.

All across the regions of the UK, including Northern Ireland, we are investing in priority sectors, such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative, defence, digital technologies, financial services and life sciences. These also speak to Ireland's priorities, and I am really confident that we can find many more opportunities going forward.

Also, we are not just thinking capital to capital; this is a relationship that exists right across the geography. We have a long-standing arrangement in our Joining the Dots programme, which has connected city leaders, businesses and researchers right across the islands, from Limerick to Leeds and from Cork to Coventry. We look forward to welcoming the Mayors of Liverpool and Manchester on a trade mission to Ireland next month.

You will spend a lot of time during this plenary talking about research and innovation. It is a topic that is really dear to my heart, because I think that what we do in research and innovation today is what will drive growth in our economies tomorrow.

The UK's reassociation with Horizon Europe will allow us to access funding again so that we can foster new partnerships in life sciences, AI and green tech. Since January 2024, we have had two research co-centres, bringing together researchers from Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain. They have already produced valuable research in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss and food security, and deepened cross-border ties.

10.00 am

I would be interested to see what more we can do in this area. I can see further opportunities for similar arrangements, maybe in health, where we have amazing shared strengths, and in cyber. I know that I can rely on Paul to help while we are driving this forward. It is easy to see why he has taken on this new job—the opportunities are absolutely enormous just for the UK and Ireland, never mind what Ireland does with the rest of the world.

It is not an exaggeration to say that our energy links are fundamental to our future prosperity. In fact, I think we need to think of them as existential. The Greenlink electricity interconnector, operational since January, has doubled the interconnection capacity between our grids. We have committed to deepened collaboration on offshore and renewables, on hydrogen and on energy resilience—all vital as we work towards lowering electricity costs, increasing energy security and our net zero goals in an age of increasing disruption in the supply of traditional hydrocarbons.

Our energy links are also a reminder of our vulnerabilities. Gas, electricity and data all flow through cables on the seabed. We must co-operate to protect them and defend ourselves from adversaries who seek to destabilise us. The same is true of the online domain. Our geography, sitting right at the edge of Europe, is no longer a guarantee of our safety. We have to protect and defend it together.

At the heart of everything I have been talking about are our people. Nothing would get done without the myriad personal connections between us. We both hold the common travel area incredibly dear. It continues to guarantee the right to live, work, study and vote across our islands. It supports cultural and human exchange for students, artists, academics and businesspeople.

This relationship has been through a lot, including in the last few years, but I firmly believe that we have built really strong foundations thanks to our shared commitment and effort. Following the bilateral summit, the UK's reset with Europe, our agreement on a joint legacy framework, our recognition of Palestine, the prospect of lasting peace in the middle east and our collective work to support Ukraine in the face of naked Russian aggression, the UK and Ireland are on the same page. Now is the time to write an ambitious new chapter together to shape our shared future and keep our citizens safe and our economies growing in a world of both risk and massive opportunity.

Thank you—go raibh maith agat. I look forward to working with all of you in the coming years.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I call Ambassador Fraser to address the Assembly.

HE Martin Fraser:

Dia daoibh ar maidin. [*Good morning, everyone.*] It is a great privilege to be serving alongside Ambassador Owen, who has far better Irish than I. Kara, you are very welcome and it is a great pleasure to be working with you. I echo your tribute to former Ambassador Johnston, who now claims to be a professor. I was looking for some honorific to bestow upon him. He probably has the power to make himself a professor now.

I was described as a diplo-star. I have never been called that before, but because I am a really good diplomat I am going to do the rest of my speech in the language of the host country, which in this case is English—do not be too impressed. I will use one bit of Irish: aithníonn ciaróg ciaróg eile. [*A beetle recognises another beetle.*] The British Clerk spotted that the last time I did this, I agreed with the British ambassador. As he is a veteran civil servant like me, he knows that is the easiest way to do a speech.

I agree with everything the British ambassador said and will endeavour not to repeat it. I genuinely believe in everything that Kara said. I am honoured to be here accompanying the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and our Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who will address you later at some length. I do not want to repeat what Kara said, but I do not want you to think that I do not believe it; I think it is absolutely accurate.

In that spirit, I have a couple of thoughts. I am conscious that there are lots of new Members and that I have been at this a long time—apologies to Lord Murphy, who has heard some of this before, but some of you have not. I will reflect on how the relationship has developed and how it has to go forward, drawing on some of the things that Kara spoke about.

First, I am so grateful to everybody for being here to be part of the 67th meeting of this Assembly. It is so important that we have parliamentarians from all across these islands coming together—veterans who have served so well. Those of us who have been here before were chatting about this last night—thankfully, they are still around, but a lot of Members have moved on and have done great service.

This Assembly has done huge service to the cause of peace and prosperity in these islands—a service that cannot be overstated. In a minute, I am going to talk about

service that will be needed in the future, because things are much easier between Britain and Ireland, but they are not getting any easier in the bigger world out there, so it is wonderful that you are all here and can all give your time. I will talk a bit about the work programme that Kara did, and the fact that the Committees are shaped around them, because that is so important. It is just great that you are here.

It is also great that all the institutions that underpin our relationships are now working. We have the joint statement by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister, and a work programme up to 2030, which is being managed now by the Cabinet Secretary in London and the Secretary General to the Government in Dublin. They are working together on all those elements. As officials, we are mandated to work through that, as are Ministers.

The summit in Liverpool was really brilliant. There was a cultural event the night before, and hundreds of people in Liverpool—no better place to capture the links between Britain and Ireland. People from all over this country and from all over home, north and south, came to be there together in a very relaxed, easy and constructive way. At the summit itself, there were five representatives from each side. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Tánaiste, the Minister for Energy, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Justice. The British Prime Minister had the Deputy Prime Minister and three counterparts as well. It was a very high-powered gathering, and it was great to see that. It is a great base for the future, and we look forward to the next summit in the first half of next year, which will be hosted by Ireland.

That, of course, puts pressure on us all to deliver on what the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have asked, and to come up with new ideas. The coming up with new ideas thing is one of the big challenges we face. Many years ago, around 2012, I was involved when we reached a similar point in our relationship, when the Prime Minister and Taoiseach were setting the direction. It is sometimes hard for officialdom and everybody else to jump forward from that platform, and then distractions come along. In the case of 2012, the big distraction was Brexit, which is an understatement, to put it mildly, but we just do not know what is coming. We have to keep working on that.

Anyway, the institutions are good. It is great that the Executive is working in Belfast, and that the Assembly is working in Stormont as well. The North South Ministerial Council is working. The British-Irish Council, where everybody here has members, is working, and so is the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. All the institutions—all the agreement and the things that underpin our relationship—are working. Of course, this is the parliamentary part of that relationship, which is so important.

We also, as Kara mentioned, have very good relations now at a regional level. We are expecting a visit from the two Mayors from the north-west—from Liverpool and Manchester—which I think will be their third visit in recent times. We also have good relationships with Mayors in places such as the north-east of England, in Yorkshire.

Obviously, there are very good relationships between Ireland and the devolved Administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh. We have just recently published, as the ambassador said, a joint programme with Wales, which is probably the third or fourth one of those. We are hopefully going to publish one shortly with Scotland as well, and we are expecting a visit from the First Minister of Scotland to Ireland in the near future.

All these relationships are all working well, are operational and are there to be used and to build on. That is great.

I have a central thesis that I want to share, particularly with new Members. This relationship works really well when the two Governments work together, and not well at all when they do not work together. One of my first jobs, many years ago in the Taoiseach's Department, was reading the archives. I point out to people that the British and Irish Governments did not really talk to each other from the 1920s to the 1960s, even the 1970s. You really have to get into the early 1980s before you have proper engagement at the level of the Taoiseach and Prime Minister. When that engagement came—of course, it was a terrible time with the Troubles—we then, in historical terms, quite quickly got the Anglo-Irish agreement in '85 and the Downing Street declaration. Both, by the way, were under the Conservative party, to be fair to them, in Britain. Then we got the Good Friday agreement and all the progress since, and Lord Murphy and others were so instrumental in bringing those things about.

When we do not work together—Brexit, I am afraid, is the leading example in recent years—things go bad. We in Ireland sometimes get frustrated that people in England do not think about Ireland as much as we think they should. That is why I am so delighted to have so many British parliamentarians in the room today. I will talk in a minute about how Ireland has to think more about Britain as well, but when they do work together, we get much better things. We did, in the end, get a Brexit deal and a workable way through on all of that, which is obviously not supported by everybody, but none the less, it is a way forward.

Recently, as Kara has mentioned, we have had an agreement on legacy, which is the fruit of very detailed conversations between the two Governments and with affected people, mainly in Northern Ireland, but not exclusively, because we have an obligation in the south of Ireland to deal with our own legacy as well. That has been announced by the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I think that is a constructive way forward on what is a very difficult issue. My net point is this: if the two Governments, the two Parliaments and the two sets of elected representatives in the broader sense can work together, then even on really difficult issues we can make huge progress. But when we turn our backs on one another, or we ignore each other's concerns, that is where problems come.

For now, I think we are in good shape. But in the spirit of thinking about what we might face in the future and how we might work together, I will talk about two things. Lastly, I am going to talk about the work programme and the Committees that you have established, but first, briefly, I will look at what things look like from London, which I have done before on this occasion.

My job is to explain Ireland in England and Britain, but I also have to explain what I am experiencing in Britain to colleagues in Ireland. In London, among my EU colleagues, and my colleagues in the British Government and more broadly, I see a lot of turbulence outside these islands. Particularly in EU member states, there is a real fear of Russia. There is fear of interference in elections in places like Georgia and Moldova, and even closer to home. There is a real, genuine fear of invasion by Russia in the Baltic states and some of the eastern member states. Therefore, as the ambassador said, there is an absolute imperative to increase the defensive capacity of Europe to deal with

cybersecurity, conventional security and defence. As people know well, the EU is also grappling with that, and it is one of the biggest fears.

There is a lot of concern about China's role in the world and what that means. There is a concern about US policy, obviously, which is evolving to a more isolationist, "America first" policy—I am quoting the President, so there is nothing controversial about saying that. The interaction between China, America and Europe is very complicated in terms of the global economy and global security. Britain, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, a leading member of NATO and a leading European power, has an important role to play in that.

Britain is very much back in the conversation post-Brexit. The Prime Minister is in all the conversations that matter and playing a constructive role. What I say to my EU colleagues, whether we are talking about the Ireland-UK reset, which is good, or the EU-UK reset, which is under way—we hope to get deals on things like mobility and SPS—is that Britain still remains one of the most important forces for freedom and democracy in Europe. I do not think it does Ireland any harm to sometimes think about that as well. We are in a really febrile place on the continent of Europe. These are not distant problems; these are very imminent problems. I speak to my colleagues from the EU every couple of weeks, and if you talk to people from the Baltic states or eastern Europe, the concerns they have are really profound.

None of this is really in Ireland's interest. Whether it is the breakdown of globalisation, the increase of military activity or election interference—whatever it might be—none of it is good for Ireland, and Ireland has to find its place in that debate. We have to find a way, through our EU membership, our foreign policy, and our bilateral relationships with countries like Britain and America, to ensure that freedom, democracy, and, frankly, free trade, which matters hugely to us, can be maintained.

The other big issue in Britain is migration. It is not as much of an issue in Ireland as far as I can see—I do not currently live in Ireland, obviously. I suppose it is never too far from the surface, as elected representatives will know, but it is a big, big issue in Britain. The ambassador mentioned the common travel area; we have worked really hard, and continue to do so, on the common travel area. We have kept it right through Brexit, we have kept it for over 100 years, and we will keep it into the future. You have seen an announcement from the British Government recently about digital ID cards; they did speak to us around the time of the announcement, and they have engaged with us. A Minister came to Dublin last week to discuss it with some of the Ministers in Ireland, so we will work together on that. But it is very difficult to overemphasise the pressure that migration is putting on British politics at the moment. You can see that in opinion polls and in the debate, which is different from that in Ireland.

Security and defence and migration—in the mode of what you might want to hear from London—are the two things I think that Ireland needs to think about, because Britain now is not in the EU, but is very much a powerful country in NATO, the G7 and the G20. We have to think about what Britain is interested in, as well as always wanting Britain to be interested in our very legitimate concerns.

10.15 am

We have the Minister here to talk specifically about further and higher education, just to say that obviously that is one of the great opportunities we have. We worked very

hard to get Britain back into the Horizon Europe programme after Brexit. Britain has one of the best—not the best, but certainly one of the best—higher education sectors in the world, and some of the greatest universities and greatest minds in the world. Ireland cannot but benefit from working with British universities, the entire further and higher education and the science and innovation sector. I know that Minister Lawless will talk about that later on.

Finally on the four pillars—security, justice and global—I think I have sort of outlined some of the things that are on people’s minds there. Climate, energy, science and technology we will hear from the Minister. Ambassador Owen has mentioned that energy is existential, and I think that is absolutely right—it is an existential issue. Reliable energy supplies, sustainability, climate action and the cost of energy will all be huge issues. We can see a very definite view from America about the cost of energy in Europe. If you speak to American officials in London or anywhere else, they tell you very bluntly, as the President has said, that they think energy prices are too high. They of course think fossil fuels are the answer—that is a difficult debate in both our countries. There is a debate about small modular nuclear reactors in Britain and other countries.

The future of energy is fundamental to the future of all our countries. Where does the energy come from and is there enough of it? Is it reliable? Is it sustainable? What does it do to the planet? What does it cost? Those are big issues. I have sort of a mild dream that somehow these islands can become a source of renewable energy for all Europe. If you think of the situation in central Europe, particularly in Germany, they have no nuclear power and they have pulled out of Russian fossil fuels, so where is the source of energy? The German Government—trust me—are very interested in this. They have a lot of energy people in London; they have good ties with those of you from Edinburgh and Scotland and good ties with the Scottish Government.

This sense that these islands, through renewable energy, could be a source of energy not just for ourselves, but for the European continent I think is a really important thing. That really is a joint effort because, whether it is skills, infrastructure, ports, money, equipment, regulation, market structure or whatever it is, these things we have to do together. Climate and energy are of course interlinked. On growth, trade and investment—I mean this is a statement of the obvious—we are dependent on each other. We are massively interlinked economically; we are both easily in the top five or top 10 trading partners in imports or whatever way you want to measure it. Including an economy as big as Britain relies a lot on Ireland and vice versa. Thankfully, that is going very well, but we can never be complacent about it.

Finally, a good way to finish in this forum is this issue of people, cultures and people links. Of course, they are the things that have kept us together through all the centuries: the ambassador has Irish ancestors; we all have English ones ourselves—the Fraser is probably Scottish, and probably more Tom Elliott’s crowd now than my own, but we all have the history that brings us all together. As ambassador in London, I meet so many people coming in and out of London, Britain or wherever you go, and so many people are from Ireland and have Irish history. It is the same in Ireland, and the two islands have so much in common. Those ties are so important.

We have a very good culture programme we are building out of the two Prime Ministers somewhat, but more than that, it is all the day-to-day connections, friends, family and

visits that keeps us together. As long as we, as Governments, parliamentarians and officials, can keep working together, there is no reason why we cannot continue to grow that, and that, notwithstanding all the very different challenges we face, the islands cannot have a very good future together. *[Applause.]*

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Ambassador Kara and Ambassador Martin, for your very comprehensive overview of relationships across these islands. Of course, there were some sobering messages in both addresses as well in regard to the geopolitical situation in Europe and elsewhere. One other message that I was delighted that both of you emphasised was that this relationship is not just capital to capital, but about the regions across all the legislature areas, so your addresses are extremely welcome. We look forward to working with Kara in her new role. She presents her credentials to the President this Wednesday, I think. We appreciate the great work that her predecessor Paul Johnston did over the years as well.

I know you have a very close working relationship with our ambassador in London as well, which is for the benefit of both countries. Long may that strong working relationship continue. Of course, you also outlined the challenges and opportunities that exist for us as parliamentarians in dealing with the issues that confront us on a daily basis, as well as the long-term projects that can be progressed as well.

We will take questions for our ambassadors from the floor. The first offering was Frank Feighan, to be followed by Lord Murphy.

Frank Feighan TD:

I want to thank you, Ambassadors Martin and Kara, for all your great work, and your teams, for the work they do in the UK and in Ireland. Everywhere you go, they are there, and they are very professional and very helpful. I also want to thank Ambassador Paul Johnston for the great work he did.

I alluded to this last night, and you alluded to it there, Ambassador Martin, but we were in a silo for far, far too long, from the 1920s to the 1970s. Our involvement in the EEC at that time took 28 meetings a day between Irish and UK officials, and I have no doubt that brought on the Anglo-Irish agreement, the Downing Street declaration and the Good Friday agreement.

Now we are in a situation in which the UK is out of the European Union, but that is why meetings like this and this body are so important. We have to continue to redouble our efforts to keep those relations between the UK and Ireland. Kara, not only is your husband from Ireland, but I understand he is from the west, which is even better. As we say in the west, “The west is best, and feck the rest”.

There are three issues, and I will not be too long. One, when will the legacy framework that the Prime Ministers jointly announced to address the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and enable truth for the families of the Troubles get its passage through Westminster? It is very important that it is not held up. It needs to be brought through Westminster.

You also alluded to the ID cards. That could cause issues on the island of Ireland, and certainly in Northern Ireland. I am delighted to see you are working through that. It is a lot of work.

Finally, my father, as I said, worked all his life in London. He worked at the building sites, as a taxi driver and at British Railways. He brought us over in 1974, and brought us into the Irish embassy at Grosvenor Square. We were very proud, and I have been to Grosvenor Square many times.

I understand you are going to Ireland House, which is between the Mall and Trafalgar Square. It is great—it is a new building—but I think we need to look at retaining maybe an Irish residence or whatever in Grosvenor Square. We have had the same issue regarding long-wave radio. I have constituents of mine who are back now, and they fought for the RTÉ long-wave radio, which we lost in 2023.

I am very proud when I leave Victoria station. I normally stay at the Crown hotel in Cricklewood. I walk by there and see the Irish tricolour, and I am very proud, so more needs to be done to ensure that building is retained. It is something that is close to my heart and the hearts of people in my constituency who dip in and out, and I think we could do a little bit more to retain that as well. Thank you for all your great work. I look forward to meeting everybody in the coming days.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We will group a few questions together. Lord Murphy.

The Lord Murphy:

May I add my thanks to Kara, Martin and, indeed, Paul for the wonderful improvement in British-Irish relations over the last couple of years? They really were at rock bottom after Brexit, and there has absolutely been noticeable improvement. A lot of that is due to our ambassadors.

I particularly want to ask one question regarding the common travel area. As you know, yesterday, British citizens started to undergo fresh border checks to go into the European Union countries—not Ireland, of course. There is just a niggle about the CTA at the moment, which I and Lord Moylan, a Conservative Member of the House of Lords, have been questioning the Government about: the need for British citizens to show their passports at Dublin airport.

Normally, if you go from north to south on the island of Ireland, there is obviously no issue; if you drive from Britain to Ireland through the ferry systems, there is no issue; if you go as a foot passenger on a ferry from Britain to Ireland, there is none; but if you go from Britain to Dublin, you have to show your passport — yet, if you come back from Dublin to any British airport, you do not. It is an anomaly that I think is quite difficult to understand. It is a little issue, not a huge one, but one that impacts on what I think is one of the greatest treasures we have, which is the CTA.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Paul. We will hear from Baroness O’Grady, and then we will go back to our ambassadors.

The Baroness O’Grady of Upper Holloway:

I am Frances O’Grady, a Labour peer. I should also declare that I am a member of the board of GB Energy, representing workers’ interests in a just transition. I am also a first-time delegate, so I think my main goal is to avoid putting my foot in my mouth on this first day.

I wanted to ask about something that I see as a great opportunity, in that we have a Labour Government in power that is committed to a new deal for workers. The Employment Rights Bill is really sending a signal that the fear—if you like—of divergence on the social dimension of the EU is significantly less of a threat than maybe it was previously. I would have thought that that was an opportunity for this Assembly, in terms of building stronger relationships in territory where there is a real opportunity to develop those relationships.

In particular, there is the EU directive on adequate minimum wages, and everything that that means about boosting collective bargaining and better-quality jobs for workers, and, similarly, the Employment Rights Bill in the UK. To an extent, we have talked about people, but obviously there is also a close relationship between our two countries in terms of workers. I just wondered whether that might lie at the heart of our thinking around some of the challenges that we are facing.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. Martin first, and then Kara.

HE Martin Fraser:

Thank you very much. I will just go through them all, Chair, as best I can.

Deputy Feighan, thank you for your thanks; I know that was based on eyewitness experience of our great work in England, so thank you for that. There is a long-established manoeuvre in diplomatic circles, normally carried out by the British ambassador in Ireland—not this one, yet—which is: “Isn’t my house lovely? If anyone comes over from the capital city, will you tell them it’s lovely?” So I hear what you say about the joys of Grosvenor Place and how nice it would be to hold on to it.

We are moving to Ireland House in the summer of 2027, which will be a lovely building. It is right beside Admiralty Arch and Trafalgar Square. It is very much in the heart of London, and we will do a great job on kitting it out, but there is great history in Grosvenor Place. So it is, of course, way above my pay grade to agree with you, Deputy—but thank you for your question. *[Laughter.]* Do you think they spotted that?

I will defer to the British ambassador on the timing of the legacy. I have an answer in my head, but I think, in fairness, it is a matter for the Westminster Parliament in the first instance—followed quite closely, I hope, by the Oireachtas, but I will let Kara lead that.

On ID cards, you have spotted the spirit in which we are trying to address this. We understand in Ireland that this is a very big issue in Britain, but there are ways of dealing with this. I was a civil servant before I was a diplo-star, and my experience is that there are ways and means, but we have to work closely together. We did not have a very good experience with the ETA, which London sort of came up with without necessarily

thinking about Ireland. That was unfortunate, so hopefully we avoid that, which I think we can.

10.30 am

On the CTA, Lord Murphy, I think you probably know my answer, because I may have given it to you before. I have to show my passport at Dublin airport as well, so it is everybody—I think it is the shape of the airport. Everybody is asked at immigration to show their passports, so I literally show my passport and have done so twice in the last two weeks. Sadly, they let me in on both occasions, so I then had to go to work.

I do understand your point, and it is a fair one. I know about that, but a British person does not necessarily understand that, and it is something we should think about. I think the logistics of having a channel like the ones you have in British airports is beyond the airport in Dublin, but it is still a fair point, and we should reflect on it further. The CTA has to mean something in people's hearts, minds and souls—it is not just a technocratic thing. In fact, the CTA exists because it is in people's hearts, minds and souls, not because of a load of rules that are thought up by civil servants. We always have to be conscious of the emotional content of the CTA, as well as its very obvious benefits.

I will jump forward to Baroness O'Grady's question; she is very modest, because she also used to lead the trade union movement in this country, and we are delighted that she is now a Member of the Assembly. One of the things with the common travel area is—again, in its spirit—that it really brings people together. People have shared rights, which we protected during the whole Brexit thing, and I think that is a strong basis, along with the less divergent path of the British Government. There is definitely something there, but we are already in a very strong place because of the CTA and the close links. Of course, the trade union movement itself works both on an all-Ireland basis and in all-Ireland spaces in many ways, which is a very strong foundation for that. I think I have answered the three questions, Chair; Kara may want to come in.

HE Kara Owen CMG:

Thank you very much for all the questions. Starting with legacy, I think many of you will have either heard Hilary Benn speak or spoken personally to him about the legacy framework, or you might have spoken to Simon Harris, who has been negotiating the legacy framework with him. One of the things that I really got from Hilary was his clear-sightedness on the fact that this is an issue that has been held by families and victims for a really long time. One of the reasons why I think both Governments were so motivated to get to an agreement was to make sure that those people who have held these issues for such a long time can actually move through them in some form or get some understanding of what happened to their relatives.

In terms of motivation to get the legacy commission in place as soon as possible, I think our motivation is really there. We are finalising this, and we need primary legislation, so that will be coming forward in Westminster soon. I know that the Secretary of State is really keen to make sure that this happens as quickly as possible, and Ireland will then have to take things through its own legislation as well. The need to make progress on that is very much in our minds.

On ID cards, it was really great to have Ian Murray in both Belfast and Dublin last week. We are starting a period of consultation, and I think what the Minister wanted to

do in both Belfast and Dublin was talk about how we can shape the consultation in a way that makes sure that we get all the questions out on the table, and all the things that we need to be considering as we are developing our approach to digital ID cards. He had great conversations with Ministers Colm Brophy TD and Neale Richmond TD, who you will see later today, all with that spirit of ensuring that, when we do the consultation, all the issues and concerns are raised, and that the way in which we implement the Government's commitment takes those issues into account.

Baroness O'Grady, I was talking about what makes this relationship, and I think that the CTA is so fundamental to all our experience of Britain and Ireland. You talked about energy and your role on the board of GB Energy. Energy is one of those areas that is both existential and fundamental to our economies. We need cheaper electricity, we need it to be greener and we need it to be secured, but it is also a massive opportunity for us in terms of technical capability and trading. SSE, for example, is a massively important company in Ireland. It employs lots of people and has 700,000 customers in Ireland. There is also ESB, with its operations in the UK.

Both those companies are thinking very much about how that activity can also support the development of cutting-edge skills among their workforces. When we take forward the joint statement and talk about future sectors of the economy, we absolutely have to get our arms around the opportunities for our workers, for our people, for our citizens, for jobs and for growth, and around how we collaborate together to make sure that our workforce is as skilled as possible with the skills that they are going to need into the 21st century.

You have touched on one of the things that I feel really excited about. We have a lot to learn from each other. Our education and higher education institutions are very well connected up. We have conversations about things like apprenticeships, and how we can make use of those, but the very interconnectedness of our corporate life also gives us a really brilliant opportunity to make sure that the opportunities that I and Martin have talked about lead to proper benefits for workers.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Kara and Martin. We have three more Members offering, so we will take those questions and go back to the ambassadors.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:

Thanks very much, Chair, and thanks to both the Co-Chairs and the ambassadors for their enlightening, inspirational and entertaining words this morning. Kara, you talked about Ireland and the United Kingdom being pretty much on the same page in relation to Palestine and Ukraine. That is indeed very welcome. In relation to the world that we are facing now, I am a past member of the Council of Europe—my colleague, Senator Joe O'Reilly, is a present member—and there have been rumblings in the past about the possibility of Great Britain not remaining a member state. Thankfully it is at this point in time, and a very full and committed member state, but I am interested in how you see the future relationship with the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights. I think they are really important relationships.

Martin, you spoke about the summit and the cultural evening the night before. I think that one of the ways we can, as neighbouring countries, engage with one another in a

very strong way is through culture. People I know were at that wonderful concert that was organised prior to the Queen coming to Ireland. People still talk about that night as an incredible evening of cultures coming together—just that pride of place and that essential connection. As a Kildare person I have to mention that the embassy in London, over the last few years, has developed a really nice event around St Brigid's day, since it became a bank holiday. I certainly would like to see that continued. I know that Michael Loneragan, who has now come back to Dublin, was very much part of that, and I managed to bend Emer's ear last night in relation to it. I would certainly love to see that continued.

I totally appreciate that British-Irish relations are in a very good place now, at this point, and that through the years, as has been outlined, there have been challenging relationships, shall we say? But in terms of how we can engage with our younger generations and look at initiatives to promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding, are there any projects in the pipeline, or any ideas there?

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

There has been a lot of discussion here this morning, and security has featured quite a lot in it. The relationship between our two islands is inextricably linked, particularly when we look at the gas supply coming from Scotland, the electricity supply, and the umbilical cord that exists at the Irish sea. It is a matter of grave concern to all of us. There are no borders any more in the world we live in; the world we live in is without borders. There are now five pillars to security: land, sea, air, and then you have sky and space. So is it not time we extended the common travel area to a common defence area, whereby we, as joint islands, would work together?

We saw an excellent example recently when a shadow Russian ship was in the Irish sea, and the Irish Navy and Royal Navy co-operated to monitor its movements as it passed through. On our west coast, there are cables that cover internet connectivity between east and west, and it is my belief that many of those cables are already compromised, and it is only a matter of time before somebody pulls the trigger to set off a charge on one of them. Can you imagine what it would do to our economies if those cables were severed? It is my belief—I hope there will be further debate on this this afternoon, but I would be interested in your comments—that it is time we had a common defence area between Britain and Ireland.

HE Kara Owen CMG:

On the ECHR, Fiona, the UK Government have been clear that it is fundamental, including to upholding the Good Friday agreement. You will see that it is definitely a topic of political debate. Martin mentioned things such as migration and how that is such a big issue, so you will see it come up. In terms of the Government's position, however, that is really clear.

You mentioned St Brigid's day, and I have already been very flattering to Martin about what a great diplomat he is. Around the world, I have served with some of the most amazing female Irish diplomats, whom I am honoured to call my friends, including Sarah McGrath, your ambassador in Singapore and an absolute firecracker of an ambassador. She used St Brigid's day—to fantastic soft-power effect—to bring women and other female ambassadors into the residence to celebrate something really important about Irish culture and also to contribute to women's empowerment.

In terms of youth, I really agree with you. It was part of the summit agreement that we would set up a youth forum, which we are really looking forward to doing. To my mind, that does not need to be a one-off thing; that has to be something that we keep going to make sure that younger generations can understand where we have come from and where we need to go together.

More than that, it is not just about their understanding, but about their being able to shape and guide us in what they think will be most important for the two Governments to do between us. I will always have younger generations front of mind, including around culture and sport—I am a Liverpool fan myself. I am only sorry I was not ambassador—sorry, Paul—in time for the Liverpool summit; that would have been absolutely amazing. I am sure there will be lots of time for me to go back to Liverpool, and I am really looking forward to welcoming the Mayor of Liverpool, with whom I also discussed youth exchanges.

There are brilliant things going on. Welsh colleagues will be able to talk about exchanges between Wales and Ireland, including Welsh kids going to the Gaeltacht and understanding what it is like—sharing stories about how to keep the language really living and at the heart of communities. There is a huge amount we can do together.

On security, Senator Craughwell, I have been really struck, since preparing for this job, by how much more often the security conversation has come up than it might have done five years ago. That is because the world has changed around us, and we absolutely need to be on it. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach agreed in March that we would look at the defence memorandum of understanding that we already have together. Anybody you speak to in defence talks about how fast things are changing, and how we need to be on our mettle if we are going to be able to keep up with changes in the external environment. I think that the two systems are talking now about what more we need to do together. There is a strong relationship between our new national cyber-security centres; again, that is something you have to constantly feed and water to make sure it keeps up with the new moves and techniques of those who would wish to do us harm. I am looking forward to contributing to how, more broadly, our defence and security collaboration can modernise and be as strong as possible.

HE Martin Fraser:

Senator O’Loughlin, thank you for giving me the opportunity to pay tribute to the aforementioned Michael Loneran, who some of you have probably heard of. His commitment to Westminster was unparalleled, but so was his commitment to the regions: I remember Michael would go not just to Kildare, but to Aintree, Cheltenham, Newmarket and Ascot—from the red wall to the deep blue, there was nothing the man would not do for Ireland, and I am delighted to take this opportunity. *[Laughter.]* I can see that the gathering understands the spirit in which the tribute is made. We miss Michael a lot, but Emer was there, doing her best. We will of course have another St Brigid’s day event. It is the single biggest event of the year at the Irish embassy, so it is always a great occasion.

On a more serious note, it is great that this Assembly could look at the ECHR debate. The ambassador has obviously explained it from the British point of view. There is a lot of debate even within the Council of Europe, as you will know, and quite a lot of member states are looking at it, initially led by Denmark. A conversation is under way, but we always have to be very conscious of the centrality of the ECHR to the Good

Friday agreement. That is something that we never forget and never allow anybody else to forget. We are greatly heartened by the approach of the current British Government in that regard, but it is obviously something where we need vigilance at all times.

On youth exchange, I think we are setting up a youth assembly as part of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister's joint initiative. It is all ongoing. The ambassador gave some examples, and I will give you an example. I was down in Brighton for the women's rugby world cup game; it was a sold-out stadium, with so many young people, young women in particular, from all over Ireland and, indeed, Britain. It was a sell-out occasion, and the whole town of Brighton was full. Sport has a role to play.

We also had the Irish Baroque Orchestra play a sell-out event at the Royal Albert Hall only a few weeks ago, and I think the Abbey Theatre is coming to London soon to do some work with the National Theatre. Culture and sport have a role to play, with ever more exchanges between young people. That is very much on our mind, and something that is relatively easier to do than some of these big energy projects or whatever else. We certainly try to do all we can on that.

I probably will not announce a common defence area this morning, Senator, but I note that you asked for it to be discussed. Our policy remains unchanged: we are militarily neutral. We do, of course, co-operate with the British Government, and we are reviewing the MOU—that is in the joint statement. But I think everyone here takes your point about how things have changed. Security is borderless now, and in many ways politics is becoming borderless. That is a challenge for all of us, and we have to recognise that as we look to the future.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Martin. On behalf of Gill, the Co-Chair, and on behalf of the whole Assembly I extend my sincere thanks to our ambassadors, Kara and Martin, for their very informative contributions this morning. I want also to record our appreciation for the support that the embassies, ambassadors and consulates have given to this Assembly over the years. That support has been appreciated and has been extremely important in the work of our Assembly. We look forward to good engagement with the ambassadors and their staff over the coming years. Again, on behalf of the Assembly, we sincerely thank you both for your contributions this morning.

We will take a short break until 11.05 am. I mention to Members that bells will ring at 11. They are not Division bells; the hotel fire alarm system is being tested—there is no need to run to any room for a vote.

The sitting was suspended at 10.50 am.

UK-IRELAND 2030: DEVELOPING RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SKILLS ACROSS BIPA JURISDICTIONS

11.22 am

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will hear from Mr James Lawless, TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, who will address the Assembly and then take questions.

James Lawless TD:

Fellow parliamentarians, distinguished guests, it has been a pleasure chatting to most of you over the course of yesterday evening and indeed this morning. I am delighted and honoured to be joining you formally in your deliberations today. It is a very significant parliamentary body. I never was a member of the body, but I often heard wonderful stories and am aware of the impact that the body has. It is significant and impressive to see it in full force today, and indeed all of you present are very much part of that. I congratulate the Co-Chairs, Ms Gill Furniss MP and Mr Brendan Smith TD, my good friend and colleague. I thank you both for the invitation. It is a pleasure to be here.

I am going to share some thoughts and some future ideas for the relationship, and particularly how it pertains to my Department and our shared areas of co-operation. I will start with a story of co-operation. In 1932, two scientists, one Irish, one British, stood together in a laboratory in Cambridge and split the atom. They were subsequently awarded the Nobel Prize. They were Ernest Walton from Waterford and John Cockcroft from Yorkshire. That partnership changed the course of science and indeed arguably of humanity in terms of the developments that would flow from it. They did that not as rivals but as partners in a wonderful joint enterprise. That shared discovery reminds us of a deeper truth, that when we work together, we do not just share knowledge, but we shape the future through that collaboration. The Nobel Prize that they were jointly awarded is testament to that.

Is mór an onóir liom bheith anseo don ócáid speisialta seo. Táim buíoch as an gcuireadh. *[It is a great honour to be here for this special occasion. I am grateful for the invitation.]*

I do not know if my Gaeilge is up to Ambassador Owen's standard in the wonderful rendition earlier but I want to say: comhghairdeas leis an Ambasadóir Owen agus ádh mór uirthi. *[Congratulations to Ambassador Owen and good luck to her.]*

I wish Ambassador Owen every success in her new posting. By the start she made today, I think that will be a very successful engagement. I also want to acknowledge Paul Johnston who is in the room and who I will now work with in a new capacity in his role with the universities. I thank him for his leadership as well.

Today, like the Assembly in general, is a rare and valuable opportunity to speak candidly, robustly, frankly and cordially among friends about the challenges and the opportunities that we face together across these islands. As parliamentarians gathered here today, our collective leadership, our debates and our decisions shape the lives of almost 75 million people. That is quite a profound responsibility but it is also a powerful

opportunity. We might look out from different shores but we face the same horizon. We may speak in different accents, and that is only in Leinster, but we share the same values. We may carry different histories but we are together writing a common future.

11.30 am

The Irish Sea separates our lands but it connects our futures and indeed our pasts. It has long been a channel of creativity and exchange. It carried the wit of Wilde to London, Shaw's radicalism to the world stage, and Bram Stoker's gothic imagination from Trinity College Dublin right into the heart of British literature, through *Dracula*. I am very proud that Stoker and I share the same degree, maths from Trinity. He put his to use in *Dracula* and I put mine to use as a Government Minister. History will tell who had the most impact. Yeats's mysticism, Beckett's theatre and the voice of Seamus Heaney, all are voices that speak and spoke to Irish and British audiences as part of that shared cultural heritage, that history and that impact to the world beyond. These are not just Irish stories or British stories. They are stories of shared creativity, of minds in dialogue, of cultures and of conversation.

I want to reflect today on two areas of that common dialogue and hinterland, the current state of Ireland-UK relations and how this relationship intersects with my own portfolio, covering tertiary education, research and innovation. We start with what was the word of the year for a couple of years—it was unavoidable—“Brexit”. We are all acutely aware of the challenges it posed for the island of Ireland. I want to thank both the Irish and the UK Governments for their continued maturity in navigating this complex and challenging path. Our interests at times diverged but British-Irish co-operation is once again today on a strong positive trajectory, with real momentum moving forward.

As neighbours, as trading partners and as co-guarantors of an international agreement that secured peace on the island of Ireland, partnership and constructive co-operation between Ireland and Britain is absolutely vital and we cannot be complacent about that. Our relationship must be nurtured, not assumed, and it must be grounded in the values that brought us to this stage - mutual respect, democratic accountability and a shared belief in the power of dialogue. By talking to each other, we understand each other, and we move forward together.

Those values were on full display at first annual British-Irish summit in Liverpool last March. There, our Governments committed to an ambitious programme of work, from trade and energy to culture, youth, education, innovation, the marine, heritage and much more. That €2.4 billion per week trading relationship is a very significant statistic, but it also speaks to a lifeline of livelihoods, ideas and interdependence.

The summit also reaffirmed our joint responsibility to address legacy issues in Northern Ireland. I know it is on the Assembly's agenda for tomorrow. The joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles, agreed last month by the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State, is a landmark. It meets the two tests we have set, one being compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, and the other being the potential to secure the support of victims and their families. That is a testament to the strength of our relationship, a mature, respectful negotiation using a shared pathway forward. However, agreements are only as strong as their implementation. Victims and survivors have made it clear that both Governments, having talked the talk, are now expected to walk the walk. As legislators, we have a central role to play in ensuring that moment of progress, that milestone becomes a lasting legacy. More broadly, it is a significant

achievement that all three strands of the Good Friday Agreement are functioning once again. With Assembly elections less than two years away, our focus must remain on delivering for the people of Northern Ireland on housing, healthcare, education, climate, infrastructure and so much more.

In parallel with the overall reset of Ireland-UK relations, I was delighted also to see the first EU-UK summit held last May. The summit outcome set out an ambitious, practical and balanced agenda of work that will benefit the citizens of the EU and of the UK. It delivered a solid outcome for Northern Ireland. It was critical that the unique circumstances there were taken into account and that has been achieved. The summit was also a good day for opportunities for our young people, for our students. It included agreements to work towards a youth experience scheme and the aspiration of association with Erasmus+, which I would very much welcome. These initiatives will open doors for young people across the EU and the UK to study together to develop skills, find career opportunities, broaden their horizons, learn about each other, learn about the world, and forge those connections. When we talk about Erasmus+ and youth exchange, we are not just talking about mobility. We are talking about the next Oscar Wilde, the next George Bernard Shaw, the next Bram Stoker. We are investing in the storytellers, the scientists and the change-makers of tomorrow.

I have always felt the connection between our islands in a very personal way. My own parents met where all true romances start, in a bar. It was a bar in London in the early 1970s. My mother, a girl from Wexford on a student summer, was working behind a bar and my father was a young engineer from a third-generation Irish immigrant family in Yorkshire. He went into the bar to order beer, my mother served him and the rest is history. That story is replicated in countless other Irish-British connections, the story of peoples, of personalities, of real human beings coming together and shaping that shared space and shared experience.

I spoke last night with the Co-Chairperson, Ms Furniss and Ambassador Owen. We compared notes about our family histories and heritages. It is extraordinary to learn that my father's great grandfather had travelled from Ireland during the Famine to the north of England on a boat and Gill's family at the same time had travelled from, I think, Kilkenny, on a boat. They could have been on the same boat together. It is extraordinary, the connections, the humanity between our islands and those traditions and those journeys. That very deep, very real connection between our peoples binds our islands together in family, friendship and human bonds. That is the core of why we will always have that strong relationship.

As we look forward to future EU and UK agreements, we must not lose sight of the importance of implementing those we already have. The Windsor Framework is not just a technical fix but it is a test of trust and a signal of intent. It protects the gains of the Good Friday Agreement, safeguards the all-island economy and provides clarity for businesses and communities in Northern Ireland. I welcome the UK Government's recent reaffirmation of its commitment to the framework.

Let this be the beginning now of a more constructive, forward-looking EU-UK relationship, one that recognises the Irish Sea not as a barrier but as a bridge. That bridge has long carried more than goods. It has carried generations of workers, artists and thinkers. It carried Walton's atomic insights to Cambridge and Yeats's poetry to the world. It encouraged the music of the Beatles, the Smiths and Oasis, all bands with Irish

roots shaping the soundscape of Britain and beyond. “Cool Britannia” was powered by Irish music. That music was in part shaped by Ireland and that is the story of these islands, the distinct voices and those shared rhythms.

Looking to my own Department and my own brief around innovation, I have made very clear my desire to maximise collaboration between our education institutions on a North-South basis but also on an east-west basis. Our institutions working together drive our societies forward. Regarding my own background, I studied law but before that I studied maths, like Bram Stoker, in Trinity College and that included a master’s in computing. Technology has moved on a lot since my college days and I know enough to know that I know very little about technology now as it moves so quickly. I do still know that the impact of innovation is everywhere. It is accelerating. Change is the only constant in life. We do not avoid change but we embrace it. That is how we drive our societies and our economies forward. I very much view my Department of Further and Higher Education as an economic one. The decisions we make in education, research and innovation are not just about learning. They are absolutely about the learner and learning, but they are also about growth, competitiveness and resilience. They shape the future of our workforce, our industries and our communities.

The fourth industrial revolution is almost upon us. It will not be shaped by chance but by the choices we make now to equip our people with the skills, agility, and confidence in a rapidly changing world. They say the first industrial revolution was powered by steam, the second by oil, the third by the personal computer, and the fourth will be through data and artificial intelligence. We need to continue to drive on and invest and innovate into the next frontier. That spirit of innovation is not new. We have seen it before in the partnership I mentioned between Walton and Cockcroft, and the mathematical genius of William Rowan Hamilton, whose work inspired British physicists like Paul Dirac. We have seen it in the pioneering science of Kathleen Lonsdale, born in Newbridge, County Kildare, and raised in England, who became one of the first ever women elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society. Her pioneering work in crystallography helped to unlock the structure of molecules, and her legacy continues to inspire women in STEM across both of our countries. We can look to the practical brilliance of Francis Beaufort, whose wind scale was developed in Ireland that went on to be adopted by the Royal Navy and still guides ships across our shared seas today.

When we collaborate, we discover, we build and we lead. That is why I welcome so strongly the UK's re-entry into Horizon Europe. It remains a powerful platform for partnership between the UK's world-class research institutions, some of which I have had the pleasure of being able to visit in this role, and their Irish and European counterparts. When I visited Queen’s University recently, I saw this spirit in action at the Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, funded jointly by Research Ireland, UK Research and Innovation, and the Department of agriculture in UK, a real joint enterprise in every sense. It is a model of what is possible. Researchers spoke of the security of funding, the strength of industry partnerships and the excitement of working across borders. Food security will become an increasingly prevalent theme in all of our islands in the years to come. We export produce, and we are rightly hailed for the quality, the traceability and the story of that, but we must also understand the entire cycle from farm to fork, the nutritional content, the origin, the sustainability story. This and much more will become increasingly prevalent on critical points in the decades to come. That is why we are funding that co-centre with €70 million funding between the two Governments, supporting 68 researchers working across UCD, Queens, Trinity and

Reading. It is a real collaborative initiative on something so fundamental as our food security and food origins.

One of the outcomes of the Ireland-UK summit between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister was a commitment to explore further co-centres. Through Horizon Europe and initiatives like them, we are building the next generation of Cockcrofts and Waltons, researchers who will shape not just these islands but the world. That is what collaboration looks like across borders, disciplines, sectors and generations - innovation rooted in the shared purpose and a shared prosperity. We are only getting started. I plan to turbocharge Ireland's research and innovation budget and elevate this activity as a core function of my Department, and indeed of the State.

In a world of change and shifting global headwinds, trade winds and trade wars, we must innovate to survive, adapt and thrive. Research and innovation, I firmly believe, has always been the secret sauce that propels our economy forward. We will double down on that. The story of our economic success has been education. Innovation has been absolutely fundamental to that. In the following weeks, I will launch a significant new research infrastructure programme as part of my capital budget in the years ahead, ensuring Ireland remains at the forefront of the global knowledge economy. I spoke with Secretary of State Kyle when we met the British-Irish Chamber and I know he has a shared ambition and an equally strong commitment to the knowledge economy. I know he is in a new role since, but I have to say we had a very useful and productive engagement when he was in the innovation Ministry.

Innovation is not just about research; it is also about skills and ensuring that people at every stage of life can adapt, grow and succeed. In our enthusiasm for research and innovation, we must also nurture and not overlook the equally vital work of upskilling, reskilling, lifelong learning. The ambition of an Irish school-leaver seeking an apprenticeship or further education is of absolutely equal value to that of the PhD candidate or academic student. Both are builders for the future. For far too long, apprenticeships were seen as a second option, second best, something you would turn to if you did not get your first choice in university. That view must be challenged. It is outdated and must be left behind. Today, apprenticeships stand as a first-choice pathway for thousands of learners. Indeed, the earning power of many skills-based careers now rivals and actually exceeds that of traditional degree roles. Young people are now choosing vocational training not as a fallback but as a deliberate, ambitious route into the workforce. These pathways offer real opportunities to build fulfilling careers, to contribute meaningfully to our economy and to shape the future of our country.

That shift in perception is not just happening in Ireland. At the Labour Party conference last month, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer asked a simple but profound question. He said, "If you're a kid or a parent of a kid who chooses an apprenticeship, what does it say to you? Do we genuinely, as a country, afford them the same respect? Because we should". He went further and actually announced the end of the long-standing target to get half of young people into university and replaced it with a new ambition. He said two thirds of our children should either go to university or take a gold standard apprenticeship. I really admire that sentiment, to say that this is actually the goal. It is a shared outcome, a shared journey and equally valid, absolutely so. That shared challenge and shared opportunity gives us the chance across these islands to rebalance our education systems to reflect the reality of modern work and the value of practical high-quality skills.

The Government in Ireland is expanding educational pathways like never before. By the end of September, Ireland's apprenticeship population had reached over 30,000, a 52% increase since 2020. Just last week in Budget 2026, I secured the highest ever investment in apprenticeships, €79 million of new money into the Department to fund apprenticeships further. That funding will expand training capacity, support employers and ensure the system continues to meet the needs of learners and of industry. There are now 77 apprenticeship programmes available, with more in development across emerging sectors.

To guide and grow this system, the National Apprenticeships Office is a joint initiative between SOLAS, our training agency, and the HEA. It plays a central role in overseeing delivery, expanding opportunities and ensuring our partnerships remain responsive to Ireland's evolving workforce needs. A new action plan for apprenticeships will be published next year, building on that momentum and setting up the next phase of growth. I want to continue to support and strengthen the traditional apprenticeships which are so critical to all the challenges, not least that of house-building, that we face today but also to expand the model into traditionally white-collar professional jobs. There is absolutely a pathway and the same model can be rolled out much further.

We must ensure that learners and workers can acquire the skills needed to do the jobs effectively, and drive the adoption of new technologies across every sector. This is not a task just for Government. We need employers, major players, small businesses, large businesses, industry to be a strong and active partner in that effort. We are constantly fine-tuning that skills infrastructure to keep pace with the change. Our size gives us agility but neither do we claim to have all the answers. What we do have are models and learnings which we are ready to share. I have spoken both in Belfast and in England recently about the importance of collaboration in green skills and technology. Indeed, the Ireland-UK summit statement recognised our shared maritime space, our complementary moves towards net zero and our potential to collaborate on transport and energy. We also recognise the importance of shared national infrastructure. One of the shared island projects looks to improve our cybersecurity on an all-island basis to protect our backbone Internet, and to protect our public institutions from attack. There are many other projects under way and it is not just about research. It is about building common frameworks for skills across our education systems, frameworks that support lifelong learning, enterprise involvement and inclusive growth.

I started by speaking about our responsibilities to the 75 million people on our shared islands. Not all of them are researchers. Indeed, not all of them are in education. Many are already in the workforce. Some may be anxious about change or uncertain about their place in the future. To them, also, we owe clarity, opportunity and support, and I am open to all and any proposals that deepen collaboration between education and training providers in Ireland and the UK.

As the old Irish saying goes, “Ní neart go cur le chéile”—there is no strength without unity. Together, we are stronger. In a world marked by division and conflict, Ireland and the UK now stand out. More than 25 years ago, parliamentarians and community leaders sat in a room, many of them uncomfortable, but determined to show an alternative to violence and age-old conflict. I know some of the people in the room today were in those rooms also, and I salute your leadership. This Assembly remains a testament to that determination. We may differ on certain issues but we are united in our shared values, in our commitment to democracy, to peace, and the international rule

of law. As George Bernard Shaw, born in Dublin, buried in Hertfordshire, once said, “Progress is impossible without change; and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” We remain open to change, in fact we embrace it, because change is the only constant in life. That spirit of openness, of courage, of shared responsibility, must guide us now. The challenges we face are not confined to one border and neither are the solutions. The future will be built, as always, by all. I want to thank you most sincerely for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to your engagements, questions and further debate. I wish you well with your deliberations over the course of the next two days. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

11.45 am

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister, and on behalf of the Assembly, I want to thank you sincerely for your very interesting and insightful contribution across the wide remit of your own Department. You reflected on what has been achieved over the decades together, and I think you used a beautiful phrase, “shared creativity”. I think there is a lot of potential in sharing creativity across these islands. A number of people have indicated they want to ask questions. First is Mr David Honeyford, MLA.

David Honeyford MLA:

I agree with everything that has been said. The sharing piece is fundamental to that, on the island. The bit that I want to tease out and the question is that if we look back, in 1998 in Trinity College Dublin, 10% of students were from Northern Ireland. That figure is less than 1% today, so we have actually gone backwards rather than forwards. In the North, in Queen’s or Ulster University, numbers coming North have tripled in the last couple of years but we have still got the barriers for Northern students to move South. We need that mobility in two directions. What work is happening to enable Northern Ireland students to study in the South, and also to inform students coming through of what opportunities are also there for them?

Joyce Watson MS:

I thank you for your presentation. I am really pleased to see this debate. I would call it “building our futures” because that is ultimately what it is. It is absolutely key for next- and inter-generational co-operation and the threats we all face, with sustainable infrastructure, innovation and technological advancement.

I am co-chair of the all-party group on skills and apprenticeships and a founding member of the all-party group on construction in the Welsh Parliament. I welcome the Ireland-Wales shared statement that has both supported and enabled the dynamic framework for co-operation. It also built on and included the things that you talked about around learning, skills, energy, innovation, and academic research institutions. It is a tripartite of organisations. Our Government has invested heavily in an apprenticeship programme and we have 10,000 apprentices. Governments make statements about growing the economy, and all governments do that and need to do that.

When we talk about what is now clearly the third revolution, if we look at how those revolutions grew previously, and who was employed in them, you would not find too many females employed in that. I am also a founding member of gender budgeting. If

you look at the endgame of your statement through the lens of gender budgeting, you will start to understand that in the industries that you are growing, everybody must have an opportunity, in all the aspects I have just mentioned, to grow with them. I have done a lot of work around the construction industry where women make up 1%; blink and you will miss them. That cannot be sustained into the future. There has to be some real link-up and thinking around all the constituent parts. We have got the statement on GB Energy, £200 million, and I really welcome that. We have got green skills that do not require the same level of skills that were there previously. There is no reason now that we do not end up with equal opportunities in all aspects of training, work and teaching.

I have outlined my case. What actions are being taken, when we talk about the third revolution, to look at gender budgeting and to really understand what we are doing at the coalface, which is the term that is used, when we are giving those opportunities to everybody? I have done some quick maths here today. We have got 59 male members and 28 female members, so I thought it was important my voice was heard.

Frank Feighan TD:

I thank the Minister for all the great work he is doing and for coming to Sligo. After 100 years, we have a university north of the Dublin-Galway line. We are very proud of it. It should have happened decades ago but I am delighted it has happened now and thank the Minister for all his support.

On apprenticeships, we lost a lot of traction over the years and I think we are now trying to get from 5,000 to 10,000 apprenticeships. It is something that we need to do a lot more on.

Mr Honeyford got in before of me. We actually have double standards when it comes to Northern Ireland students studying in colleges and universities in the South. We need to do an awful lot more. People talk about the brain drain from Northern Ireland when students go to Britain to study and they do not come back. If we actually increased that, and let us say they came to Dublin, Sligo or wherever, they would be on the island of Ireland. That would be very beneficial, not for the Republic of Ireland but for Northern Ireland. I know the Minister has done a lot of work on it. We want to make it as easy as possible. What more can we do? Since you brought in the new initiatives regarding A levels accreditation, is the data available and is there a noticeable increase in Northern Ireland students? It is something on which we absolutely failed on the island of Ireland.

The Co-Chairman (Brendan Smith TD):

We will go back to the Minister if he could give a brief response to the issues raised. We have quite a number of other members offering to speak in this debate as well, which is very welcome.

James Lawless TD:

I thank everyone for the questions. In response to Mr Honeyford, there is a real challenge getting students from the North into universities in the South. I was in Trinity in the late 1990s when there were a lot of Northern students there. I think you said it was 10%. I still have a lot of friends, people who I was in college with who I am still in contact with. It is noticeable that it has dropped off. There are a couple of reasons for it. As Mr Feighan mentioned, typically a lot of the students were taking high points courses, very high-end courses that typically require a straight A leaving certificate to

get into. Even if you were a straight A student, on three A levels, I think the maximum you can get to is 570 points as opposed to maybe 600 points that you could get if you did six subjects at leaving certificate. It is just the nature of the way that the subject choices are governed in the two jurisdictions. As Mr Feighan mentioned, this year, to bridge that, there is an optional additional subject that you can take which boosts your points. So you take the subject, I think, the year before you sit your A levels and that gives you an extra couple of bonus points which you can then plug onto your A levels. That gets you in competition with the students coming in with their six As. It is too early to tell the impact because it is only being introduced at the moment. For next year and the year after, I think we will begin to see that. That bridges what was a technical issue for those high points courses.

Typically, the universities in the South have a matriculation requirement of a European language. Often you have to speak Spanish, French or German. You do not necessarily have to include it for points purposes but it is expected that you would have sat and passed an examination. With the three A levels, there may not be that European language choice. That may have been a barrier and might be something to look at as well. Erasmus+ and Erasmus are possibly part of this equation as well. There are a lot of students from the European Continent coming to Ireland now who would have traditionally gone to the UK. They are taking up course places as well in terms of mobilities because we are an English-speaking country in the EU still. The hoped-for accession of the UK back into Erasmus and Erasmus+ will begin to regularise some of those relationships. It is like water flowing between barrels. If more movement comes in here, it moves down there and so on. There is pressure coming from different directions. It is something I am very much aware of.

Ms Watson spoke about the Welsh Assembly, the work on the skills and apprenticeships. Thank you for your work on that. I think you make a very good point about gender balance and gender involvement. I think it is fair to say all of our jurisdictions have a huge housing challenge that we need to combat, and growth in trades, in crafts, and apprenticeships are big part of that solution. We have a programme called Women in Construction. We go out to schools; I was at a couple myself. We go to all-girls' schools where typically trades might not have been marketed as an option but why not? We cannot afford to leave 50% of the population on the sideline when we need to mobilise and equip every single potential worker to meet our housing delivery targets. We also have a campaign called Building Heroes where we have four fantastic young women apprentices, all in very traditional trades, but really becoming masters of the art very quickly. We have a marketing campaign around them. I share Ms Watson's frustration but I do think we are making progress.

We mentioned the historical imbalance. Catherine Lonsdale, who I mentioned in my speech, was one of the early female innovators. There is another lady called Jocelyn Bell Burnell. She is a scientist. She discovered radio pulsars through radio telescopes, and it was extraordinary work. She has been recognised on a stamp in Ireland very recently. We launched a women in STEM programme. Despite her amazing research and discoveries, the Nobel Prize awarded in 1974 went to her male supervisor. It was thought that she could not possibly have had the idea, and that it must have been him who had the idea. I would like to think we have progressed a lot since then. It is still quite shocking, actually, that that was the attitude of the time. I think today we have made significant progress but I absolutely agree with you. We have to continue to tackle and work on this.

In response to Mr Feighan, it is always a pleasure to visit Sligo. I was here for the earlier session and I picked up your remarks that west is best. I know it is dear to your heart, and rightly so. It is wonderful to see, as you said, after a century that ATU is now strong and we have a university in the north west. It is going very well and there will be further supports coming, things like professorships and other measures that I very much intend to roll out in the near future to support the continued development of the technological universities in Sligo and right around the regions. It is a very important development.

Heledd Fychan MS:

I am a Member of the Welsh Parliament and former Trinity graduate as well. I just wanted to reflect on the UK-England 2030 joint statement. It does cover devolved areas. We have the joint statement between Ireland and Wales renewed as well, which includes education. Obviously education is one of those devolved areas, so how do you see the UK-Ireland joint statement working alongside the Ireland-Wales and Ireland-Scotland agreements? We have a long tradition in research between higher education institutions in Ireland and Wales. I just wondered how those conversations have been. Also, Wales did establish a youth mobility scheme, Taith, which has facilitated co-operation between Ireland and Wales and young people. I wondered where that featured in the discussions.

Finally, on the Irish language and where it features in terms of apprenticeship, that is something that we have wanted to work closely with Ireland on because of the skills gaps in Welsh language and Irish language. I wonder if you could perhaps briefly share with us where that features in terms of your aspirations.

Noon

Malcolm Byrne TD:

I thank the Minister for the presentation. In terms of practical measures that we can address, and to go back to Mr Honeyford's point around students from the North coming South, the CBI and IBEC did a report about 15 years ago and one of the challenges they found was that while in schools in the South, students were told about both the CAO and the UCAS system, in the North students were only told about the UCAS system. In terms of specific recommendations, being able to explain the systems is critical. I very much welcome the UK coming back into Horizon and hopefully Erasmus+. Frankly, the UK's decision to remove itself from Erasmus+ was immoral to a generation of students. There was always a challenge when Erasmus was in operation that very few students from Ireland took up Erasmus to go to the UK and *vice versa* at undergraduate level but also among apprenticeships. Hotel and catering were usually the only case where it was done. To follow Ms Fychan's point, how can we encourage the exchange of students on these islands? It may not necessarily have to be for a full semester or a full year; we could increasingly be looking at even short periods spent in other parts of these islands.

Brian Mathew MP:

Thank you very much, Minister. It was wonderful to hear your thoughts on the apprenticeship gold standard. My question is around the whole issue of our shared green energy future. We know that there is still work to do, for example, in wind, wave and tidal technology. These are things that are there in the north Atlantic, the Irish Sea and

the Bristol Channel. What is being done to drive research into our shared renewable energy future?

James Lawless TD:

The first question was about collaboration between the Ireland-Wales agreement and the Ireland-UK joint statement. There are specific action plans arising from the Welsh agreement. We would welcome further collaboration. If Ms Fychan wants to have a chat later today, we can pick that up and progress it a little bit. I think that would be very worthwhile. On youth mobilities, before I was in the Oireachtas, I was in local government and I was mayor of Naas, which is twinned with St. Davids. There was very strong youth mobility in rugby at least, and I think in a few other areas as well. There are great connections and very strong links between the two countries. That would complement the Ireland-UK agreement as well.

Mr Malcolm Byrne asked about the CAO and UCAS. I think there is a really good point there. It is an aspiration of ours to try to align the two systems better. I agree there is not a huge amount of information or awareness of UCAS within Ireland. I am sure it is the same in reverse. It is very much an ambition to look to standardising or having a common information portal on those. Mr Byrne is absolutely right about Erasmus+. It will so much help the mobility between Ireland and the UK but also between the UK and Europe, to allow that cultural experience and cultural exchange that brings so much more with it. The Common Travel Area continues to benefit both Ireland and the UK but in terms of the formal student placements and student schemes, Erasmus+ has to be at the centre of that.

In response to Mr Mathew, I totally agree. I think Ambassador Fraser said it earlier and Ambassador Owen may have referred to it as well. We have a common seascape and we have a common energy need. There is absolutely an opportunity for us to collaborate strongly on that. In the joint statement, marine infrastructure was one of the items that was called out specifically by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. We are looking to develop new marine centres of excellence at the moment. That would include research centres. In fact, they may well flow from the research infrastructure initiative that I mentioned that I am planning to launch next month. There may be a candidate for funding from that. There are already some in development and indeed in operation. I would welcome further engagement. If Mr Mathew has any particular ideas or suggestions, we might tick-tack on that afterwards. That would be key. It is an emerging challenge. I have been thinking about Aberdeen and the oil boom of Scotland in the 1970s. We could mirror that with the renewable, green energy boom across all of our shores today and realise where we need to get to to meet our energy needs in the coming decades.

Cormac Devlin TD:

I thank the Minister for his remarks. If I could just pick up initially on the points from Mr Honeyford and Mr Byrne on the UCAS and CAO systems, there is an issue around the timing of it. The deadline for applying in UCAS is earlier than that of the CAO. By the time the students have applied, the CAO is irrelevant, effectively, for them, and it is kind of an afterthought. There is an issue that the Minister might take up with his counterpart in the North.

The Minister rightly highlighted the success and the growth we have had in apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are being seen as on par almost with degrees and other avenues and pathways to education. Something that has come up in the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the issue of placements for apprenticeships North and South, and indeed for strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement to maybe look more east-west. It was felt that we should be collaborating better, and what better forum than this to discuss that and to ensure that we are collaborating? I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on that and to see how we can progress.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. [*Thank you, Minister.*] A fair amount has already been said. If we are dealing with the CAO system in the South and UCAS in the North, there are the timeframe issues. It is the case that some are not sold as well as they could be. There is also the time lag issue which has impacted across the board. Some colleges and universities South and North have been better at trying to sell beyond. That probably has to be facilitated to a greater degree. I have seen some of that even in the context of Dundalk Institute of Technology, DKIT, in my hometown. We are in world of a lifelong learning and there are many pathways to get where you need to go. It is not necessarily traditional.

The Minister and I have met a number of times at the Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence. I generally mess up the name every time I say it. It is a fabulous entity that LMETB, the local education and training board, was involved with. There was a whole pile of cross-Border connection and so on. It is not only providing courses for those who require them but is also dealing with industry and its needs. There is a huge amount of potential there. We have seen also differing forms of apprenticeships. There is the robotics one that is planned, and there is cybersecurity. We all know that everything is going to change drastically in relation to artificial intelligence. We even have a bunfight between committees here about who be able to deal with the specifics as regards reports.

As Mr Devlin said, when we are talking about apprenticeships and placements, it is difficult logistically in doing it North or South. There are particular issues that need to be dealt with there. There is also a huge issue in relation to certification recognition. An awful lot of these issues have been talked about, no more than the university issue, for years. I remember when the current Tánaiste, Mr Simon Harris, was Taoiseach, he had suggested something that was not a terrible idea, so I am going to repeat it. I know we are talking about the wider east-west relationship but it was the idea of a hub or clearing house for dealing with these issues. We know there are wider issues in relation to taxation, remote working and all of that. While it might be more difficult across the entire Continent or beyond, we can definitely deal with this on an all-island basis and even across Britain and Ireland in a far better way than we are. I assume the Minister will have answers in relation to all of that and a timeline for delivery; two weeks should do.

The Lord Bruce:

I have a couple of points which are unrelated. On the university front, British universities are increasingly establishing campuses overseas rather than automatically attracting students. That is partly because the British Government is not so keen on

giving visas to students. I wondered whether Irish universities were doing this. I know, for example, that Cardiff University has just opened a campus, believe it or not, in Kazakhstan, just this autumn. Is there a similar situation going on in Ireland?

Unrelated to that, on the whole issue of skills, the point I raised in committee B yesterday was about the impact of artificial intelligence on the future of skills, both positive and negative. I was attending the OSCE assembly and one of the committees there had produced two separate reports, one of which said artificial intelligence is going to destroy millions of jobs, and the other of which said we have got a massive shortfall of employment and we need to import millions of people to fill those jobs. Nobody had made the connection between the two. I wondered whether in the whole planning of skills there is room for co-operation on how we use artificial intelligence, what its impact will be and how we deal with it. A huge amount of investment in the United States is going into artificial intelligence and people are worrying it might be next bubble but we need to be part of it. I wondered whether there is scope for specific co-operation between the UK and Ireland to address the impacts of artificial intelligence, positively and negatively. I do not think we know enough about it and it is coming down the track very fast.

James Lawless TD:

Mr Devlin asked about the cross-Border apprenticeships and Mr Ó Murchú had a similar question. There are a number of issues there and also opportunities. It is very much my ambition to develop cross-Border, all-island apprenticeships. It is very much on my to-do list. We have made some progress. We have possibly one or two that we may be able to commence very shortly. There has been movement towards a shared syllabus, so that learning outcomes are mirrored both sides of the Border. Ultimately what I would like to see is a situation where an apprentice could attend lectures in Dundalk IT but actually work for a company in Newry, or you could substitute Donegal and Derry—that we would have a cross-border collaboration. To do that is as much about logistics. There is very little politics but a lot of logistics. For example, our model in the South is that an apprentice would take a block of lecture time. They take a block in work and they do the number of weeks or months and then they do a block in the university and they have their training. In the North and as I understand it in the wider UK, the system is that you might do three days of the week in the job and then two days in the college. There is different timing and sequences. None of these issues are insurmountable at all. I will be meeting the Minister, Ms Caoimhe Archibald MLA, on Friday at the North South Ministerial Council.

I met her number of times. We are very much of the same mind on these issues. We will again look to progress that further. It is really important that we do that. It is very much on the list.

Mr Ó Murchú referred to Dundalk Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre of Excellence. It is an excellent centre and it leans in a little bit to the Lord Bruce's question because it is a centre of excellence in robotics, cyber, AI and advanced manufacturing—all the skills that we need to prepare for the future. Lord Bruce raised a question which is the debate we are having everywhere now. What will AI mean for society, the economy and the labour markets? I read the other day that AI will not take your job but an AI trained worker might. I thought that was very pithy, actually. Really the message is that we all, certainly our students and those entering the labour force today, need to

be familiar with it, be able to use it in the best possible way, to optimise it, as does everybody already in the workforce.

When we look at it from a training needs point of view, we have two different cohorts. We have the need for AI specialists—deep tech, our people with doctorates and advanced qualifications—who can design the systems and optimise them. We have a channel of those people coming through and we are doing quite well in terms of that, as a skill set; we have a number of talented people. There is a much broader piece of work around general AI training for the general workforce, so that people in any job or occupation can use the skills. I liken it to the advent of the personal computer. There was a variety of speculation about 30 or 40 years ago when the Internet was emerging, personal computers were coming to the desk top and we had things like early versions of spreadsheets and word processing. There was speculation that everybody would have a challenge of having too much leisure time. What would we do all day? We would be so bored because we would have no work to do. I think we can see how that worked out. I suspect AI will be the same. It may take away hopefully some of the more menial, mundane, routine tasks. Number crunching and so forth can be put into the machine but there still has to be value add on top, which is the human. I read a piece in the *Financial Times* at the weekend about cartoons; AI still cannot find jokes funny, so there is hope for humanity yet at the end of that.

On the last question about campuses internationally, within the Republic the three principal sources of international students are China, India and the US. That is traditionally the case; the US might change with changing dynamics there. There are certainly conversations about some of the universities locating in India in particular. I visited there recently and a number of universities are looking. I think Queen's either already has or is about to open a satellite campus there. Some of the other universities are in talks about that as well. It may begin to be a model that is followed as well.

The Co-Chairman (Brendan Smith TD):

That concludes our debate on this subject. On behalf of the Assembly, I again thank very sincerely the Minister, Mr James Lawless, for his insightful and comprehensive contribution at the outset, and for his frank manner in responding to the questions raised. Minister, we are very grateful for your contribution this morning. It is not just that there are opportunities for partnership across these islands; there is an absolute necessity as well for partnership across all those areas. Sincere thanks to the Minister and his department officials for their work.

UK-IRELAND JOINT STATEMENT IN THE ASSEMBLY'S JURISDICTIONS

12.15 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

The 2030 joint statement announced on 6 March 2025 signified a renewed commitment to strengthening the relationship between the UK and Ireland. It set out an ambitious programme of cooperation between our two countries through to 2030.

We will now commence our debate on the motion approved by the Steering Committee, which is in the programme of business. I call on Senator Niall Blaney to move the motion.

Senator Niall Blaney:

I beg to move,

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly welcomes the 2030 Joint Statement of the UK and Irish Governments issued in March 2025, which marked a moment of renewal for an ambitious programme of co-operation through to 2030; and commits the Assembly to supporting and encouraging the work needed to make those ambitions a reality in pursuit of the Assembly's foundational aim of promoting co-operation between political representatives in Britain and Ireland for the benefit of the people we represent.

Good afternoon, Co-Chair. This morning, we heard two very good statements from our two ambassadors about the potential for deeper cooperation across these islands. To move on from the difficult years that we have all experienced to a place where we have a concrete framework for cooperation between the two Governments is extremely welcome. The 2030 joint statement sets out an ambitious programme, one that should not be left to the two Governments alone to deliver. The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly is uniquely placed to review the work that will underpin the joint statement and help make its objectives a reality.

The last segment of the joint statement focuses on developing the ties between our peoples and cultures. The Assembly has experience of building relationships even in the hardest of times. We are now in a moment of opportunity, as relationships are being reset and renewed. Our Committee meetings yesterday and last night's Steering Committee, in particular, noted how all four Committees were brimming with energy, new ideas and a lot of new membership. It is great to have that energy in the room.

We are only starting to tap into the potential of cooperation across these islands. The Assembly should welcome and endorse the joint statement issued by the two Governments; not only that, but we must challenge them to deliver on its ambitions and, through our Committees, support and guide the two Governments on the work outlined in the joint statement.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I call on Members to make contributions on the subject of the motion. I ask Members to keep their contributions as brief as possible to ensure that all those who wish to speak have the opportunity. It is important to hear a wide range of views. I shall seek to end the debate no later than 12.45 pm.

The Baroness Hooper:

I welcome the joint statement and very much welcome the motion that has been moved. I agree with it. There is one issue in particular that I would like to pick up. In paragraph 2 of the second section of the joint statement, we talk about working together

“to strengthen international institutions for peace, promote conflict prevention,”

etc. We rely very much on our shared values, our shared language and similar institutions. The international organisation that also represents all those things is the Commonwealth. What is happening about the idea of Ireland’s joining the Commonwealth?

Senator Conor Murphy:

I very much welcome the statement and the progress that is outlined in it. After the post-Good Friday Agreement period, when relationships between the two Governments were very strong, the Brexit experience was bruising for everyone on the island of Ireland and between the island of Ireland and Britain. The attempt to reset relationships is welcome, particularly in the post-Brexit environment, in which we need as little friction in trade between the two islands as we can manage and as good a relationship as possible between Britain and the EU, and it lends itself to the idea of much better trading arrangements between us.

Baroness Hooper may have taken a different approach to it, but there is ongoing political change across the island of Ireland that is not recognised in the statement. It is incumbent on both Governments to recognise the ongoing political change across the island, particularly in the North, and the prospect of constitutional change on the island and to prepare, at least in the form of dialogue between them, for whatever the eventualities are. The responsible thing for Governments to do is anticipate change and prepare the necessary steps. That is part of the Good Friday Agreement, which commits both Governments, if the circumstances are right, to holding a referendum and commits them to active preparation and legislation for the outcome of such a referendum. While I welcome the statement on the areas that it covers and while it is necessary to have a positive working relationship after that was damaged over the Brexit years, it is also necessary for both Governments to recognise the political change that is happening and to begin preparation for it.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

No one will be greatly shocked that I agree with Conor. First, there is probably not great support for Ireland rejoining the Commonwealth. That is not to speak for the entire Irish people, but I am fairly sure about that. This could be one of the few times that I am absolutely right.

We all know our shared history, good and bad as it is. We have had real positives from the peace process and its outworkings, and there was serious damage during the Brexit period. I welcome an awful lot of what is in the joint statement. We should get on not only because it is the best thing to do and we know that there is an awful lot of potential in the places where we can work together but because it is absolutely necessary.

The serious onus is on the Irish Government in their engagements with the British Government, given what is allowed for under the Good Friday Agreement on

constitutional change. There are conversations ongoing with many people, many of them nationalist but some from within elements of unionism, who would never previously have considered the possibility of Irish unity. Irish unity is now seen by many as a means of returning to the European Union, and it has many other facets. If it is a possibility, preparing for that possibility is just an obvious thing to do.

We would expect an Irish Government to feel an obligation to try to facilitate and deliver Irish unity, but I would be happy enough if they just worked on the basis that it is a possibility and there is a need to make the preparations because none of us knows exactly what the future holds. There is an onus on the British Government to eventually agree a date for a referendum.

Nobody wants a Brexit-type conversation. We want there to be space for everybody to have a conversation about what is possible. I have no doubt that many people would oppose that, as is their right, but I was recently at the launch of a book by Ben Collins. I suppose that, when somebody speaks about the possibilities and potential of Irish unity, there is not much point in calling them a unionist any more, but he is from a unionist background. He was asked about the Irish Government and the Taoiseach's position of now not being the time to speak on Irish unity. He said that, on the basis that we are to await the perfect day when everyone gets on, the biggest obstacle to delivering Irish unity that anyone could put up is just making sure that people do not get on and other issues are not dealt with so that the conversations are not allowed to happen.

There is no definite outcome on this. Irish unity is a definite possibility, and, obviously, there are people in this room who want to see it. However, the fact is that there is a need for real conversations and preparations, and then we can have a reasonable debate. That is what democracy is all about.

Pat the Cope Gallagher TD:

First, let me say that I had not intended intervening, but Brexit was mentioned and, to me and to the people whom I represent, it is a bad word. Let me qualify that.

As a result of Brexit, the Irish fishing industry has been decimated. We had a reasonable quantity of mackerel and blue whiting, and, as a result of Brexit, that was reduced by 26,000 tonnes. That is the price that our industry paid. I recommended at the time that we should have threatened to veto Brexit, and, had we threatened to do that, we would not be in the situation that we are in now.

A name that I will never forget—I knew when him when I was in the European Parliament—is Michel Barnier. He was a European Commissioner, and, subsequent to that, he was negotiating on Brexit. When I met Michel Barnier in Dublin, I asked him what he was going to do to defend the fishing industry. It is located, largely, in rural parts of the country, just as in Scotland and other parts of the UK, where there is no alternative source of employment. He said, “I can guarantee you that fish and trade will be inextricably linked, and, therefore, fish will be protected”. He was not true to his word. The industry was thrown under the bus that time, just to secure a Brexit deal. That was totally wrong.

Fast forward to last week, when the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) made recommendations in advance of the Fisheries Ministers' Council meeting

in Brussels in December to reduce mackerel fishing in our country by 70%. That would mean that there would be nothing left but boats that are unable to fish except for a few days in the year—I mean that—because the quota had been reduced so dramatically. In addition to that, blue whiting is to be reduced by 40%.

Whom do I blame? I blame Norway, Iceland, the Faroes and, since Brexit, the UK for fishing indiscriminately with no regard for the future of the industry. How can they take one million tonnes above what is recommended to secure a sustainable fishery? Hopefully, they will adhere to this. Off the coast of the west of Ireland, which I represented for many years in the European Parliament, so much has been taken out of our waters for no return for our small fishermen. We land a lot of our fish, depending on where they are caught—it could be east or four degrees west off the north of Scotland—and go to Norway or to Fraserburgh to try to secure the best possible price. It makes no sense.

I know that that is not what today is about, but let us hope that we can take an opportunity at a future meeting to have fish on the agenda and deal with that issue in a broader sense. I thought that you people from various parts of the UK and Ireland should know what is happening. Advantage was taken of our fishermen during Brexit, no thanks to Michel Barnier or, indeed, the others. The UK, Norway, Iceland and the Faroes must act more responsibly if there is to be a future for the fishermen.

12.30 pm

Pauline McNeill MSP:

When I first joined BIPA in 2017, it was a year after the Brexit referendum. To say that it was a tense meeting in Kilkenny is probably understating it, so we have come a long way. It is important that we recognise the importance of the Assembly, which is a feature of the Good Friday Agreement. The previous contribution was a reminder that, although we have moved on significantly, the Assembly should continue to be frank and honest and discuss the implications of Brexit, albeit that we have to find solutions.

I will make one comment on the statement about the transition to net zero, of which there are lots of mentions. I presume that, when the committee drafted the statement, it went without saying that we need to ensure that the transition is just and fair. Frances O’Grady mentioned the issue of workers’ rights, and it should be a feature of the Assembly that we always make sure that we represent the interests of the working people whom we represent across these islands and the island of Ireland. That means that, when we talk about net zero, we must keep saying that it has to be a just and fair transition. In Scotland, the discussion centres around making sure that, job for job in the North Sea, we can protect the diversity of jobs in the sector. If we cannot do that, we will not be properly representing people.

I just wanted some reassurance about the statement—I have not read it word for word, so it might be in there—because, when we talk about net zero, we must all be clear that there is that caveat.

Heledd Fychan MS:

While, of course, I welcome the joint statement, it is important to note, as I mentioned in my question, the joint statements between different Governments as well. A number of things that are devolved competencies are mentioned in the joint statement without

that being reflected. References are made to the two Governments without reflecting the reality. It would be pertinent for all Members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly to be aware of the other joint statements by Wales and Ireland, by Scotland and Ireland and so on, so that they understand what is included in them.

I especially note the arts, culture and sport. Obviously, language is not mentioned in the joint statement, but it very much is in the statement made by Ireland and Wales. If we are to reflect the reality of multi-Government relationships, we should even note things like preparations for the Euros in 2028. That involves a number of Governments, not just two. I want it to be noted that there are a number of joint statements that, I hope, all BIPA Members would be aware of as they look to support the interconnectivity of Governments.

I echo the previous comments: things are changing in the make-up of the United Kingdom. That is not reflected in the statement either.

Cormac Devlin TD:

I, too, welcome the statement. It has genuinely reset relations. We have seen progress particularly on legacy. The North/South Ministerial Council and all the other institutions are functioning as they should be, and benefits are flowing from that. Equally, the memorandum of understanding (MOU) on energy is important. We have seen the benefits of that.

I speak as Chair of the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in the Oireachtas, where we have a weekly discussion and we have witnesses come in. We listen to issues that pertain to Northern Ireland. However, we need to have greater cooperation between the Westminster Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and our Committee. I dare say that, maybe in the future, plenary sessions such as this should have the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement on the agenda. We maybe should invite members of both Committees who are not necessarily BIPA Members so that they can listen to these important discussions, because they have huge relevance to the agreement. Everything in the statement has relevance to and correlates with the Good Friday Agreement.

I have one question for this session. The statement refers to the establishment of the UK-Ireland 2030 steering group: when will it be established? As an Assembly, we should find out exactly what progress has been made on that.

Seán Ó Fearghail TD:

Notwithstanding the importance of the points that have been made by all my colleagues, I would like to refer briefly to article 8 of the joint statement and, in doing so, express Irish gratitude to the United Kingdom for the support that we have received not just since 2015 but over many years, particularly in relation to security and support given by the naval and aviation services.

Britain and the UK may be a great military power, but Ireland is not and, hopefully, never will be. Today, I am embarrassed by how weak our army, navy and air corps are. Our numbers are depleted. We are often unable to put ships to sea, for the want of manpower or womanpower.

Article 8 talks about cooperating in the area of education and training, and it talks about reviewing the memorandum for our next summit. Ireland could learn a lot from the UK in how it values its defence force members and creates a career path in the defence forces that makes it an attractive prospect for young people, which, sadly, is not yet the situation in Ireland today.

Ross Greer MSP:

I have two quick points. The first follows on from Ruairí's point on the prospect of constitutional change. It would be remiss of me not to highlight that the prospect of constitutional change in Scotland is still a live one. The majority of people under the age of 50 in Scotland support independence, and support for that does not decrease as people become older; indeed, among the under-30s, support for independence is now consistently above 70%. The UK Government will have to grapple with that reality, and its position of simply denying a second referendum is not a long-term sustainable or, indeed, democratically legitimate one.

The other point that I want to make about the statement relates to the sections on energy and national security. I welcome a lot of what is in there, but my concern is the lack of emphasis on who owns our energy infrastructure. There is a legitimately serious concern around the security of our undersea cables, for example. We are all well aware of the prospect of the damage that Russia could do by severing those cables, but there is much less emphasis on the prospect of states that would not need to physically attack that infrastructure. China will have no need to cut our undersea cables if they own much of our energy infrastructure. I cannot speak about the Irish Government's relationship with China, but, for decades, the UK has consistently put economic and trade interests ahead of national security interests to the point where we have a hostile, anti-democratic state in control of far too much of our infrastructure.

Whether we are looking at public ownership or ownership of private companies that are headquartered in the UK and the EU, we need to grapple with the fact that energy infrastructure in particular and other aspects of our infrastructure will become a significant area of risk for national security, and the trade-first approach that we have taken to one state – China – is now a really significant risk. There needs to be much more emphasis on who owns the infrastructure.

Decarbonising our energy infrastructure is urgently required, but, if we decarbonise it by allowing state-owned companies from a hostile state to take greater shares of ownership, we create new risks for ourselves that are entirely avoidable if we put enough investment into supporting companies that are headquartered in the UK and the EU.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have now got three more people. I ask that the last three people are brief. I will not take anybody else after that, because lunch is calling us all.

Senator Garret Kelleher:

I will be brief. Ba mhaith liom mo chuid tacaíochta a thabhairt do Heledd. [*I would like to give my support to Heledd.*] I support the point that Heledd made about the importance of recognising joint statements between some of the devolved Assemblies by an amendment to Senator Blaney's motion, which I fully support, or possibly

through another motion, but, at least, that it be recognised. That is important, particularly in relation to the Welsh and Irish languages and Scottish Gaelic.

The Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard:

I want to raise three quick issues. Even though it was not in the statement, it is always useful to hear from those who still dream of a united Ireland. While I am not opposed to having the discussion, it is a pipe dream that is a long way away.

Secondly, while there is broad agreement among some parties on the UK's legacy proposals, there is a massive issue around the lack of engagement from the Republic of Ireland and its contribution to those proposals. We want a parallel process: in other words, if there is an inquiry into the Omagh bomb in Northern Ireland, there should be an equivalent public inquiry in the Republic of Ireland. If we have a separate legacy commission in Northern Ireland, there should be a separate legacy commission in the Republic of Ireland. There should be parallel processes that are not going to happen.

Thirdly, I noted the reference to climate change issues in the statement. I am sure that many people here are aware that the A5 road project has been stopped because of climate change legislation in Northern Ireland. My concern is that, because some of that legislation is so stringent, were many other public or private developments to be challenged in court in relation to climate change, they would fail the legislative test and development would be stunted. I am not sure whether the situation is the same in other parts of the UK, but I believe that we are going to lose out to many other countries, particularly the likes of China, from which we import large volumes of goods, because it has no climate regulations whatever.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

I welcome the statement, as others have done. As a Committee Chair, I also welcome the fact that we have chosen to structure the Committees around the statement. It can serve as a valuable document for us as we proceed through the next BIPA term in order to shape how we work.

I would like to add some brief comments on the discussions around a united Ireland. Those discussions are happening, and this is a place where they also have to happen. Of course, the sensitivities of a post-conflict environment must always be protected and respected. The language that we use as parliamentarians is particularly important. The reality is, however, that those conversations are happening more and more, and the term "united Ireland" is losing a lot of the sensitivity that it previously had. We must deal with that in a forthright way in this environment, and I welcome its addition.

I want to back up what others said about the joint statements by the devolved Governments, which would also be a welcome addition.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

My colleague, Seán Ó Fearghaíl TD, pointed out our embarrassment with respect to the defence of our sovereign state. We have one naval ship to cover the west coast. Thousands of cables transfer thousands of gigabytes of data every day of the week. Trillions of dollars are transferred back and forward across the Atlantic. We have an umbilical cord connecting us to the UK by which gas and electricity are fed into Ireland.

In this forum, we have to be honest and open. A new MOU is about to be signed on defence matters that will have to be comprehensive and transparent. It cannot be vague. This is the ideal forum where we can discuss that in an open and safe environment. We should do that, and I urge the Committee to do so. All our futures depend on our having a secure relationship.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I will take one last speaker but no more.

12.45 pm

Séan Crowe TD:

Leave the good wine until last.

It is important that the statement, in the first sentence, talks about a

“starting point for a strengthened relationship”.

There is a recognition there that something went awry or off-track in this. The essence of the statement is that the days of solo runs on issues should be over. The language that is used — it was used in the past — was that of “cooperation”, “partnership” and so on. That should be the framework for moving forward, particularly on the contentious issues that we face into, including the legacy stuff, which has to command the support of the most important people: the families and relations of the victims. If both our Governments are going to move this project forward collectively, we need to work together. That was the message that came out of the Good Friday Agreement.

We heard earlier today that all the institutions are working now, whereas, in the past people were cherry-picking what they wanted to work and where they would not work. The message that is coming out of the statement is that we need to work together collectively, and that should be the focus as we move forward.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you to everyone who has spoken.

Can we agree the motion? No?

Pat the Cope Gallagher TD:

No. Can we have a line inserted about the destruction of the fisheries and marine sector?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

The procedure is that an amendment has to be moved before the actual debate, Pat, and I am sure that Gill will agree with me. We take your point in regard to fisheries for future consideration at a plenary, and I suggest to the relevant Committee that it is a specific issue that should be pursued by the relevant Committee as well. If Committees embark on a programme of work, they have to get clearance from the Steering Committee. If the relevant Committee puts forward a proposal in relation to doing a work inquiry or a report on fisheries and bringing it to our next plenary, it will meet with approval by the Steering Committee.

Maybe, Pat, you might talk to us afterwards. It is just that, technically, an amendment has to be put before the discussion or the debate gets under way. We can absolutely facilitate you. You make a valid point, and it is a matter of great import across all these islands, not just for the coastal community in Ireland but for many coastal communities across these islands. Is that OK, Pat?

Pat the Cope Gallagher TD:

Will it be on the agenda for next time?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Yes, but it will be up to the relevant Committee to do some work on it in the meantime.

Pat the Cope Gallagher TD:

Which is the relevant Committee?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

It is Committee C.

Pauline McNeill MSP:

Just so you know, Co-Chair, we do not always get notification of the processes before we come here; maybe that should change. I raise a specific point. I would be happy not to amend the motion but just to get clarification that the Steering Committee accepts that, in the references to net zero and transition, workers' rights is part of our sentiment.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

There is no difficulty with that, Pauline.

Pauline McNeill MSP:

I just wanted that minuted. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Una and Martyn are taking detailed notes, and the minutes will reflect the spirit of the contributions as well. There is no difficulty with that, Pauline.

I think that Committee C is the relevant Committee. Sinéad, you are the Chair of that Committee.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Yes, I have just told Pat.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Can we take it that you can work that into your work programme?

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Yes, absolutely, with the Committee members' consent, obviously, but we will certainly take it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

You will put a proposal before us, as the Steering Committee and tic-tac with Pat on that issue. I am sure that there are colleagues from other legislatures who have an interest in fisheries, as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly welcomes the 2030 Joint Statement of the UK and Irish Governments issued in March 2025 which marked a moment of renewal for an ambitious programme of co-operation through to 2030; and commits the Assembly to supporting and encouraging the work needed to make those ambitions a reality, in pursuit of the Assembly's foundational aim of promoting co-operation between political representatives in Britain and Ireland for the benefit of the people we represent.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, colleagues. Our clerks will arrange for the text of the resolution to be sent to the British and Irish Governments.

The sitting was suspended at 12.51 pm.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE CO-OPERATION

2.33 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We are very pleased to welcome back to the plenary Neale Richmond TD, Minister of State in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. As many of you know, Minister Richmond is a former member of our Assembly, and I thank him sincerely for taking the time to return to us and to address our plenary today. Minister, you are very welcome. Fáilte ar ais. [*Welcome back.*]

The Minister of State, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Ireland (Mr Neale Richmond TD):

Go raibh maith agaibh, a Chathaoirigh, agus a dhaoine uaisle. [*Thank you, Chairs, and ladies and gentlemen.*] Lords, ladies and gentlemen, it is absolutely wonderful to be back here among friends at this Parliamentary Assembly, at a time of great global uncertainty and confusion, to be quite frank. That is why it is so important that we have fora like this, and opportunities like this, to be among our natural friends and allies to discuss all the issues on which we agree and, indeed, the occasional issues on which we disagree.

I have been a long-standing advocate of the importance of the widest breadth of institutions arising from the Good Friday agreement. As a parliamentarian, I think that this is one of the most important. Over the years, it has consistently shown its importance as a place where TDs, Senators, Lords, Ladies, MPs, Members of the Senedd, Members of the Scottish Parliament and, crucially, Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly can come together, away from prying cameras, to have difficult discussions and, to be quite frank, to get to know each other as human beings as well as elected representatives from across these islands. At times like this, it is important for those of us coming from the Irish side to make it quite clear that we have friends and allies and that we think that those alliances are important. I have no hesitation in saying that one of the most important alliances are those friendships across these islands and the very differing strands that they take.

My remarks this afternoon are a little bit outside the day-to-day running of my brief, which focuses largely on international development and the diaspora, but they are not a million miles away and they are not inconsistent with the areas in which I have shown interest throughout my career. I want to make them in the context of two documents. The first relates to the joint statement issued by the British and Irish Governments a number of months ago and the second relates to the report that is going to be laid before you by Darren in relation to Committee B. I had the great privilege of attending the first couple of the committee's hearings. As I was telling Martyn, I remember a particularly warm afternoon in a committee room someone in the doldrums of Westminster where Steve Aiken talked me through exactly what life was like as a submariner. I thought, "If you close the curtains, I'll feel like I'm on a submarine, with a very large northerner who doesn't always like me." But it was a wonderful opportunity to start this discussion at what is a crucial time.

I will approach my remarks with those two reports in mind. I will offer some of the Irish Government's position, I will take a look at the European Union position and, depending on questions or where I get to in my remarks, I might offer a few personal opinions, which will very much be personal and not necessarily representative of everyone in the Irish Government or, indeed, the Oireachtas.

I want to start by saying that Ireland recognises the need to take our own security and defence, and our responsibility towards like-minded partners, extremely seriously. We acknowledge that no state acting alone can address either the vast existing or the rapidly emerging new security challenges facing us. We also recognise the changed security landscape in Europe, arising from Russia's full-scale, illegal war of aggression in Ukraine as well as an increase in hybrid and cyberattacks and challenges and, more broadly, major shifts in geopolitical positions and norms that were once quite simply taken for granted.

As everyone in the world knows, Ireland is militarily neutral, but we are not politically neutral. Most significantly, we remain steadfast in our support for Ukraine to help it to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity in line with Article 51 of the UN Charter and we are very much part of the broader international support effort. It would be absolutely remiss and ignorant of me not to acknowledge the actions of the current and previous British Administrations in their absolute, steadfast support of our friends in Ukraine at a time when some people's support is less strong than it was. I must say that British politicians from across the aisle, from across the political spectrum, have been a beacon of consistency and should be admired and recognised as such.

Beyond that, the Irish Government is absolutely committed to strengthening the capabilities of our own defence forces to respond to the changed landscape that I referred to. We progressed a national conversation on security and defence issues in 2023, through holding a consultative forum on international security policy, and the Government is now advancing a range of measures to meet the challenges of the future. Ireland has delivered significant increases in our own national defence spending in the past few years. A record allocation of €1.35 billion in defence funding for 2025, for example, will facilitate significant progress on important defence projects, including military radar and subsea awareness, though it is of no surprise that I think that there should be a lot more scale for ambition in this going forward.

In March, the Taoiseach announced the establishment of a Ministerial Council on National Security in response to the increasingly challenging security situation across the world. The council will be chaired by the Taoiseach himself. It will meet at least three times a year and will review major national security developments, as well as providing a forum for enhanced co-ordination and assessment of Ireland's national security needs, capabilities and, crucially, risks. Ireland is also developing a new national security strategy as well as several more focused thematic security strategies. Our new National Maritime Security Strategy will be published by the end of this year and the Government published a counter-disinformation strategy in April. Ireland has increased investment in cybersecurity and we continue to contribute constructively to the development of EU policies aimed at countering malicious, hybrid and cyber activity by state threat actors.

We also have new legislation on investment screening, providing a framework to ensure that third-country transactions are scrutinised in the context of security or indeed public order. We know that international co-operation and partnerships are essential for success. In all the areas that I have mentioned, the Government is committed to broadening and deepening Ireland's international security engagement. Working with partners in the EU in partnership with NATO and on a bilateral basis is a priority of Ireland within this.

With regard to the United Kingdom, Ireland highly values its close relationship with the UK on defence and security issues and 2025 has been an important year in this regard. In March, at the first annual British-Irish summit, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Starmer made a joint statement that committed to establishing a range of new areas of co-operation between us. This included a commitment to strengthen co-operation in the area of maritime security, with a particular focus on critical undersea infrastructure. The Ireland-UK Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Co-operation provides an important dimension to our bilateral security co-operation. This memorandum of understanding in place between our respective Ministries of Defence continues to work well, particularly in the areas of military training and education. Listening to the media sometimes, it is a novelty to some people that this actually exists, but it is no secret and it is something that works well. We should talk about those things that work well and are so mutually beneficial. Given that 2025 marks the 10th anniversary of this MoU, the Government is supportive of revisiting it with a focus on maritime security as a possibility.

Our officials are engaged in discussions with their UK counterparts in this respect and it is my opinion that this is the most obvious thing that we should do. It should be an absolute focus not just of intergovernmental discussions but also of interparliamentary discussions. The MoU has been up and running for 10 years. It has worked well and provides an absolute template of what can come next. In parallel, though, I know that Ireland and the UK will continue to develop joint efforts in the area of security and defence through existing frameworks and channels, including through our structured security dialogue at senior official level.

As I mentioned at the outset, one of the many strands to my brief is as Minister with responsibility for international development. This is something about which, when you are talking about security and defence, people often get puzzled. How do the two things go in line when certain Governments across the European Union are cutting their spending on overseas development assistance in relation to security and defence spending? Ireland is not cutting our spending on either—we are increasing our spending on both—and it is my deep-seated opinion that the two are intrinsically linked.

We talk about the issues that all of us face in our constituency clinics and surgeries during the week: people are talking about rising grocery prices; they are talking about rising energy prices; they are talking about concerns in relation to irregular migration; and they are talking about concerns in relation to security, disinformation and everything else. The vast majority of these come back to instability and insecurity in the developing world, so when we talk about how we help people, that is one thing that is right and correct to say, but we also have to look at international development as absolutely being an investment. When we talk about all these issues that are impacting our constituents, we ask, "How do we tackle them and tackle them at source?"

In the Global South, communities are feeling the brunt of climate insecurity and witnessing drought and flooding and violence on a scale that many of us would only read about in our history books. We know that investing in healthcare, in education, in making sure that 12-year-old girls are not forced to marry their uncle not only is the right, decent thing to do, but provides that level of stability in those countries that does not, in due course, lead to instability in our countries. For those of us who fundamentally believe in the importance of international development, we perhaps need to turn the dial on how we present that conversation. We are not talking about charity. We are not talking about guilting people into feeling bad about their own station in life. We are talking about very commonsense approaches to how our world can work better, fairer and, crucially, in our interests.

I want to talk now more specifically about the European Union. As you know, the international security environment continues to deteriorate and to be contested, dynamic and volatile. In this context, the EU's increasingly leading role as a facilitator for international engagement and co-operation is vitally important for Ireland. The UK is a key like-minded partner for the European Union in this challenging geopolitical environment. It is therefore in our mutual interest to have a close relationship between the EU and the UK in the area of foreign and security policy. Not only is terrible conflict taking place as we speak in Europe, but the fear of such conflict broadening to other parts of the continent is real. These threats include the horrific kinetic war that we see waged against Ukraine, but also the significant increase in malicious hybrid actions committed against the EU, its member states and our international partners.

The EU published a milestone White Paper for European Defence in March of this year. That White Paper noted that hybrid threats and cyberattacks do not respect borders. This point was also highlighted in Ireland's National Defence Policy Review as being of particular importance to Ireland. In the past, our geographic position was seen by many to mitigate our security risks, but in the age of online connectivity this is quite simply no longer the case. In the past year, Russia has embarked on an increasingly reckless and intensified hybrid campaign against Europe, including sabotage, attempts at electoral interference, spreading disinformation, cyberattacks and disruption of critical infrastructure. I know that I am not alone in this room in saying that I am proud to be on Russia's sanctions list: many of you have found yourself there, including the former Ceann Comhairle, for speaking basic truths about its horrendous activity across our continent.

The EU is acting with decisiveness, ambition and speed to tackle these threats. Ireland, therefore, must be a part of this process not only because we are part of the European Union, but also because such threats pose existential risks to the way we live our lives across Europe. As I have mentioned, Ireland has delivered significant increases to our own national defence spending in the past few years. This has allowed us to procure much-needed capabilities. The opportunities provided under the EU's White Paper for European Defence and associated initiatives may also assist in achieving further progress. Ireland sees very significant value in the SAFE instrument in the context of our support for a credible and unified approach to defence in the EU and we want to play an active role in this regard. We are supportive of the UK participating in the SAFE instrument, which would increase procurement and defence co-operation between the EU and the UK.

2.45 pm

I am very grateful for the opportunity to be able to debate these issues in this forum and I put it quite clearly that we should not be afraid to debate these issues and speak our mind. We have to be able to talk about the security of our countries, of our islands, without someone driving us down the rabbit hole that somehow we are obsessed with the military industrial complex or obscure conversations about how you define neutrality in terms of military and in terms of political. At the end of the day, if we are talking about our own family homes, we do not think anything about getting a house alarm. Among the Irish contingent, we all got Eircom PhoneWatch when we knew we needed it. As elected representatives, we certainly all know the pains of what it means to increase security, not just in our family homes, but particularly in our constituency offices due to recent increased concerns.

In closing, a Chathaoirligh, let me emphasise how much Ireland, as a small country, really values co-operation. It is in our interest, but a good working relationship between the UK and Ireland, between the UK and the EU and between all of us in the international community is in all our interests. This Parliamentary Assembly—the issues it studies and the context it fosters—is a vital part of the co-operation. A very famous person said, “No man is an island”, and we are not just islands. We have a geographic, historic, political and personal responsibility to each other that we cannot lose. But we have to have those discussions in a context where we can all share openly the very real concerns and put across our very much shared potential solutions.

As I said, a Chathaoirligh, it is an absolute joy to be back here at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. It is an added responsibility to be back here as a Minister, but I am really looking forward to this debate and, Darren, for you launching your report in due course. Go raibh maith agat.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. Your address is much appreciated, outlining and giving us a great overview of issues of concern across all these islands. Frank Feighan is the first to ask a question.

Frank Feighan TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. Minister, it is great to see you again. You are a good friend and colleague and the fact that you are in this position is inspired, because you have a huge interest in British-Irish relations and overseas relations. I am not going to spend too long. You talked about a commonsense approach and you have increased overseas spending. An issue that I raised this morning was the embassy in London. We are moving into a brand-new Ireland House—300,000 square foot near Trafalgar Square—and it will host Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland, the IDA and the Passport Office. That is very important. You are talking about vacating Grosvenor House, where the Irish Embassy is currently located. I checked after I spoke this morning and I think the rent is very nominal. It is important that there should still be an Irish influence in that

building, because, as I said, it is strategic. Thirteen years ago, we closed down the embassy at the Vatican. We thought we were great, but we opened it up four or five years later. There is a huge responsibility on us to maintain that building and I know that you will bring that back to your boss, who happens to be my boss as well. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Frank. Lord Bruce.

The Lord Bruce of Bennachie:

Thank you very much, Minister, for your very positive statement. I want to pick up, as Frank has done, on your statement about overseas aid and development. It is a matter of great disappointment to me that the UK Government have slashed aid to the point of virtual invisibility. What makes me even more cross about it is that they have justified it on the grounds that aid had lost its way, was charity and was not focused in the right direction. As chair of our International Development Committee for 10 years, I monitored our aid and that just simply was not true. The President of Zambia said, “Well, maybe it’s a good thing. Maybe we need to take responsibility for ourselves.” My question is how the UK and Ireland—I think we can partner with the EU as well—can use whatever aid and other influences we have, particularly in Africa. Right now, Russia is steaming across francophone Africa supporting authoritarian regimes and corruption. China is all over Africa. We are disappearing, effectively. I am looking to see whether Ireland could use its example to try to persuade the UK Government not necessarily to reverse the policy—I am not going to be successful in that—but to think about how we use whatever influence we have, especially in Africa, to raise the profile, raise the commitment and enable those countries to help themselves in ways that some of them perhaps now want to do. I have to say that your example is where I wish the UK could have followed, rather than rescinded its commitments.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you much, Lord Bruce. Brian Mathew MP.

Brian Mathew MP:

Thank you very much indeed. Minister, might I start by saying that the Irish people are some of the most generous in the world in terms of their commitment to aid? I welcome your comments, and I echo what Lord Bruce has just said on the idea of international development as an investment. As a member of the current International Development Committee, I know that many of my fellow members would agree with those sentiments, as indeed would members of my party who spearheaded the move to 0.7%. The Government have themselves said that they would like to see a return to that when circumstances allow it. However, any pressure that you can bring to see that happen would be most warmly felt. I just want to say thank you again for your comments.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Brian. Minister.

Neale Richmond TD:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I will take the question that Deputy Feighan asked, which is, needless to say, way above my pay grade—but he knows that. However, there are two things that I want to say in particular in reference to it. First, the Ireland House model works. I have the distinct pleasure, in 10 days' time, of opening Ireland House in Chicago and I was in the skeleton building of Ireland House in Toronto a couple of weeks ago. Our Tánaiste opened our new Ireland House model in Washington DC a couple of weeks ago. These work, bringing together all the state agencies, our diplomatic effort, but also Enterprise Ireland, the IDA, Bord Bia and Tourism Ireland. There are also possibilities of bringing in things like Science Foundation Ireland or Research Ireland as per your discussions this morning. Those are really important. I think you agree and acknowledge that, in order to do that in London, the new site off Trafalgar Square is ideally located geographically. I am lucky like you, Deputy, to have been in Grosvenor House a number of times and enjoyed not only its architectural delights but the important role that it has played over decades in bringing people together, particularly from the Irish community of all strands here in the UK. I recognise that it occupies an important place emotionally as well as physically and that its location in the heart of Belgravia is not to be sniffed at, but I am more than happy to take that up with my boss, who is also your boss, and we will try our best in that regard. I think that is the best I can offer you at this time.

I will take the points made by Lord Bruce and Brian together as one. It should be said, Lord Bruce, that despite the British Government's decision to cut its spending on aid, it is still a massive amount and it is hugely impactful in a lot of parts of the world. It also builds on decades of powerful development work by various British colleagues, as well as the very well-organised aid agencies sector here, many of which have head offices here but have offices in Ireland. I am absolutely blessed in my role to spend a lot of time with all those NGOs and aid agencies, not just in Ireland but in country.

I raised this issue at the EU-African Union summit a couple of months ago. When I raised it at the EU meeting beforehand, we were about to go in and lecture over 50 Ministers from Africa about the importance of supporting the Ukrainian war effort. This is at the same time as we are removing our influence in their countries and providing two gaps. The first is a gap for other states to fill—as you mentioned, Russia and China, but also Arab states and India, some with more benevolent approaches than others—to build major infrastructure and to provide support for military forces, in the case of so many Russian actions. But we are also providing a gap for non-state actors, who believe in radicalisation in certain parts of their country and can feed on poverty and injustice to fuel radicalisation that does not recognise any geographical borders. I think that when the European Union looks at its approach, particularly to sub-Saharan Africa, but not just to sub-Saharan Africa, we have to realise that we can no longer take the approach of telling other people what to do and making sure they are grateful for our money. It is about working in partnership to see where the real successes are.

I have been lucky to meet Baroness Chapman a number of times and to have shared platforms with her, most recently at the UN General Assembly, but also at various other

fora, where we have, Brian, discussed the need to look at making aid more effective. But I fundamentally think that the most effective thing we can do is to get the discussion about aid more effective in our countries. When I used to go on Make Poverty History marches over 20 years ago, the thought of not even trying to aspire to 0.7% but cutting to 0.3% would have led to people on the streets. That has not happened. That is not because people are not interested or because people have lost their sense of the importance of the world, but perhaps because politicians, like all of us in this room, are not talking about this in the meat-and-potato way that impacts people's livelihoods. That is not a responsibility of one Government Minister or one Government or successive Governments; it comes to all of us who want to play a proactive part in public discussion.

Certainly, there are a couple of thematic areas on which I am hoping that the Irish Government can work with the British Government, specifically in eastern Africa, particularly in the area of women and girls and sexual reproductive rights and health, largely to fill the gap because so many other actors have reduced funding there for ideological as opposed to budgetary reasons. You are right in saying that the UK aspires to get towards 0.7%. Ireland is still a long way off 0.7%. The only time we were close to 0.7% was at the years of the financial crash. We have increased our funding to a record amount of €840 million, as of our budget last week, but the only way for countries to aspire to get back is to reimagine their conversation about it. I absolutely want to work with not only the current British International Development Secretary but any of her successors from any parties to make sure that that conversation stays ongoing.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. Baroness O'Grady, please.

The Baroness O'Grady of Upper Holloway:

Thanks very much, Minister, for your presentation. I wanted to pick up on a reference in the joint statement to the importance of peacebuilding, and not just peace but sustainable peace. To state the bleeding obvious, Britain and Ireland have a pretty unique experience of that in the Good Friday agreement, where, just as you remarked earlier, civic society had an often under-the-radar but incredibly important role to play. What is interesting is that, even in recent years, that experience—again, often led by civic society—has been shared with countries such as Colombia and played a very important role in securing peace there. I recognise in the joint statement that, quite rightly, there is a discussion of pursuing that through international national institutions, but I think that there is a pretty unique experience and I wonder whether there is a role for codifying and building capacity to share that positive skillset, if you like, in developing and sustaining peace in other countries where that support is sought.

3 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Frances. Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Malcolm Byrne TD:

Thanks, Brendan, and thank you, Minister, for articulating the importance of overseas development aid in a cogent and relevant way. You mentioned that, although people in this room do not always agree on everything, one thing that we are all committed to is democracy, human rights and the rule of law. They are the values that underpin our societies. The reality is that these values are under attack globally by state actors—the CRINKs, or China, Russia, Iran and North Korea—but also by the non-state actors that you mentioned. This is a vicious war, to be honest, in terms of spreading misinformation. We have talked about the attacks on critical pieces of infrastructure in our countries and the fact that, as Lord Bruce mentioned, China now owns 7% of the land in Africa. That is telling in terms of where some of these countries now see the direction of the world. There is an increased responsibility on us, when we talk about defence and security, to talk about those values. We have to start to talk about defending democracy, the rule of law and human rights, because we do not all talk about it sufficiently. Ukraine is in many ways on the front line of having to do that, but all our societies are on that front line and we are all seeing how those values are being undermined from within, through the spread of misinformation and disinformation. There is an obligation on all of us as politicians to go out to talk about those values. We have to live it. Apart from, as you mentioned, going to talk to countries in Africa about its importance, we have to live it on these islands and in Europe as well.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Malcolm. Senator Gerard Craughwell.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, you mentioned on your way up that you are one of the good guys. You are one of the good guys. You will know that recently a poll carried out in Ireland looked at the priorities of people in Ireland. Nowhere in that poll did the word “defence” feature; it simply did not feature. Neither did “security” feature. We talk about the increased spending in defence in Ireland at €1.49 billion for 2026. A country with an economy roughly the same size as our own, with a population roughly the same size as our own—Finland—is spending €6.5 billion on defence. Can we honestly say, when we are sitting here among our friends, that we are taking security and defence seriously? Last week, or the week before, Ireland got castigated in the House of Lords for its total lack of responsibility in defence. We were referred to as “freeloaders”, something that is constantly being said across Europe about us right now. We are the western flank of Europe. We have a massive responsibility. Yet €1.49 billion, with one ship on the Atlantic, a smaller ship in the Irish Sea and no air force, is hardly taking security and defence seriously. We really have a job to do. I am not criticising the Government here, other than to say that the Government has to educate the people of Ireland that money has to be spent on defence. There are no borders in cybersecurity. There are no borders when we talk about space security. Land is not really that much of a threat right now, but air and sea and particularly our undersea cables are a massive risk not just to the economy of Ireland, but to the economy of the entire world. We need

first and foremost to align ourselves with like-minded countries and we need to put a defence strategy in place that protects us all. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Gerard. Minister.

Neale Richmond TD:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I would like to thank all three speakers. I will take them in order—first, Baroness O’Grady. Peacebuilding does not just happen in a short period of time. It is a constant. It is 2025 and we are all happily sitting around tables at an instrument of peacebuilding. That is what we are talking about here in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly: bringing together people from across these islands, who have different opinions and nationalities, in a convivial sense, to discuss really serious issues and to be able to do it methodically. That is the great lesson. It is not that, just because the guns fall silent or because the aggression is toned down, peace is built. It is something that you constantly have to work on. I am delighted that you mentioned Colombia, not only because I am travelling there in November, as it is one of the 13 Irish Aid programme countries, but because it is also one of the areas where we have had an excellent working relationship with our British counterparts, where we can use the experience from across these islands, but particularly from Ireland, in relation to how we constantly have to work in peacebuilding and the opportunity that it presents.

On the role of international institutions, I have barely made a reference to it, but they are under an absolutely serious degree of threat. The United Nations and the institutions contained therein are under threat, not just financially but politically. People are consistently trying to undermine the good work of the WHO, saying that there is no need for UN Women and that the UN General Assembly has no role to play. I would be the first to say that the UN needs major reform, but the reform process is under way. A very talented British diplomat, Tom Fletcher, is starting that UN process and I was happy to feed in to his discussions when I met him in New York. He will be in Dublin next Tuesday and he will be meeting to say, “How can Ireland play an outsized role in terms of humanitarian response leading to peacebuilding?” It is obvious that the conflicts that dominate our news headlines will be the focus of discussion. We will talk about the ceasefire in the Middle East—please God that it holds. We are all happy to see that the hostages have, eventually, been returned home, that the guns have fallen silent and that a level of humanitarian aid is starting to get back into Gaza, but it is nowhere near enough. We need to see hundreds and hundreds of trucks every single day pouring in and we need to see the initial tools of humanitarian aid response in terms of the tents, the tarpaulin, the medicines, the food and everything that goes with it. But we also need to see the teachers back, we need to see the press back and we need to see real dialogue between people of all traditions and none in that part of the world that has been the scene of so much conflict since the beginning of time.

When it comes to Ukraine, although many would say that we are tempered by our military neutrality in the support that we provide, one real focus of Ireland’s support is providing a level of civic support. We are talking about rebuilding schools in the Donetsk in partnership with Lithuania, putting real funding into the civilian medical

capabilities and civilian radar capabilities of Ukraine, but we are also providing the fora for that level of reconciliation and rehabilitation that simply must come.

Those are the obvious conflicts to talk about but, to go back to the start, what about when we talk about Colombia? A Colombian would not be getting the Nobel Peace Prize if everything was hunky-dory there, to be quite frank. I have strong opinions on the regime there, but there is no point in me talking about it here. We talk about Sudan, we talk about South Sudan and we talk about Yemen. We talk about situations across the world where peacebuilding can learn from us and can benefit from us, but from which we can benefit too. I think that many people here would be in agreement that within the Middle East, be it in Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, Ramallah and the West Bank, Irish people have played a good, positive role and we can continue to play a positive role in an agreed peace, which I hope will come.

Malcolm is absolutely right that the attacks by state and non-state actors are very clear. When you are talking about development and about defence and security, what are you defending and what are you keeping secure? You are defending freedom of speech, freedom of expression and the right to assemble. You are defending free and fair elections and the rule of law being applied equally to all people. You can list off probably 140 jurisdictions where the rule of law is not applied equally, if at all. When it comes to Ireland's role in countering that level of disinformation, you will be aware, as chair of our AI Committee—artificial intelligence as opposed to artificial insemination, according to my deputy, my colleague from Laois, Willie Aird—that we have made it quite clear that Ireland's national disinformation strategy, launched in April, is key, but it needs the buy-in from all state and non-state actors within the jurisdiction to provide that level of clarity and information. I travelled to the UAE a couple of weeks ago and I was struck that, when I looked at my algorithms across my social media, there were all these random Instagram, Facebook and X—whatever you want to call it—posts in relation to Vladimir Putin. There are 1 million Russians and 700,000 Ukrainians living in the UAE, so they follow the geography. The posts were absolute nonsense to my discerning eye. I know that they were nonsense, because we have a free, fair and open media here, but to other people who perhaps have less equality of access to clear and present information, it is very real and it is having a major impact.

Gerard, I am glad you think that I am one of the good guys, considering you live in my constituency and I have represented you in the Dáil for the last six and a half years, as in turn you have represented me in the Seanad for the last 10 or so years, even though I never voted for you—in fairness, you were on the same panel as me twice, so that was a good excuse. In relation to the serious issues that you raised—I do not want to trivialise them at all—I agree with you to an extent and you know that, which is probably why you asked the question, hoping that you would drag out my most hawkish responses. I will temper my thoughts a little bit.

I think that making a direct comparison to Finland is unfair. Yes, we have the same population, but we do not have the same geographic size or location. Finland has been invaded a couple more times than we have in recent years and its nearest neighbour is an aggressor in the form of Russia. Finland also has military conscription and national service, so it is not a direct comparison. To the point of the levels that Finland is spending on defence, I think that we have to be clear about our ambition. It is not the Government's response to educate anyone—people are educated by teachers and they

make up their own minds as informed adults—but it is the Government’s responsibility to justify its actions. However, if defence and security is polling only at 1% in Ireland, where it is the number one priority for 18 of the 27 EU member states, there is something awry, perhaps in our public discussion. This is what I alluded to. We need to be able to talk about security and defence infrastructure without getting obsessed about the military industrial complex. When we are talking about protecting information and cybersecurity, it is not something in the movies. It is a fact that Ireland’s health service was hacked by a non-state actor in the last number of days, taking our entire health service offline for days and leading to people losing their appointments. To be quite blunt, people died because of that attack. That sort of discussion we can have without going down the rabbit hole, but it has to be done from a place of respect and balance. I have no hesitation in saying from within the Government that I am absolutely relieved that we are increasing our spending on defence and security, but I know that we need to do so much more.

The next trick is how I convince the electorate, only 1% of whom, according to opinion polls—and opinion polls do not count for everything—are concerned about it. Actually, we are talking about not just defence and security and boots on the ground in some far lands, but about your own information. We are talking about your right to vote and your right to have free and fair expression. We are talking about the very drivers of our economy in Ireland. The data that ensures that eight of the world’s largest 10 tech companies have their EMEA head office in Ireland is protected. The undersea cables that connect North America to continental Europe that run through Irish waters are protected because those cables power our economy, which ensures that our society can pay for everything from schools to housing, from our climate responsibilities to everything therein. It is going to be extremely difficult, but we have to be able to create that space. I am going to endeavour to try my best, but I do not think that focusing on the term used by certain commentators in Europe that we are somehow “freeloaders” is going to move the dial. It is going to put people’s backs up. We have to ask, “Where does this investment come from, where does it lead to and what does it mean beyond the confines of the Curragh or McKee barracks?”

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Minister. Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your contribution. I welcome not only the comments around aid and the recent increases, but also the framing. As you say, it is an investment in our future and an area that is seriously under threat with the withdrawal of USAID in recent months. I cannot let pass, though, the comments at the end of your contribution around the military industrial complex and neutrality without offering an alternate opinion. Whether or not people like the term “military industrial complex”—and I realise that it jars with a lot of people—the reality and the fact is that many economies around our globe are not only profiting from but indeed in some cases founded on the manufacture and sale of arms. If that is not included in our defence and security discussions, we are neglecting it.

Secondarily, I would say that it is not splitting hairs about neutrality, because there is a chasm of difference between how I view and interpret our military neutrality in Ireland and how you do, Minister, with respect. I would look towards Article 29 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, which says:

“Ireland affirms its devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality ... Ireland affirms its adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes by international arbitration or judicial determination.”

I, too, uphold the values of human rights, democracy and rule of law, but I add to it peace. I purport that we should seek to achieve peace across our globe, in an increasingly volatile and conflict-driven world, by means of peace, not war, and that that also should continue to be included within our discussion. For the benefit of those who are not as familiar with our discussions around neutrality in our Dáil, that does not mean that I do not consider that we need to invest in our defence forces. We have many years of neglect to make up for in our defence forces to get them to a point where we are attracting and retaining talent, where we are able to operate vessels effectively in the sea and where we are able to defend ourselves. But our power as a small island nation is not in military strength. It is in diplomacy, it is in human rights and it is in the longest-standing unbroken record of peacekeeping under the UN mandate of any country in the world. Those are the things that we need to be thinking about when we talk about Ireland being, and continuing to be, militarily neutral. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Sinéad. Joyce Watson.

3.15 pm

Joyce Watson MS asked about the online safety of elected representatives and the effects on democracy and parliaments. *(Due to a technical fault, this contribution was not recorded.)*

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joyce. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Well, I have had long enough to prepare, so I have a 25-minute question and I expect an hour's answer from the Minister. In fairness, I am deeply disappointed that I actually agree with some of what he said. This is absolutely vital in relation to that whole area where aid meets fair trade meets fair access to technology skills. We are talking here about regulation but also about the harnessing of AI. Joyce and others have made a really strong point. At the minute we have social media, we have people that deal with issues in a silo and we know that there are very simplistic answers. We know that people are not looking at the holistic scenario where a destabilised world leads to a greater level of migration, so we need to have that argument. We are doing it on the back of the cuts that the British Government have carried out to their aid and we know what has happened with USAID. All I can see is that that will lead to more issues. It is a matter of tackling social media but also being

better in how we do it. Malcolm stated what is fairly obvious: there has been a huge amount of game play by China and Russia and, obviously, Ukraine was a follow-on from that—an absolutely brutal onslaught. The world that we have at the minute has allowed the space for state and non-state actors to carry out these actions.

I am going to put this here, because you mentioned Gaza. I think that we would all very much welcome what we see today, but there has to be an acceptance that the Western world has failed miserably in what has been a genocide and that this has hampered us in having some of these conversations. We could not take the moral high ground because we had failed miserably. While we want to see peace, while we want to see aid getting in and while we want to see infrastructure built, none of this will work unless we are talking about delivering not only peace but also self-determination and justice for the Palestinian people. That is also the only way that Israel can have peace in the long run.

I think the conversation has been fine, but I would follow up on what Francis and Sinéad have said. We have to have a real interest in this. Multilateralism has been attacked. We know that the UN requires reform but in some cases it is the best that we have. It has to be better. We know the issues that exist at the Security Council, but we have a history here; we do not necessarily have a wonderful history, but in recent times peacebuilding has been utilised. Some of these lessons have been learned in other places and more of it could be done. I get that it is not always applicable everywhere, but there is an element of doing everything better that would give us greater powers in delivering this.

I am not going to get into the conversations that we have at home in relation to moves that are made that we would see as being detrimental to our position on independent foreign policy and neutrality, but I have a question in relation to what the Minister said about radar and a need for greater capacity. Minister, you said that you wanted to see a greater level of scale and ambition. Do you mean above and beyond the level of ambition contained in the Commission on the Defence Forces report? Again, I agree wholeheartedly with Sinéad about the fact that we are dealing with underinvestment over many years. We talk of neutrality, but we did not have the capacity as a State for neutrality, because we had not put enough money and enough effort into our own defence forces. That is something that definitely has to be dealt with.

Because the Minister would be deeply disappointed if I did not make this last point, I assume that he would agree with me that his Government could probably play a greater role—this is slightly off topic—in relation to the necessary preparations for Irish unity and the conversation that is happening.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Ruairí. We have five more people. We are running into time constraints, so if people can be cognisant of the time I will take all the questions now and the Minister will answer all the questions at the end. Deputy Cormac Devlin.

Cormac Devlin TD:

Thank you. Chair. I thank the Minister for his remarks and indeed for the stance of the Irish Government on funding, particularly around foreign aid. It is on that basis that my

question is formed. We organised a briefing with Dóchas the week before the budget and I was struck by the fact that a number of factors are affecting aid agencies right across the globe. You spoke of the UN reforms taking place. One of the particular issues that was highlighted was the humanitarian response and how that needs to be reformed. In your response, you might come back on that point, please. Thank you very much, Chair.

Ruth Jones MP:

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your refreshingly clear comments in your speech. As a new member of this Assembly, and coming from the Council of Europe, it is interesting to see the informality and flexibility but also agility of debate here—very clear, very useful and hopefully very constructive. As a newbie Member of Parliament for Newport West and Islwyn, it is good to hear these issues debated here, where there is a continuity of theme coming through. You mentioned, Minister, that nobody was on the streets when we cut the overseas aid budget—and, yes, I was on the Make Poverty History marches—but I just gently say that Anneliese Dodds, the Minister, did resign in protest at the time. That is quite important to note. In terms of the overseas aid budget, we know that USAID is decimating the reproductive funding across Africa and elsewhere. We are setting up problems there for the next 10, 20 or 30 years to come. Freedom of religion and belief is another area where funding has been cut, which, again, will lead to long-term, lasting issues.

Yes, of course we want to get back to 0.7%, but as Irish colleagues have said about the defence budgets, it is a choice. At the moment, the UK Government is choosing defence, but hopefully very soon we will get back to the correct levels for spending on overseas aid. You made a point about the spending and making sure that we get more bang for our buck, if you like, and that we are spending the aid budget in the most cost-effective way. I wonder if you have any thoughts about how best we should do that in collaboration not just here, but also across the world.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Ruth. Deputy Seán Crowe.

Seán Crowe TD:

Go raibh maith agat. The Irish peace process would not have happened without outside actors or outside countries—the US, Canada, South Africa. It just would not have happened; we would not have been able to do it. Unfortunately, if we talk about statistics, less and less countries are getting involved in the whole area of conflict resolution. Sadly, that is the fact, but we have more and more countries involved in supplying weapons and so on. They are the two conundrums that we have to face. In Ireland, we would not have had peace, so more and more countries need to fill that space.

There has been mention of Colombia. The Colombian peace process would not have happened without the Cubans stepping up to the plate, facilitating those talks between all the actors, with peace coming out of that. That is another example. What happens to the Cubans then? They are put on a US list of countries sponsoring terrorism on the

back of the talks in Havana. Again, that is the wrong signal. Rather than supporting countries that are involved in this, we are doing the opposite.

One of the things that I am really proud of about Irish Aid is that it is untied aid; it is not linked to anyone saying, “You’ll buy our grain”, or “You’ll buy our spuds,” or whatever else. It is separate from that. So who would ever have thought that we would be in a situation where food is rotting in warehouses and in the country beside it people are starving from famine? That is happening around the world. We also had the weaponisation of aid. People mentioned Gaza and the so-called Gaza Foundation, where people were being funnelled into areas supposedly to collect food and they were using tank shells as crowd control weapons. I never thought I would see that in my lifetime.

I suppose what I am asking the Minister is: are we going to be one of those countries that will facilitate peacebuilding, peace processes and conflict resolution, because the number of those countries is becoming less and less? I think we have a responsibility, because we owe it to other countries on account of the peace that we have in Ireland. Surely there is an even greater responsibility on us, and on Britain, to engage more fully in peacebuilding, peace activity and conflict resolution.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Seán. Deputy George Lawlor.

3.30 pm

George Lawlor TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I am conscious of the time. Mine is kind of “What if?” question with regard to the undersea cables—I thank the Minister for his contribution—which provide such a vital component to our economy and the economy of the rest of the world. What if there was an attack by a state actor on those cables in Irish waters? Do we view it as an attack on Ireland, an attack on the EU, an attack on the rest of the world? How do we react to that or how do we facilitate the reaction to that, given our military position of military neutrality? Do we facilitate interaction in Irish waters for the defence of those cables or a counterattack? My basic question is how we react to an attack in Irish waters on cables that effectively serve the rest of the world.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, George. Deputy Paula Butterly.

Paula Butterly TD:

Thank you very much. My question is quite similar to Deputy Lawlor’s. You put it very well, Minister, when you said, “When you defend your house, you get an alarm or you get a dog”—a really big one in my case. In actual fact, it is great to be able to defend your house, but my question to you is: how far, when your house comes under attack, should we go? Do we do we row in and invest more, obviously in our own budgets at

a European level? When we potentially come under attack, how far should we be going in order to make sure that our house is safe? Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Paula. Now, Minister, that was a broad range of questions, not all within your department.

Neale Richmond TD:

The joy about the Department of Foreign Affairs, Brendan, is that everything is in your department, if you choose it to be so. I am going to try to answer as many questions as possible and provide personal opinion. I will bring them together in one response as best as possible, but some points, particularly those made by you, Joyce, merit individual responses.

I will say one thing from the outset. USAID was mentioned by Sinéad, Ruairí and, I think, Ruth. USAID represents 22% of the global aid infrastructure. The European Union represents 44%, in terms of both the Union and its member states. Ireland has made it very clear within the European Union context that we have increased our ODA this year. We increased our budget by €30 million in our ODA budget last week. We are now in the early stage of the EU developing its multiannual financial framework, which is its seven-year budget. What will the European Union response be in relation to our development instrument? Will Ireland be able to get a bigger coalition of allies who come from all political positions and none—for example, the likes of the Spanish, the Danes and others—to say that we are not going to cut the European Union's aid budget? It is a massive challenge, but it gives us an opportunity.

I maintain that aid spending and defence spending are not a choice. Ireland is increasing spending on both. They are tied. The more you spend on international development, in due course the less you will have to spend on security and other apparatus. That is my adamant belief. I think it is very much a case of them being tied to each other.

I am not going to get directly drawn into too much of the domestic back and forth—we have a dinner ahead of us for that tonight—but I think that we have to be fair. When we are talking about resourcing and strengthening our defence forces, what is that? Is that just the pay of the men and women in the services or the equipment that they use? What do they carry on their hip? What do they learn to drive? What do they learn to operate, if it is not defence mechanisms? We very clear: Ireland is a militarily neutral jurisdiction. There is absolutely zero ambition to change that inside the Government or out. But we have to be sure. To your point, Paula, it is to make sure that the wider apparatus is as strong as possible.

I would also argue that—this is crucial to a forum like this and the revisiting of the memorandum of understanding—the most important tool at the moment in terms of defence security is information. It is sharing information and it is co-operation between like-minded member states, not only between Ireland and our EU partners, but also with the UK and indeed the United States—regardless of who is President, we have a

responsibility to them. We have very clear shared interests. We have allies. That is the difference.

To your point, George, I am loath to answer a hypothetical question with a definite answer, because it is guaranteed to lead to a discussion that is perhaps not in the right direction. You look at Estonia—this is to Paula’s point as well—and what happened to its undersea cables in recent days and weeks. You respond by strengthening your defences first and foremost. You respond by increasing your level of communication. The British Government were able to predict the attacks on Kyiv and the outset of the current military escalation three weeks out. That information was shared with like-minded allies, which is perhaps why Kyiv is still Ukrainian today and not Russian. That level of preparation is key. To answer the hypothetical, what is the nature of the attack? Was it a state or a non-state actor? Which state? Was it undersea, or was it through the connectivity? Every action presents a different reaction. Hopefully that is not too much of a fudgy answer but, to the clear point, we are not speaking in Chatham House here and this is the joy of this debate. We are speaking openly and giving honest and clear answers, but on very sensitive topics.

Ruth, I absolutely recognise the decision by Anneliese Dodds. I was raging because I was due to meet her the next day but, as I said, I have been able to have good conversations with Baroness Chapman on a number of occasions in London and indeed at various global fora.

To your point, Cormac, in relation to the humanitarian response and the UN reform, part of that is making sure that UN agencies are not doing the same work. This is where we talk about efficiencies and overlap. We want to make sure that the work of the refugees agency and the migration agency are connected and not siloed and that they are not doing each other’s work. That is how you increase that level of reform. On the humanitarian response, it is about making sure that aid gets where it needs to get to as soon as possible. I make one very clear point in relation to Gaza: aid needs to go into Gaza from UN agencies. It is UNRWA that supplies aid into Gaza now; it is not any other body, the GHF or anyone else. That kind of goes a little bit to your point in relation to the role of the IOM, but also in relation to UN Security Council reform and the fact that Africa is greatly underrepresented in that forum in terms of a permanent basis. We need to ensure that scale and ambition: fulfilling that ambition is the first most important thing we need to do. But we have to be aware that the challenges that will present themselves to Ireland and Europe in the next two years could be greatly different from when the Defence Commission produced its filings a couple of years ago, so we need to be open to that.

You know my stance on a united Ireland. I am more than happy to read your paper. You have read mine. That is something that you and I can have many a discussion on. I hate to disappoint you, but I disagree with very little of what you had to say.

As to Seán’s point, I think that it is a really good point to finish on, because it is something that I hope would unite opinions across this room. It is in relation to peace processes and peacebuilding and it goes to the point that you made, Sinéad. The hallmark of our Irish foreign policy is our value system. Our value system is rooted in desire for peace globally, but crucially on our islands first and foremost—hence the presence of this Assembly. Ireland still works massively in relation to peacebuilding.

You mentioned Colombia, which I will visit. We also have wonderful peacebuilding initiatives that happen not just in the sort of ways that you write reports about and you see headlines about, but in the practical ways that Baroness O’Grady mentioned in relation to the real community-based peacebuilding. I am talking about, for example, working with former child soldiers and combatants in Liberia to provide them with an economic means to prevent them from drifting from being a rebel fighter to being a member of an organised crime gang, to actually having a legitimate professional role within their community. That peacebuilding requires continued investment. We run amazing projects with a number of British NGOs on the Liberia-Sierra Leone border, where we have motorcycle gangs. That sounds scary, but they are actually a courier and taxi company and that is so much better than the alternative that they would have faced, having drifted through a vicious conflict 20 years ago, the one that we all know.

What we do not talk about are the sort of tribal and agrarian conflicts in various countries that sound like something from 200 years ago—the battle over land. You look at Kenya and you look at the work with nomadic farmers that Irish Aid does to make sure that the impacts of climate change do not lead to the level of internal migration that leads to conflict. That is the sort of peacebuilding and community building that is really enriched. We see examples of that, as I mentioned, in Colombia, but also in Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as in Zimbabwe, particularly supporting and protecting the civil society space. You look at the vast majority of Irish agencies that have been working in Ramallah and the West Bank, as well as throughout Gaza over the last decade or two. The vast majority of them have been working on intra-community peacebuilding—the simplest things.

No one is born prejudiced. We all remember the peace ads from our islands from 1995 and 1996, of the babies and toddlers going round. I will conclude on this point, before I answer Joyce’s very good question on disinformation. None of us comes from the moral high ground. If we seek the moral high ground, we are in the wrong place. It is not our position to tell people how to run their societies. It is our position to provide support towards finding mutually beneficial outcomes. That is the approach that the Global North needs to take.

To your point, Joyce, just to rattle through the last question in relation to disinformation, first and foremost apathy is the glove into which evil puts its hand. The more we have people disconnecting from politics—not voting or saying, “They are all the same, they are all in it for expenses and the gravy train”—the less people will vote and the more they will just simply accept the levels of disinformation and malicious disinformation that are being put into our stream. I would use the term “unfriendly” rather than “foreign” owners of media, because I think that is an important point to make. You can have a foreign owner of a media organ, but they are extremely friendly and play by all the rules. That is really important in terms of the narrative.

Artificial intelligence has the greatest potential to transform our society for the good than anything since the industrial revolution, I would think, but it needs to be a system that is human controlled and human-led and that has human rights at the outset. That is why you need the level of regulation that is being passed at a European level and that is going through Malcolm’s committee. Ireland was the first EU member state to pass the Digital Services Act. Ireland’s artificial intelligence Minister, Minister Niamh Smyth—Brendan’s dear friend—has this portfolio in her remit and we are the leading

European Union voice in doing it. But regulation is not the be-all and end-all in relation to AI. Information and innovation are key and you have to make sure they are running off the theme. More broadly, in relation to disinformation, the disinformation strategy that we published in April will only be as good as it is in terms of implementation. Leaving it as a report to be unread in a PDF is not going to help anyone. We are in a tricky situation now, but it is not a disastrous situation. Mankind has faced far worse situations. It is merely tricky and we can navigate it through clear information being absolutely embedded in the laws and rights that we all take very seriously.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. As an Assembly, we very much appreciate your very forthright contributions today and your answers to myriad questions. We are very glad that you are back with us, making a really positive contribution to our deliberations. [*Applause.*] Colleagues, we will have a short break now for 15 minutes, then we will come back for the Committee B report and then the debate on security and defence co-operation in Europe. We will resume in 15 minutes sharp, please.

The sitting was suspended at 3.43 pm.

COMMITTEE B REPORT: “UK-EU DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION POST-BREXIT”

4.08 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Order. We now move to consider a report from Committee B on security and defence co-operation. I call on the chair of Committee B, Darren Millar MS, to present the Committee report “UK-EU Defence and Security Cooperation Post-Brexit” to the Assembly and move to adopt the report.

Darren Millar MS:

Thank you very much indeed, Co-Chair. I am very pleased to be able to present the fourth in a series of reports by Committee B on UK-EU defence and security co-operation post Brexit. Can I put on record my thanks today to fellow members of the Committee for their commitment to this important piece of work over a number of years, and, indeed, the clerks and the witnesses and everybody else who provided evidence to the Committee during the course of our work?

As I say, we started this piece of work in 2018, in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, because of the concerns of Members of this Assembly, and members of the Committee, about the working arrangements that could emerge from Brexit in terms of the relationship on defence and security with the European Union and the United Kingdom. But, of course, during the course of our work, more and more evidence came to bear that pointed us in directions to take during the course of our work. That is why eventually we undertook, effectively, three inquiries. The first was on policing and intelligence, then we did cybersecurity, and we also looked at the response to the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine and the threats from Russia that had emerged as a result of that. It was a fascinating piece of work. As I say, the more we looked into it, the more we ferreted about, the more holes there were for us to be able to investigate.

Clearly, the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia took a great deal of time for us to look at. That involved us taking evidence from NATO and also looking at some centres of excellence on cyber security in Tallinn, and taking evidence also on hybrid warfare and the threats of hybrid warfare from the centre of excellence which is based in Helsinki.

Obviously, we would have liked to be able to present this report much sooner than today, but of course there were elections that caused a hiatus in the work of this Assembly last year, and that meant that we were not able to publish it sooner. Since we have taken our evidence, and drew our evidence collecting to an end, there have been a number of changes to the security landscape in that period, and therefore we wanted to make sure that we reflected these in the report that is before you today. But we do make some key recommendations in the report, and I do hope that they will be useful to the UK and Irish Governments in being able to take things forward to make our respective jurisdictions safer places in which to operate. The global picture and backdrop, the context, has changed significantly, not just because of the ongoing conflict in eastern Europe, but because of the significant change in the United States with the election of

Donald Trump, which has also had a huge impact, I think it is fair to say, on global security and defence and co-operation on those issues.

In the report that we present to you today, there are a number of issues that we touch on, including the joint statement between the UK and Ireland that was issued in March, and indeed the further work on security and defence co-operation with the EU from the statement in May 2025. We think that they pose a very promising basis for further mutual co-operation on security and defence matters going forward. We think that those agreements very much will result in a more collaborative approach to security and defence issues that concern BIPA jurisdictions, whilst also recognising Ireland's long-standing tradition of military neutrality. It was good to hear from Neale Richmond earlier on about how seriously the Irish Government is taking the contents of our report and the recommendations that they include.

I just want to touch on a few of the recommendations, if I may, before I ask the Assembly to adopt the report. While we observe the co-operation on policing within the common travel area and the fact that it is working very well at the moment under the current arrangements, we have recommended that the UK and Irish Governments and the EU should work closely together to manage any future divergence in intelligence and policing co-operation, because we recognise that that is a risk in the future.

We also recommended that the Governments of the UK and Ireland should establish a joint statutory commission to protect and monitor the critical infrastructure under the sea. We say very clearly in the report that that should include representatives from government, defence representatives and asset owners, and should ensure comprehensive mapping of the communications cables, gas pipelines and other maritime infrastructure that serves the BIPA jurisdictions. I know we have touched on this issue during the course of the day at various points, but we were quite alarmed, I think it is fair to say, when we took evidence in Ireland from asset owners that there were no statutory requirements for people to meet together in order to ensure that that critical infrastructure was properly protected. That rang alarm bells for us, and that is why I think it is absolutely essential that the informal arrangements that currently exist are put on a statutory footing.

We also made a recommendation aimed at including energy security within the ambit of discussions between the UK and Ireland and the UK and the EU on security, because we know that energy security is part of our national security in our various jurisdictions. We are aware of the fact that energy security could be threatened at any moment through interruptions with cables, interruptions with gas pipes, and, indeed, interruptions or sabotage of critical assets, which are very often in remote locations, and not always policed particularly well.

4.15 pm

A further concern of the Committee, which leads to our next recommendation, was the matter of irregular migration—illegal migration—across Europe. We were told when we visited both Helsinki and Tallinn that Russia was using migration and facilitating illegal and irregular migration across the eastern borders in order to disrupt and destabilise many of the countries that are our allies. There has even been a suggestion—

I do not know how true this is—that they may be involved in supporting some of the smuggling gangs getting illegal migrants across the English Channel and even further afield over into Ireland. We felt very strongly that Committee A, which now has different responsibilities and has taken on this responsibility from our Committee, should undertake a piece of work to look at that particular issue because of the concern amongst citizens in all of our jurisdictions about illegal migration and the way that that is flaring and causing heated public debate at the moment across these islands.

And finally, if I can just touch on one other issue, and that is the importance of information sharing. At the moment, information sharing is done in a different way than it used to be because of the fact that the relationship between the UK and the EU has changed. It is done usually via bilateral arrangements between the UK and Ireland, and it seems to be working reasonably well. But, of course, we need to make sure that that continues, and so we refer in our report to the need for the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement to pick up this issue when it is reviewed—of course, the review is coming up in 2026—to make sure that those arrangements are captured and further developed.

I did say “finally”, but I am going to say “finally” again here, because another risk in the future is the fact that we have legacy information technology systems in many of our jurisdictions. Some of them are very old. Many of them are easy for people to infiltrate. Minister Richmond, of course, referred to the recent concerns over the vulnerability of Ireland’s health databases and systems, and the UK has not been without challenges to some of its IT systems, too.

I commend the report to the Assembly. I very much hope that you will agree that it can be adopted, and I look forward to the debate that we will have on the motion in a few moments’ time.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you very much. I will ask the Plenary to formally adopt the report of Committee B. Are we agreed? Thank you very much.

I wish to commend the members of Committee B for their work in completing their report. The joint clerks will arrange to send the report to the British and Irish Governments.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We now move on to the debate on the following motion on security and defence co-operation in Europe, as approved by the steering Committee. The text of the motion is on your order of business. I have got my first speaker as Ruth Jones. [*Interruption.*] Sorry, no, we have not done it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Gill. As Gill mentioned, we are commencing the debate on security and defence co-operation. With regard to remarks made by colleagues this morning about the procedural issues involved in amending motions that are agreed by the steering Committee, and put to the Assembly at short notice, the clerks will discuss how we can get a better means to give Members earlier sight of motions that are to be put to the Assembly and arrange meaningful opportunities for amendments to be proposed for debate. Generally, the steering Committee meets on the eve—. We met last night. Generally, the motion is only cleared at the steering Committee. There is only a short time frame between the motions being adopted at the steering Committee and then put before the full Plenary. I ask Members to make contributions now on the subject of the motion. I think Ruth Jones has indicated.

Ruth Jones MP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. You have just highlighted exactly the issue I have, because, obviously, it is the first time I have seen this report and, as a new Member, I just wonder—. I welcome the report, and I know we are debating the motion, but in terms of paragraph 6, we are talking about welcoming security measures for Cromarty Firth, but I do wish to suggest that there should be an amended version, because it is not just Cromarty Firth, there is also Milford Haven, which is a free port, and there are other areas that we should be looking at. So, not to condemn—I want to agree with the report—but can we just augment it, please?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks very much, Ruth. Darren, would you like to make a contribution?

Darren Millar MS:

I am very happy to, yes. You are absolutely right, Ruth, to draw attention to the fact that there are other very important ports as far as floating offshore wind is concerned, including Milford Haven, with the free port development that is taking place there. It is not that we did not want to touch on that. We have not specifically mentioned it in the report. But, of course, that piece of work, which is ongoing in Wales, to make sure that that facility is up and running, is likely to come onstream after the Firth of Cromarty. So, it is not a deliberate oversight, but it is a point that is well made, and I think we would have mentioned it had you been on our Committee.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Darren. Lord Paul Murphy.

The Lord Murphy:

Thank you very much indeed, Co-Chair. I will just make one comment before I make some remarks with regard to this statement, and that is about the absence of a British Minister today. I have said before that I have been on this body for nearly 30 years—*[Interruption.]* I will wait till they finish. As I say, I have been on this body for nearly 30 years, and I do not think I have known a session in Britain that has not had a British Minister, and I think it is pretty awful, to be honest. So, I would hope that we would make very serious representations to the British Government about the lack of a British Minister today—of any sort, at any point in time in this three-day conference. I will certainly be making my personal representations on that issue as well.

On a much happier note, I was very proud to be a member of this Committee, and I want to pay tribute to Darren, who chaired it. He was an absolutely outstanding and dedicated Chair of this Committee over a large number of years. He guided us in a very skilful manner, and you will have heard what the recommendations of the Committee are.

We live in a very changed world from when this body first started in the early 1990s—dramatically changed. I am not quite sure that all the countries, or all the jurisdictions, in our remit here quite got to grips—and I include the British Government in this, by the way—with what we are facing. The threats now are very different, and the real unpleasant actors do not play by the rules anymore.

One thing that was absolutely riveting—it was only a day—was a visit to Estonia. In Estonia, bearing in mind it is just over 1 million people, that is all, its army is as big as the British army, but it has been devastated by a series of cyberattacks at its schools, at its infrastructure, and other parts of its country as well. So, I do think that we have to be very conscious that the people who are nasty people in this world will not take into account any constitutions or international agreements; they play by different rules. The discussion we had earlier about maritime security has been particularly significant to this session, and yesterday in the Committee I was on, Committee A. So, it really is a huge issue, which we really have to tackle.

More domestically, in terms of intelligence and security on the island of Ireland, it is the only part of the European Union that has two separate jurisdictions on it, one of which is not EU—EU on one side, and UK, in terms of Northern Ireland, on the other. It is so very important that the intelligence and security communications between two parts, as part of the EU and as part of the UK, but particularly for Ireland, continue, and although we did this at the very beginning of our report, it is still very, very relevant. A couple of weeks ago, Baroness Eliza Manningham-Buller, who had been head of MI5, was saying that, effectively—effectively—we are at war with Russia now, not officially, but unofficially, and Russia, as I repeat, knows no borders, and particularly a border on the island of Ireland. Now, I am not saying they are operating there, but who knows what is happening?

Finally, on a question of what happens to this report, which I think is one of the best I have seen in the years I have been on this body: to whom do we send it? Not just to the Governments, but to the specific Ministers and departments who deal with this. I think we should send it to the British-Irish Council, as the Government part of strand 3, and I think that we should really ensure that we follow up the responses from the Governments on this one. It is unfinished business, it is hugely significant, and I think, when we meet again in Ireland next year, and hopefully the Governments have responded to this report, we can have a further debate on it. It is probably one of the most important issues that we have ever faced in this Committee.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Lord Murphy. Darren, I need you to formally move the motion. I do not think you did in your comments.

Darren Millar MS:

I will happily formally move the motion on the order paper, Co-Chair. I beg to move:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly recognises the vital importance to all BIPA jurisdictions of effective measures taken by governments to ensure their security and defence; appreciates that global trends and events pose significant threats to that continued security; welcomes the agreements concluded between the UK and Ireland in March 2025 and the UK and the European Union in May 2025 which provide for practical cooperation on matters of security, defence, intelligence sharing and cyber security; and recommends that the British and Irish Governments continue to work closely together and with European partners to enhance security measures, in particular in the fields of critical marine infrastructure, energy security, cyber security and irregular migration.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much. I think, as Lord Murphy said, it is an extremely important subject and we want as widespread views as are possible. So, with that in mind, quite a number of people have indicated that they wish to speak, so I would appreciate if the contributions could be as succinct as possible by not curtailing anybody's contribution.

We are very pleased that we have Jānis Vucāns, a very experienced Member of the Latvian Parliament, and the current president of the Baltic Assembly, with us today. The steering Committee takes the Assembly's relationships with its partner Assemblies in Europe very seriously, and it is a great honour to have the Baltic Assembly representative with us today. Jānis will be shortly contributing to this debate, and again, I have asked Members if they can be as succinct as possible. Just with regard to Paul Murphy's point about the absence of members of the British Government, Gill and the support staff, clerks and their staff, made every effort to have representation, but unfortunately it has not happened. Thanks, Paul. Senator Craughwell.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you very much, Chairman. Chairman, the report is an excellent report, and I am surprised that it initiated in 2018: it is quite up to date and quite topical as it stands right now. The piece on migration: I travelled to Sicily some years ago to watch migration processing from the Mediterranean at the time, and I went there specifically because we had been reassured that anybody that was coming into Europe had been vetted, and I wanted to see the vetting process for myself. Indeed, the Italians wanted us to see the

vetting process. The truth of the matter is, you could assume any name you want, you could assume any country you want as your point of departure, and after a very short time, provided you passed a medical, you were into the Schengen area, and from there you could travel anywhere you wanted.

I think we as politicians are a little reluctant to look publicly at migration because of risks of being accused of being racist et cetera, et cetera, but, actually, it is something we are going to have to take a really serious look at. Our own Minister for Justice recently got castigated over sending an aircraft to Georgia with, I think, 10 people on board, or 20 people on board—it was a small number—and people said, ‘What a waste of money.’ You could not have bought the advertising he got, because anybody in Georgia thinking of coming to Ireland now know you will be sent home very, very quickly. We do have to provide a safe haven for those who need it, but get into any taxi in Dublin, ask the taxi driver, if a non-national, ‘How did you come to Ireland?’, they all came as refugees. Right? As an Irishman, I know economic migration. I came to the UK when I was 16 years of age and worked in a pub in London. I know that economic migration drives us to move to where the money is to survive. So, I understand that. I agree with your assessment. We need to look at that in its entirety as a special part of Committee A in the next session. I complement you on an excellent report and excellent delivery today. Thank you very much, Darren.

4.30 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Gerard. Deputy Frank Feighan, please.

Frank Feighan TD:

Thank you, and I just want to thank Darren and the Committee for all of the work that they have done. I was on that Committee, along with Lord Murphy, and we went to Helsinki and Tallinn, and it was really an eye-opener how they are so concerned. It brought me back to my own country when, before the Ukraine war, the Russian fleet was mobilising down the south-west, and it was a bit of a joke, really, where the Irish fishermen were going out and they were going to stop them. And it was on the radio as if it was a bit of fun. This is really, really serious. I genuinely think that the Russians have missed a trick; if they had sent one or two longboats with a few sailors in to Castletownbere for a few drinks, we would probably say it was great craic. Genuinely, we have to wake up to what is going on.

Secondly, the undersea cables are something that we need to do, but I just noticed myself, when you were talking about cyberattacks—I have prided myself, for the last 10 years on social media, on never blocking everybody. I went to the British-Irish Association with Simon Harris a weekend back and put up a photograph. The pile-on that came on was absolutely—it had to be motivated from a big player. It was incredible. And in the last three weeks, I have now blocked 300 people. I do not know if anybody else has from there, but it is something that we have to be very, very aware of, and I do not think that we treat it that seriously. And that trip to Tallinn was absolutely an eye-opener for me and for my colleagues. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Frank. Our guest, the President of the Baltic Assembly, will address us now, and you will have noted that, throughout proceedings today and even in the discussions last night, the dangers of the political situation, particularly in eastern Europe and on the border, is one of concern to all of us across these islands. I call on Jānis.

Jānis Vucāns:

Dear Co-Chairs, colleagues and distinguished friends of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, let me start by saying that it is a true honour for me to be here today, representing the Baltic Assembly at your conference. I would like to sincerely thank you for the invitation and for the growing co-operation between our organisations over the past years. I look forward to welcoming your Co-Chairs at the forty-fourth session of the Baltic Assembly, which will take place on 13 and 14 November of this year, in Riga. Our Assemblies may be rooted in different regions of Europe, yet we share the same democratic principles and the same responsibility to ensure the security and prosperity of our citizens. The dialogue between the Baltic Assembly and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has already proven to be valuable, and I am confident that it will only deepen in the future.

And now about defence and security. Darren and some of your colleagues have already told you some facts related to security and defence issues in our Baltic region, which, by the way, is the eastern flank of NATO and the European Union as well. The international environment that we faced today is shaped by Russia's full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine. For the Baltic states, this war is not an abstract conflict, it is happening in our neighbourhood. Based on that, today, here, you have spoken a lot about defence and security issues in your countries. In the Baltic Assembly, and especially in its Security and Defence Committee, and also in all three Baltic Parliaments, those issues have been on the table for discussion for at least the last 11 years, since Crimea's occupation. But, of course, especially, this issue was discussed after February 2022.

In the late fourth century, the Roman general Flavius wrote: "Si vis pacem, para bellum". If you would like peace, prepare for war. The reason for that was that, at that time, Romans, for quite a long time, lived in peace without any significant military conflict. And now, such a situation came to our European continent as well. In the Baltic countries during the last years, this preparation for eventual war is realised in different practical steps. One of them is starting to build up a common Baltic Defence Line—like a serious military defence infrastructure system.

The second step is made simultaneously by all three Baltic Parliaments. We stepped out from the Ottawa Convention of usage of controlled landmines. We, as a Baltic state, see this war in Ukraine as our own. This year, we marked the thirty-sixth anniversary of the Baltic Way, when Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians stood together in a human chain, peacefully protesting the Soviet occupation of our nations. We honour this peaceful demonstration as a symbol of unity and hope, but it contrasts with the brutal reality of Soviet occupation. In our countries, thousands suffered through arrests, deportations and systemic oppression. Having lived through Soviet occupation, the Baltic states

understand deeply that Ukraine's struggle is not only its own, it is a fight for freedom, justice and the future of Europe.

Friends, international support is vital, because it not only strengthens Ukraine's defence, but also sends a clear message that the world will not stand by when freedom and democracy are under attack. This is why the Baltic states have provided steadfast political, military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. But let me say this again: Ukraine cannot and must not stand alone. The responsibility is collective. Only by acting together can we ensure that this aggression does not succeed.

We are reminded daily that the aggression posed by Russia does not stop at Ukraine's borders. Just recently, armed Russian aircrafts have violated the airspace of Poland, Finland, Norway, Romania and us—all three Baltic states. These are shameless provocations that demonstrate Russia's disregard for international law. Russia is wholly responsible for these actions, which are dangerous and could put the lives of our people at risk. They must end. These incidents also highlight that the close defence co-operation of NATO and its allies is not optional, but essential.

In this regard, the United Kingdom's leadership within NATO, as well as the newly signed security and defence partnership between the EU and the United Kingdom, is crucial. This provides us with a framework to work more closely on peace building, countering hybrid threats and protecting our maritime space and cyber-security interests. We also highly value the leadership of the United Kingdom for its commitment to strengthening allied defence on the eastern flank of NATO. The presence of British troops in Estonia continues to be a cornerstone for our collective deterrents. It proves that resilience must be built on the regional level. Just as the Baltic states are building joint defence lines to strengthen our eastern borders, we must also strengthen co-operation with like-minded Parliaments and Governments across Europe. Our challenges are interconnected and so must be our solutions.

I would like also to highlight the important role of Ireland within the European Union. As a committed member, Ireland has been a strong advocate for unity in the face of aggression and has provided remarkable humanitarian support to Ukraine by welcoming over 100,000 refugees and offering assistance that goes far beyond its border. For the Baltic states, Ireland's solidarity within the EU, its compassion for those displaced by the war and its firm stance in defending democratic values are recognised as a vital contribution to our common cause.

Dear colleagues, the war in Ukraine and the overall instability we see globally remind us of a fundamental truth: unity is our greatest strength. When we co-ordinate our actions, align policies and pool resources, we not only protect our nations but we also protect the very idea of Europe as an area of freedom, security and democracy. The Baltic Assembly deeply values the partnership with the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. By continuing to share the best practices, strengthening parliamentary diplomacy and pursuing joint initiatives, we can show that cross-regional co-operation is not only symbolic but also practical. Let us therefore stand together, speak with one voice and act with determination, for the Baltic states, for Britain and Ireland, for Ukraine and for the future of a free and secure Europe. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Jānis. You brought great clarity in your remarks about the huge challenges facing Europe countries and facing the eastern side of the European Union, and you bring a message that reminds us very, very clearly of the obligation on countries to work together in partnership to deal with a common enemy. Unfortunately, so much loss of life has occurred, and an evil war still is inflicted on Ukraine, an independent sovereign state. Our next contributor is Ross Greer MSP.

Ross Greer MSP:

Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to pick up on the very last section of the motion, in relation to what is described as “irregular migration”, and just to reflect on a couple of points. The first is how incredibly self-defeating the UK’s immigration policies are, just in straightforward economic terms. So, in Scotland, we have a rapidly ageing population, we have a relatively low birth rate and we have a desperate need for people to move to our country and to fill really key roles in our society, particularly in our health service and our social care, and just to keep our rural communities in existence. We are at the point where, in many of our rural and island communities in Scotland, if they lose one more young family, that will be it—the school will close and, once the school closes, it does not reopen, and that community is then just running down the clock to the point where it is no longer viable. That has happened before and it will happen again, but we have UK immigration policies that are contributing massively towards this, contributing in all sorts of other ways as well—for example, putting at pretty existential risk some our universities because of the hostility that they have caused.

That is just in terms of hostility towards legal immigration. When it comes to what is phrased here as ‘irregular migration’, I think we also need to reflect on the fact that much of the irregular migration into the EU and the UK is because of a lack of safe and legal routes. We have not given people the opportunity to arrive here legally, and we have a straightforward moral obligation. We complain about many of our tabloid newspapers, certainly, and some of our political colleagues complain about Yemeni refugees into the UK, after 10 years of the UK funding, arming and training the Saudi air force to bomb Yemen into rubble. We complain about Afghan refugees, the same people who spent 20 years working with us and then we abandoned thousands of them to the Taliban without giving them free passage here to safety—the people who protected our soldiers and our administrators and our personnel in that country for 20 years, and then we abandoned them. Yes, they now take these irregular paths, these not quite legal paths into the UK, but who could blame them?

The European Union uses Turkey to push back refugees. It struck a deal with Turkey to do that. That is a country guilty of ethnic cleansing. Everything that Israel has just done to the Palestinians, the Turks have been doing to the Kurds within their own borders and in Syria for decades now. So, there is an element of self-reflection that is required here. We cannot just keep fortifying our borders until we feel we are sufficiently safe. We need to take responsibility for a world that is so unsafe that many people feel they must travel here to safety. Much of that is because of arms sales, because of our direct intervention in other conflicts, and increasingly because of a climate crisis that has been caused by the richest countries on this planet.

4.45 pm

Like Gerard, I have been to Italy to look at the situation there, and I met some of the most desperate people on earth. It was in Lampedusa, the Italian island, that, for the first time, I met people who were climate refugees, a family who were incredibly proud of their family farm in Ghana, but had been forced to make that journey because the farm did not exist anymore because of expanding deserts and droughts. Ghana contributes almost nothing—literally almost nothing—to the global climate emergency. It is countries across Europe, the UK, America, Canada, et cetera, that have contributed towards that. So, if we are talking even just purely in narrow terms about our own national security, we have national security interests in setting up safe and legal routes for people to come and arrive here, and we have national security interests in tackling the greatest threat that we all face, which is the climate emergency. We cannot do any of that by investing more into Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Leonardo and throwing more money at them. I do not object to adequate defence spending, because there is a need for physical force protection, but that is not the route towards the kind of security that I think we all owe our constituents.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Ross. Deputy Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Jānis, for your input. It was great to also discuss some of these issues with you last night at dinner and to hear of the very stark reality that your country and many others are facing right now.

In relation to the motion, I think there are a few things that I would like to add to this. The first is that, in any discussion or debate around security and defence co-operation between Ireland and the UK, we have to mention and discuss the long-standing policy of military neutrality. I do not want to go into too much more detail because, obviously, we did so in our discussions with the Minister a little earlier, but it is absolutely vital that we honour and understand that policy within this context of discussion.

Secondly, and as a part of that, while we take defence and security issues very seriously, we also have to acknowledge that Ireland is not a member of NATO. And I want to quote our Tánaiste, Simon Harris, who, in response to me recently in the Dáil, said that “Ireland...does not participate in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements.” I think that is really important if we are talking about this, and that we must underpin all of this with diplomacy, international law and the Pacific settlement of disputes, first and foremost, and I would like to see the words 'international law' within the motion. We also need to be stalwart defenders of the UN Charter and I referenced earlier that all of these principles, I believe, are captured in our Bunreacht na hÉireann, our Irish constitution, in Article 29.

Building on what Ross has just spoken about in terms of migration, the language also jars with me in terms of “irregular migration”. What we are actually talking about is international protection. We are talking about people who are seeking asylum and who have every human right to do so. We must uphold the rights and humanity of refugees

and asylum seekers in any discussion around security co-operation, and that includes search and rescue at sea and, indeed, treating people with dignity on our shores. There is a rise in hostile border policies all across Europe, which is impacting on our reputations as human rights defenders—globally, I would say—and it is really important that we do not ignore our duties under maritime law in favour of pursuing stricter migration policy goals. If we do that, we are risking creating a world where search and rescue does not happen, by our example, which, quite frankly, is a worrying prospect for two island nations.

I would finish by saying that, as we have heard a few literary references today, to that last point, I encourage everybody to read Ireland's most recent Booker Prize winning novel from 2023, *Prophet Song* by Paul Lynch, which quite starkly depicts a future that should concern us all. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Sinéad. Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Malcolm Byrne TD:

Thank you very much, Brendan, and I thank Jānis. I want to commend the paper, but, to echo Paul Murphy's point, we need to call out the aggressor for who they are—we need to call out Russia. We are, effectively, across Europe, in a state of pre-war. While I agree with Sinéad about the point that we need to place emphasis on diplomacy and on international law and on the UN charter, the problem, as Paul Murphy has said, is that Russia does not play by those rules. That is the difficulty. If we were dealing with a country that was happy to play by those rules, it would be different, but it does not. I think our challenge is that we did not, in western Europe, listen to those in central and eastern Europe. Going right back to the cyberattacks that were happening in the Baltics and the invasion of Crimea, and remember, as well, when Russian agents carried out targeted assassinations on British soil, and when an attack on our health service, which emanated from Russia and—I will put it diplomatically—was at least condoned by the Russian authorities, we are not taking a lot of this sufficiently seriously.

As Jānis outlines, other European states are now experiencing what could be determined as acts of war, and they are not just the ones you mentioned. Denmark recently also experienced it. I go back to George Lawlor's question to Neale Richmond about what happens if Russia cuts one of the cables, because we know, and I know, from talking to some of our own security sources, there are Russian vessels in Irish waters right at this moment. We know that they are active, that they are there.

I came to this event from the Tallinn digital summit. What struck me there was so much of the discussion was about how we are to use AI and technology to try to combat what Russia is doing, in terms of the bot farms, the mis- and disinformation, and we really need to take the issue seriously. I totally agree with the point that we are not playing by the same old rules. This is about, going back to the point I made in the earlier session, our values and those things we need to defend. If we are to defend international law and human rights and the rule of law, we cannot just talk about it. We have to get out and defend it. Russia is not going to play by those rules.

I agree a lot with Ross's point. I am a little concerned, given the general direction of this paper, which is around defence and security, about tying in the migration debate. I am not saying it is not separate to it, but it is almost like there is a separate discussion and issue that needs to happen on it. But I do think we have got to wake up, and I think the mistake we made was not listening to our Baltic colleagues over the last decade, and we now need to listen very, very clearly to what is going on.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Malcolm. Lord Bruce, please.

The Lord Bruce:

Thank you very much. First of all, thank you very much for coming to us from Lithuania and giving us the reality of being on the front line of European defence against Russian aggression, which you have been living with for lifetimes, actually, not just a few years, and been at the receiving end. I think we should also recognise that those front-line states have, actually, acquired knowledge, sophistication and understanding about offensive defence that we need to learn from. The people who are now at the front line of innovation in defence technology are Ukraine, the Baltics, Finland, Sweden, and, actually, we are sitting here in western Europe and still tending to think this is a faraway conflict, but, as we have said, it is on our doorstep. The thing about hybrid and cyber warfare is that it is all deniable: "It is not us; nothing to do with us. It is just an accident".

I am very pleased to be a member of the Committee and I am very grateful to Darren for the way he led it, which I think gave us a lot of insight, a lot of valuable input to produce this report. I was particularly keen that we went to the centres of excellence in Helsinki and in Tallinn. I think that what we learnt from that was that, at the frontier there, this is happening all the time and, every day, they are encountering it, learning from it and acquiring more sophistication. We are part of that, but we do not talk about it that much. The UK is a member of both of those organisations, but I am not sure the average parliamentarian is aware of that in the UK. Ireland is also a member, but, again, I do not know how often people are aware of it.

In our report—and I support the motion—there were two things: first, in paragraph 3 of our report, points a., b. and c. are about maritime defence, comprehensive mapping of cables, monitoring patrols and resilience capacity. We discussed earlier Irish defence and British-Irish defence co-operation. That seems to be exactly the area where we could strengthen our working together for mutual benefit. So, I would like to recommend that we take that specifically forward.

One issue that arose during our inquiry, which is not so obvious, was on policing and security. Of course, post Brexit, we have left Europol, and I would like to raise the question that although we have built alternative forms of communication outside Europol, the information I have is that it is nothing like as quick or as sophisticated as it was. Should we not be recommending, if it is possible, for the UK to rejoin Europol? It seems to me that there would be a mutual interest to do that, also bearing in mind that quite a lot of the criminal activity that we are policing is also coming from Russia. So, it is actually part of the same thing. So, I just put that as an aside, as something that we maybe want to consider recommending.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Lord Bruce. Brian Mathew MP.

Brian Mathew MP:

Thank you very much. It is a great report, but, reflecting on what Ross and Sinéad had to say, and thinking about the earlier part of the afternoon, where we were talking about, effectively, soft power, as well as international law, I am just wondering whether there should not be—and I am just throwing this out, and I realise it would be difficult, but I will suggest it anyway—whether we should not have a point 12 that states that we recommend the adoption or readoption of 0.7 per cent GNI spend on aid, as suggested in the Brandt report, as the right thing to do, preventing the need for migration by protecting those who might migrate by helping them to prosper where they live. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Brian. Is anybody else offering to speak? Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

This will be a lot shorter. In fairness, a considerable amount has been said. I think we would all agree—and I thank Jānis for coming here and speaking—that, yes, the world has changed. You are talking about hybrid and asymmetric warfare; it is not just the straightforward scenario that we understood before. When we talk about the cyberattack in Ireland, it was carried out by—what would you have called them—sub-contractors that work occasionally for Vladimir Putin’s regime. I suppose that just tells us the type of world that we are in. So, obviously, we have to make preparations in relation to that. We obviously need to make sure that we have the capacity. I do not think we are there.

In fairness, I think one of the biggest things that it showed at the time was that you suddenly had a conversation with a whole pile of people who were in business, IT and beyond, and security, and you realised the amount of people who had been paying off outfits like that that had attacked them, if you know what I mean, and it was just that they were afraid of the reputational damage, so nobody heard; they were happy to pay the £50,000, £100,000 in some cases, and sometimes less. However, you just suddenly discovered that you had a huge amount of weakness in your entire infrastructure, and I do not think we are anywhere near dealing with that. I think that is a very particular issue.

I do not intend to go into it, but I think Sinéad was right to make the point in relation to the fact that we constantly talk about international law and the UN charter and about ensuring that, and Ireland still has a belief in an independent foreign policy and neutrality. I think that always has to be contextualised. However, if we are talking about migration, I think it is fair to have a full conversation. There are instances where it has been used as a weapon. You are also dealing with people who are fleeing on the basis of persecution of all sorts, and we have all, collectively, failed to deliver a safer world,

where less of this would happen. You are also talking about those, on an individual basis, who have made a decision to come here to improve their lives, and people will be good and bad; that is just the reality of it.

I do not think there is any problem in us having a conversation in relation to fair, efficient and enforced systems that work properly, while, at the same time, looking after those who require looking after. We would all be a lot better in a world where fewer people had to travel on the basis of fear—which, of course, they do—but I think we are a long way off from getting there. I would just reiterate, while we talk about calling out Russia and all the rest of it, and while things are better, it seems, at least today, in Gaza, the fact is that the entire genocide and all that has gone with it has taken away from the western world's moral high ground, and, actually, has probably made the issue more difficult in relation to dealing with the issues we have to, from Ukraine and on.

5.00 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Ruairí. Annabelle Ewing MSP.

Annabelle Ewing MSP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I will just make a few comments. I am mindful of my role here as the Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament; I am not here as a backbench MSP, so I will try to restrain myself. I would just commend the report and make a few points. Picking up on Lord Murphy's initial point, I do absolutely share what he said. I was very surprised indeed to note the, I think, three successive apologies from UK Government Ministers, presumably for very good reason, but I do not think it is a very good look, and, I think, in terms of my brief involvement with BIPA, it is the first time that I have been at a plenary session where we have had no UK Minister at all—certainly at a plenary in the UK.

I would like also to pick up on Malcom Bruce's point about Europol. I think that is a point very well made. I know that Police Scotland had a direct relationship pre Brexit with Europol. I think they have tried to do the best they can do, but I suspect that it probably could not be the same degree of closeness and access as was achieved pre Brexit. I would just like to thank very much our colleague from the Baltic states for having come to the plenary to give a very interesting overview of what it is like, actually, in terms of your geopolitical situation. So, thank you very much indeed. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Annabelle. Darren, would you make a few remarks to wind up, please?

Darren Millar MS:

I will. Can I thank everybody who has taken part in this debate? I think it has been a very frank and honest discussion about many of the issues and challenges that we face.

I was particularly pleased that Jānis Vucāns was here today to be able to contribute and to shape our discussion, because he is absolutely right: whilst our nations are far apart geographically, we share this common struggle to protect our freedoms, our democracy and our security. We certainly, all of us, from our various Parliaments and jurisdictions, stand shoulder to shoulder with you and the other Baltic nations in doing that.

Some of those similar challenges, of course, have been cited by Members during the course of the debate. There is a lot of undersea cabling and infrastructure in the Baltic, which has been the target of sabotage by Chinese- and Russian-registered vessels and crews over the past few years, and that has caused all sorts of problems for the nations around the Baltic sea. We know, of course, as others have mentioned, that we have had the whole issue of vessels in the Irish sea—Russian intelligence vessels, even, in the Irish sea—which have been collating and collecting information on what is under and on the sea bed, who knows for what purpose, but that, clearly, presents a risk to our national and international security, and we must do everything that we can to prevent it. So, we need to co-operate; we need to make sure that there is a close relationship on these issues. As I said earlier on, it was very apparent that there has been excellent co-operation in the past, when the UK was a member of the EU, and that relationship, that close co-operation, was actually continuing quite well, in spite of the UK's departure. That is what we were told by the various people who gave us evidence. But there is clearly much more work that can be done, particularly in terms of protecting that undersea cabling, those energy facilities that, unfortunately, are vulnerable too. Of course, it is not just in the Irish sea; there is also the Atlantic coast, with data cables coming in across the Atlantic, which are critical for our way of life these days, and we must make sure that those are also protected.

I just wanted to touch on this issue of migration. I too was taken with the comments of Neale Richmond earlier on, when he was talking about the need to invest in international aid and development as a means of trying to exert a positive influence overseas that could prevent unnecessary migration, potentially. But I think what we were trying to get at in the report was that there are significant numbers of undocumented migrants arriving, from goodness knows where, and that potentially poses a significant risk to our national security. That is the issue that I think needs to be followed up in some detail, hopefully by Committee A picking up that piece of work, because not only is undocumented migration a cause of concern to those that we represent in our various jurisdictions, but it is fuelling disenchantment with the establishment, if I can call it that, in terms of the Governments in our country, and that is precisely what our enemies want to see. Our foes overseas—Russia, some of these other allies of Russia—want to see dissent in our nations, confusion in our nations, and they want that to have an impact on our democracy. That is why, according to the people that we met in NATO, they have been helping to fuel waves of illegal migration and undocumented migration and irregular migration across the EU, largely through the eastern European borders, but also elsewhere, as I said.

In addition to that, of course, they are fomenting dissent through social media, which we have not touched on a great deal. Joyce Watson, of course, mentioned this earlier on, but the disinformation, the bots that are out there spreading lies, the use of AI to make fake videos of elected representatives and even Ministers in Government, fake recordings—all of this is fomenting dissent and it is causing problems in our democracies. That is why we have to make sure that we protect our free and fair

elections and make sure that we tackle those things, hopefully on an international basis, through international co-operation too.

I wanted also just to touch on the whole issue of espionage, which has not been raised today. There is a statement today in the House of Commons on Chinese spies, or alleged Chinese spies, that were not charged by the Crown Prosecution Service. This is not the first occasion, of course, where there have been spies hanging around the UK Parliament. In this case, it was Chinese spies, but, of course, there are other people, sometimes within our Parliaments, that can be motivated to do and say things that actors outside of our jurisdictions might want to do. There was the recent case, of course, of Nathan Gill, the former leader of Reform in Wales, who has admitted to taking bribes to make pro-Russian statements in the European Parliament, for example. So these things should be a matter of concern to us all, because no one wants that foreign interference in our democracies, and that includes, by the way, Elon Musk saying things online as well, trying to interfere in our democracies too.

So, let us be vigilant, let us work together on these issues. I think there has been a positive response so far from the Irish Government in the comments that we heard today from Neale Richmond. There is clearly work to do to follow up on this report, and I was pleased that Lord Murphy made reference to the need for us to hold our respective Governments to account to make sure that they deliver on some of these recommendations. However, we have a responsibility as well, in our Committees, in our various ways, to do so too, and to make sure that we do not lose these things.

So, thank you very much indeed, and I very much hope that people will accept and support the motion that is on the order paper, which I moved earlier on.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Darren. Is the motion agreed? Agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly recognises the vital importance to all BIPA jurisdictions of effective measures taken by governments to ensure their security and defence; appreciates that global trends and events pose significant threats to that continued security; welcomes the agreements concluded between the UK and Ireland in March 2025 and the UK and the European Union in May 2025 which provide for practical cooperation on matters of security, defence, intelligence sharing and cyber security; and recommends that the British and Irish Governments continue to work closely together and with European partners to enhance security measures, in particular in the fields of critical marine infrastructure, energy security, cyber security and irregular migration.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I want to thank all the people who contributed, and those people at Committee who did a lot of good work on an important report. Our clerks will arrange for the text of this resolution to be sent to the British and Irish Governments. We will also follow up on Lord Murphy's suggestion in relation to sending it to individual Ministers and also to the British-Irish Council.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I want to thank our guest speaker. That was a really informative speech that Jānis was good enough to give to us, and I think we have all got a very good perspective of the position of the Baltic area. I want to thank Members for their stimulating contributions to the plenary session this afternoon. I can now tell you that we are concluding our programme of business for today, but there will be a reception in La Terrazza, which is the same place that we all met last night, and our conference dinner will be held in the Mulberry restaurant. So, we will meet in La Terrazza at 7 pm and dinner will be at 8 pm in the Mulberry restaurant, which I believe is where we were last night as well. That is it. Order, order.

Sitting suspended at 5.09 pm.

Tuesday 14 October 2025

The Assembly met at 9.41 am.

ANNUAL REPORT

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to you all as we begin our second day of deliberation. I look forward to the remainder of our Assembly and further interesting engagement. This morning, we will deal with some Assembly business. We will consider the annual report. We also will hear updates from the Steering Committee and Committees A, B, C and D. Our session today will conclude with a debate on a motion on the proposed joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles.

The Steering Committee has agreed the draft annual report of the Assembly for 2024, copies of which are available in the plenary room and which will be circulated electronically to all Members.

I ask that the plenary session take note of the 29th annual report, which is for 2024. Is that agreed?

Report agreed.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

That report will be sent to all legislatures. As I mentioned yesterday, we hope to have the opportunity to engage with the legislatures predominantly through relevant Committees of each legislature.

At this point, I would like to update Assembly members on the staffing changes in our secretariat since the last time we met. I would like to offer our sincere thanks and appreciation to Regina Boyle, our former Irish clerk, who has moved to a new position in the Oireachtas; to Emma McCarron, Stephanie Bollard and Darren Kelly, who have moved on from clerking Committees A, C and D respectively; and to Tim West, our British media adviser. Today is the last day of service to the Assembly for George James, British clerk to Committee C, who has given sterling service to that committee over the past four years. We thank you sincerely, George.

I know the Assembly will wish to welcome the staff who have joined us since the last plenary. We have a new Irish Clerk in Una Langan, and we welcome Barry Tumelty to Committee A, Emer Hannon to Committee B, Kay Gammie to Committee C and Sam Keenan to Committee D, and Oliver Florence as our new British media adviser. Gill and I as Co-Chairs greatly appreciate the continued support of the secretariat for the Assembly's work on an ongoing basis.

COMMITTEE REPORTS ETC.

STEERING COMMITTEE

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

The Steering Committee, at its meeting in July, considered the Assembly's strategic direction. This discussion was framed around the UK-Ireland 2030 joint statement announced by the Prime Minister and Taoiseach in March 2025 and Committee remits were revised to align with the four strands outlined in the statement.

You will have heard yesterday from all our speakers how the Governments appreciate the decision to align Assembly Committee work with these four strands. The Steering Committee has taken on an overall co-ordinating role to ensure that committee work does not overlap unduly. This marks a new chapter for the Assembly and its Committees, and the renewed focus will build on recent significant developments and will contribute to strengthening British-Irish relations.

9.45 am

The other update we have is to inform you that work has been ongoing on the redevelopment of the Assembly's website, a project jointly funded by the UK Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The site will be launched later this month and will be a superb asset as we look to increase awareness of the work of the Assembly.

COMMITTEE A (SOVEREIGN MATTERS)

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will now hear updates from the Chair of Committee A, Senator Niall Blaney.

Senator Niall Blaney:

Good morning, Co-Chairs. We had a very good discussion in Committee A last evening. We talked about many possible issues and eventually came down on the side of defence, with a particular emphasis on examining the security of undersea cabling for broadband and gas interconnectors. We are conscious of work that has previously been done on that, so we agreed to consult with clerks from other committees on that basis and move forward from there.

COMMITTEE B UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Niall. We will now hear an update from Committee B.

Paula Butterly TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and good morning. Previously, Committee B dealt with European Affairs, but it now has a new remit: climate, energy, science and technology. The issues under that remit are energy security, transition to net zero, decarbonisation, offshore wind development, interconnection and grid development, maritime planning, science, technology, and innovation and skills. As you can see, it is quite a broad remit.

After discussion, we agreed that we would focus initially on skills and maritime planning, because we believe that they are the foundation stones of all the other issues. We also recognised the fact that you cannot talk about skills in the future without addressing some issues around artificial intelligence. At this stage, we are conscious of the fact that that might overlap with another Committee's work, so the clerks are going to have a discussion and see whether there is some way in which we can integrate our work on that without overlapping.

COMMITTEE C UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Paula. We will now hear an update from Committee C.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you. I would like to echo the Co-Chair's thanks to George James, who has served on Committee C for the past five years, and I welcome Kay Gammie as the new British clerk. As I am a new Chair and new Member of BIPA, I also give huge thanks to Niamh, who got me up to speed pretty quickly in the past couple of weeks. Also, I thank the Co-Chairs for giving me this opportunity to serve as a Committee Chair. I am delighted to be here. I have enjoyed the past couple of days and am excited to get into the work.

In 2022, there was an agreement that Committee C would commence an inquiry into Government energy strategy and consumer energy policy, and, over the course of 2023, there were 10 virtual and in-person meetings. That report was presented to the 66th BIPA plenary in Wicklow in April 2024.

There was a recommendation from the previous iteration of the Committee around an inquiry into childcare, but, as discussed at the Steering Committee, that issue no longer sits within our remit, so I have passed that on to Committee D.

In our discussions yesterday, artificial intelligence emerged as the strong contender for a first line of inquiry, under a number of different headings. Having spoken to the clerks, I believe that the best specific area within that would be the gap between larger companies and small and medium-sized enterprises in relation to AI. As Paula Butterly has explained, the two Committee clerk groups will discuss that, but I suggest that Committee C does an ambitious one-year inquiry that I think could serve as something that could potentially be picked up by Committee B afterwards. Subsequent to that, we would like to move on to other issues that emerged in the discussion yesterday, including housing.

We will also be involved in ongoing updates on the Windsor framework, which also sits within our remit now. That is everything from us.

COMMITTEE D UPDATE

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Sinéad. We will now hear an update from the Chair of Committee D, Lord Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you. Before the change in the terms of reference, Committee D was busy with a project that we got only halfway through, which concerned the tensions between tourism and the ability of local communities to access housing. As we had taken evidence, we have, happily, reached agreement with Committee C that, although housing is now within its terms of reference, we should continue with that project. We will finish off taking evidence, probably in Wales and south-west England, with the aim of delivering our report by the time of the next plenary, in April or whenever next year.

We then spent an interesting period of time discussing what we should do next. I have to say, it was a real seminar on various aspects of policy—we have a great Committee now. In the end, we decided to focus on the role of the arts, defined in the wider sense, which includes local community access to the arts—that is, not just art galleries but access to art and all the other things around that. It is a pretty wide-ranging remit. Following that, we will do something on youth—again, that is a very wide remit indeed, but it is within our terms of reference, and we will see how we go.

Those of you who have followed the newspapers over the summer will have seen that the tensions between tourism and housing need have exploded into quite a lot of active demonstrations in places such as Barcelona, Majorca and Venice, which have experienced those tensions for a long time. This is not a new issue for our jurisdictions, but it is certainly one that is an on-going issue in many European countries.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Lord Dubs. Does anyone have any questions for the Committee Chairs?

As there are no questions, we will have a short suspension so you can get a cup of tea and something to eat. We expect you to be back before 10.30.

The sitting was suspended at 9.50 am.

PROPOSED JOINT FRAMEWORK ON THE LEGACY OF THE TROUBLES

10.33 am

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Colleagues, we are now in public session. Please take your seats.

I remind colleagues who might not have checked out of the hotel yet of the need to do so by 11 am. Also, Una Langan has reminded me that people flying back to Ireland need to check in in advance of going to the airport. That is just a reminder, in case you have not checked in yet.

We will commence with a debate on a motion on the proposed joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles, as approved by the Steering Committee. The text of the motion is in the order of business, and it reads:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly notes the publication on 19 September 2025 of the joint framework agreed between the UK Government and the Government of Ireland on the legacy of the Troubles.

I call Lord Dubs to move the motion.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I shall be very brief, but this has been one of the most difficult issues affecting both Governments and the people of Ireland, North and South.

As you have said, Co-Chair, a joint framework was published in September. I do not want to make this party political, but the previous Government managed to put forward proposals that united the whole of Northern Ireland in opposition to them. It took some doing to get everybody in Northern Ireland on the same side against the proposals.

I know that Hilary Benn and his opposite numbers in Dublin have been working very hard to produce the joint framework. Hilary Benn has told us on several occasions what he has been doing, and it has been difficult. Surely the aim must be to ensure that both Governments are happy, to get the people of Northern Ireland broadly to accept the proposals, and to allow the victims to begin to feel that some little modicum of justice is being applied to the difficulties that they have gone through. Those are quite difficult aims, and I hope that the joint framework goes some way towards achieving them.

I understand that, today at Westminster, the British Government will be publishing its legislation to give effect to the proposals in the September document. We will have to see, when we look at it, to what extent it does so. “The Legacy of the Troubles” is a pretty complicated document; those of you who have had a chance to look at it will see that it is very complicated, and one has to read it several times to begin to get the gist of it.

Among other things, there will be a reformed legacy commission, and, above all, legislation will be necessary in, I think, both jurisdictions—it will certainly be necessary at Westminster, which is why it is being published today. We will have to see how this works out, but I hope that, after many, many years of difficulty, we are going some way towards resolving what has been a very painful part of history for many people. Let us hope that it works.

I beg to move:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly notes the publication on 19 September 2025 of the joint framework agreed between the UK Government and the Government of Ireland on the legacy of the Troubles.

Senator Conor Murphy:

Go raibh maith agat. I share Lord Dubs's view that we sincerely hope that this is something that can bring a degree of closure to legacy issues that still impact, almost daily, on the operation of Stormont and the relationship between the parties. They continue to bedevil those things, but at the core of this are the families and people who have lost loved ones, and they want answers and some semblance of justice and closure. We have not managed to deliver that as yet, even though we are so many years on from the Good Friday Agreement itself.

We did have an agreement in 2014 that involved both Governments and all the parties, but the British Government, for its own reasons, took a unilateral approach and embarked on another odyssey to try to satisfy veterans' issues and things like that. Because of the position that that left us in, people are now trying to pursue things through coroners' courts and legal systems, only to face blockages with regard to national security interests and other matters and decisions being appealed by the Government itself.

Therefore, the process over the past nine years has been very unsatisfactory—and indeed unnecessary. Some of this is contained in the paper, but there were elements of a broad agreement that had broad buy-in across the board. You will never satisfy everybody with any of these arrangements, but you have to do your best for as many people as possible. There were broad agreements, and we could have been much further down the road in providing a degree of closure and some sense of justice for people who have lost loved ones.

Nonetheless, I have been told—and, obviously, Lord Dubs has heard this, too—that legislation might be published at Westminster today. That will be the critical test, certainly for victims' groups and the families. We should bear in mind the experience of the Patten report into policing—it took three goes at legislation before it was got right. The initial legislation did not reflect at all the content of that report and its scope in terms of change, and we had to go back three times to get the legislation to a place where we could get sufficient buy-in and move forward with the changes that were necessary for policing.

I hope that we do not have that experience now. We have a report that has been given some sense of a fair wind in terms of people being prepared to study it, but I think that the critical test for most people will be what the legislation looks like. Will it reflect the ambition that the two Governments have stressed that they have in relation to this report? That will be the test going forward.

I hope that that legislation will be published in full today, and I know that legislation has to be taken forward in the Oireachtas, too, but I hope that it will reflect some sense of what people want—mechanisms that bring a degree of closure to these matters. I hope that victims' groups and the families can get some satisfaction from this, too, because, ultimately, they will be the arbiters. A lot of these people have been pursuing these issues for more than 50 years now, in some cases, and they have been passed on from parents, to children, to grandchildren. We have to get to a space where we can assist with bringing these matters to a close.

I have two, or maybe even three, concerns about the Government's approach. Previously, when the two Governments have collaborated, they have worked with all the parties; in this case, when they collaborated, they did not do so, and, for their own reasons, presented their own findings. I worry about that, because I do not think that it is the way in which the Good Friday Agreement, and all the agreements and developments that came from it, were done. Generally, an attempt was made to bring all parties around the table, and I think that things are stronger if all parties are involved.

Secondly, I am not sure how it intends to do this, but the Government are continuing to try to satisfy some pushback with regard to their own defence forces and veterans. I do not think that you can have two systems—one for people in the British Army and one for everybody else. I am not sure how the Government are going to square that circle, and it worries me that, by attempting to do that, they will dilute what needs to be done here.

Lastly, we know the position of the Conservatives and Reform on the European Convention on Human Rights, which is completely reckless, given that the convention underpins the Good Friday Agreement. The Labour Government are seeking some modifications to the convention, but I think that, in doing so, they are embarking down a dangerous road. If Labour is doing that for electoral reasons to satisfy a certain constituency or to head off arguments that the Conservatives and Reform might make in the run-up to an election, it runs the risk of losing control and ending up in a place that it did not intend to end up in at the start.

The Labour Government need to remember—as, I know, a lot of people in Labour do—the importance and success of the Good Friday Agreement. For the past two days, we have been talking about the success of our peace process and our agreements in comparison with what has happened in other troubled areas in the world and about the lessons that we can bring to other people in order to assist them.

We need to ensure that those issues are not forgotten. The Labour Government should proceed very cautiously with what it intends to do regarding the ECHR, because it should bear in mind that the convention fundamentally underpins the Good Friday Agreement and all the other agreements that flow from it.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

I welcome the motion and thank Lord Dubs for moving it. I also welcome the framework. Conor Murphy has covered a lot of the issues, but I will add to his comments.

Both Governments have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that the framework is implemented and that we can move forward. We have spoken about the ECHR. The ambition is that any future work will be compliant with the ECHR, but I would say that we are already not compliant, and can never be fully compliant, with the ECHR, because it requires prompt and effective inquests and independent investigations into deaths that might have involved state-related failures. However, unfortunately, as Conor Murphy outlined, issues with access to justice and the search for justice have been handed on from generation to generation within families, who have never had a prompt response to their concerns and their grief, so it is really important that there is effective and quick implementation.

A lot of the features that we want to see relate to the historical investigations unit. In that regard, it is important to say that, when crimes are committed—whether by those in uniform or not—we all seek the same justice. We can do that alongside celebrating the service that is provided by people in the military. It is important to say that holding people to account for criminal activity does not take away from the appreciation of people in the UK and Ireland for our defence forces.

For compliance with the ECHR, there must be strong, robust and independent public inquiries, but, as I said, such inquiries cannot be prompt because, in many cases, so much time has elapsed.

Having an independent international truth commission to examine themes and patterns relating to conflict-related violations is so important to allow all of us, as a society, to move on and build on the good work of the Good Friday Agreement and everything that has been done since then.

10.45 am

Frank Feighan TD:

I thank Alf Dubs for moving the motion. The framework is a clear demonstration of the UK-Ireland reset. I thank Hilary Benn, Simon Harris and their officials for the work that they have done. The framework is not perfect, but we are moving in the right direction.

A lot of work has gone on behind the scenes. As someone said, if we were trying to pass the Good Friday Agreement today, it would not get passed, given the issues with social media. I suspect that social media could have undermined a lot of the work that was done.

I very much welcome the framework and look forward to the progression of legislation through the Houses.

The Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard:

As one of the few unionist voices from Northern Ireland here, I probably take a different perspective from that taken by some of the previous speakers. While I have an audience from the Republic of Ireland, I think that it is important that I highlight some of the failures in the proposals and plans.

First, the Irish have never stood up for what they should be accountable for. For example, the Omagh bomb victims are calling for a parallel inquiry in the Republic of Ireland, because that is where the bomb was manufactured and transported from and where those who left it in Omagh went back to. There has been a huge failure by the Irish in relation to their responsibilities.

We can always be sure of one thing when we are dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland: until there is some fairness and equality in these processes, there will never be agreement. I see former ministers here, and they will know quite well that that is extremely difficult.

Ninety per cent of the killings during the Troubles were carried out by terrorists, but there is not that number of investigations or processes to bring those people to account. For example, some victims of and families whose loved ones were murdered by the

Enniskillen bomb are quite close to me, and they are saying, “Where is my public inquiry? Where is the fairness and support for my family?” There is none for them, and this process will not bring it about. That is the blunt reality.

We had an inquiry into Bloody Sunday, which was fair, but where is the fairness for those affected by the Enniskillen bomb, the people who were murdered in Teebane and those affected by the Narrow Water killings? Where is the fairness and equality? There is not any. Until there is, we will not see agreement and we will never get a resolution. Yes, we will have a non-political process now—another process of sorts—but it will not bring a resolution.

If there are going to be public inquiries, given that 90 per cent of the killings were carried out by terrorists, why will there be no public inquiry into the directing of terrorism? That would bring to light some of the key elements and might bring overall closure to a lot of individuals who have suffered at the hands of terrorists. We have people who continue to suffer greatly from the killings by terrorists.

In the area where I come from, near the border, many of the killings were carried out by people from the Irish Republic, who went back there once they had carried out their dastardly deeds. I served in the security forces for 18 years, so I know what some of those people did and I know the names of some of them and where they live, but we cannot do anything about it. While I have an audience that is largely from the Irish Republic, I note that there is a responsibility on you folk, but that has not come forward through this framework or through any processes that we have had in the past.

A perfect example relates to the Kingsmill killings. Most of the documents that we got from the Republic of Ireland were just newspaper cuttings, which were all on the public record. We did not get the intelligence information and the security forces information that people were longing for to bring them justice.

Senator Joe O’Reilly:

I welcome Lord Dubs’s report. Indeed, my colleague Frank Feighan put it well when he said that it represents “a clear demonstration of the UK-Ireland reset”.

(Due to a technical fault, four minutes of this contribution was not recorded.)

Rights are absolute rights; they are not negotiable by any side. I just want to make that point.

The framework is a step forward. Along the way, as it and the legislation evolve and develop, all considerations will be brought in. It is a blueprint that, ultimately, can result in healing, and I think that it can be successful in that. The two Governments deserve great credit for their work. It is quite a breakthrough to reach, with the potential for a legislative phase, which I hope will go well.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Joe.

The Lord Murphy:

I welcome this document, which has been produced between the two Governments. Remember that it is precisely this: a joint statement by both Governments on the issue

of legacy; it is not from one side or the other. The British Government have to be the bigger partner because of the legislation that they have to introduce, which is being introduced in the House of Commons today, ready for its processes in both Houses. We must remember that, if we look at the very end of what is a very complicated document—it will need to be re-read more than once—we see that the Irish Government are going to give £25 million over a number of years towards this process in Northern Ireland. However, I agree with Tom Elliott that the Irish Government have a significant part to play in this development, and I am sure that they want to play that part.

We should have dealt with this matter when we made the Good Friday Agreement. There is a paragraph or two on victims in the agreement. I suppose that we could not do everything at the time. However, over the past 27 years, legacy has become a very sensitive, difficult and controversial issue. There have been several attempts to deal with it, including the Eames-Bradley attempt many years ago, which some of you will remember. More recently, as Conor Murphy mentioned, the Stormont House Agreement tried to deal with it, and it contains some very sensible ideas. I think that the previous Government got it wrong—not because of their sincerity, which I did not doubt for one second—but because they could not achieve consensus. Although it is hugely problematic to achieve that consensus, the process will not work unless you do. Things do not work in Northern Ireland unless you get an agreement, and, sometimes, it can take an awful long time to achieve that.

I agree with the points that have been made about the European Convention on Human Rights. For example, in *The Times* today, there is an article that refers to the fact that there are now 12 major countries in the Council of Europe that want to start to think about the convention. That does not, in any way, mean abandoning its main principles; it means thinking about how it relates to 2025. After all, the convention was written before I was born, at the time when the Second World War was ending. Clearly, after 80 years, we need to look at whether it is up to date. I completely agree that we should not leave the Council of Europe or abandon the main principles of the ECHR.

However, it is also important to understand, as Conor Murphy, Joe O'Reilly and others have referred to, that the Good Friday Agreement itself is heavily dependent on the ECHR. For two years, I chaired the talks on human rights and equality for the Good Friday Agreement, and embedded right through the agreement is a reliance on the ECHR. Therefore, it would be virtually impossible to leave the Council of Europe and the ECHR without having enormous effects on the Good Friday Agreement. In fact, even Farage has said that, were his party in Government, it would basically have another talks process to work out what to do with the Good Friday Agreement. Of course, that would be easier said than done. At the end of all this, the process is about victims, how it affects victims and what victims feel about it.

There is a view, which I partly share, that there will come a time when we have to draw a line under it completely and say that we will just forget about everything that happened before 1998. Of course, that is easier said than done if you are a victim or if a member of a victim's family. Therefore, this is a good way to try to address the matter.

The legislation will be heavily scrutinised in both Houses, but it must go beyond that. However, I agree with Senator Conor Murphy—I always agree with a Murphy—that all the parties in Northern Ireland and the two Governments must work this out together. The great failure of the last act was not just that it did not comply with the ECHR but

that it did not achieve consensus. People might disagree with it for different reasons, but, in a sense, their disagreement with it made it become almost unworkable. I was talking to Declan Morgan about it some weeks ago. As you know, he is the former Lord Chief Justice, and he chairs the commission at the moment. Quite a large number of cases have already started, and people, rightly, are taking advantage of the set-up. However, the new regime is much better. It will require a lot of thought, but, above all else, it will require a lot of agreement.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Paul.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Legacy issues from Northern Ireland are always going to be problematic—in fact, legacy issues on the island of Ireland are always going to be problematic. I am speaking as a member of the Oireachtas but also as somebody who wore a uniform. I wore a uniform for the Irish Defence Forces and I wore a uniform for the Royal Irish Rangers. I want to try to put something into perspective when we talk about legacy issues.

Soldiers who served in a conflict area, irrespective of where they served, were there under orders—they did not ask to be there—and, in that situation, they would sometimes find themselves in fairly precarious positions. I remember raw fear as a young man in a situation in the Republic of Ireland. It was an issue to do with the Northern Troubles. I remember that fear. I was the sergeant in charge of the section, and I remember every man in that section being absolutely petrified. The only thing that stopped us doing anything was discipline.

Moral injury affects three generations—that we are told—so the crimes that I commit, whether in uniform or not in uniform, come back to haunt me at a later stage. Therefore, we are looking at two sets of victims. We are looking at the relatives of those who were murdered, and we are looking at the damage done to the families of those who carried out the murders. What I am about to say is probably controversial, but the damage is done regardless of whether someone was wearing a uniform when they murdered somebody—wrongly murdered them; I am being very careful in saying “murdered”, because there were people who wore uniforms who murdered people.

I addressed a gathering of the Ulster Defence Regiment Association in Coleraine some years ago, and the title of my speech was “Collusion”, because, whether we like it or not, collusion took place. Collusion takes place in all dirty wars. The point that I made to the UDR Association that night was that it should be proud of the work that it did to secure vital installations—vital infrastructure—in its country and to disrupt terrorism, but there were bad apples in that barrel. I said that it needed to admit that and to move on from it; I believe that it needs to do that.

However, should we demonise somebody in uniform for carrying out exactly the same thing as somebody who carried it out based on ideology? Young men and women joined the various terrorist groups that existed, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association, the Irish Republican Army and the Provisional IRA, and they murdered people. Do we say that, because someone who carried out a murder belonged to one group—the Provisional IRA, say—that is okay, and they can walk out of prison and start their life again?

Senator Conor Murphy made the point that we cannot have different resolutions for different people. Of course, he—and most people—would agree with me that those who were released following the Good Friday Agreement were not really set free, because they cannot travel to certain parts of the world, which is something that hangs over them all the time, and they are subject to certain levies on their car insurance and so on. There are all sorts of things that affect people who were jailed for terrorist activities during that time.

I am

However, is it right to now go looking for the men who wore uniforms and start charging them with crimes? Is that right? Should they not be given the same release from the horrible deeds that took place? I have huge difficulty with the idea of bringing a man in his 70s before the courts, causing him to be wracked with fear, on account of something that he did when he was 18 or 19 years of age. There is certainly evidence that, in some cases, people used human beings for target practice—I am 100 per cent convinced that that happened—but there is also evidence to show that innocent people were taken from their homes by terrorists, brought into alleyways and shot, for whatever reason; in some cases, the only reason that was required was the suspicion that someone was a tout. That was all that was required—just a suspicion, and it was good enough to shoot you.

I think that, as we move forward in legacy situations, we must be honest with one another, understand the times that we lived in, and have huge respect for the families who suffered the loss of a loved one. However, we must also consider the families who suffered from moral injury. The evidence of moral injury is that the perpetrator of the act who is now living with moral injury resolves the difficulty within his psychology by taking drugs or alcohol, which leads to violence in the home, and that family suffers in exactly the same way as those who lost a loved one.

I know that the Sinn Féin party has always believed that a truth commission should be set up. I actually believe that such a commission may be of some benefit, as it would give people a place where they could go and tell their story. There are people who are wracked with guilt over the things that happened during that period.

I just want everybody to be treated on an equal plane. I do not want to see one particular group demonised because they wore a uniform and another group allowed to take the high moral ground while occupying what is a very low moral position.

I think that, as the legislation passes through the Houses of Parliament in the United Kingdom and comes to Ireland, we have to give a bit of thought to the young men who were not there because they wanted to be but because they had to be—because they were under orders. Some of them were thugs—there is no getting away from that—but the number of thugs was minuscule in terms of the overall number of people who served, both north and south of the border.

I agree with Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard that people from the Republic of Ireland travelled freely to the North of Ireland, carried out horrendous acts and came back down to the South, where they were protected. Similarly, people in the North carried out horrendous acts and were protected. Soldiers from the UK—some of them—carried out horrendous attacks, but there is no point in going after them now; they are all men in

their 70s who have lived with whatever guilt they have carried with them for the rest of their lives.

I ask that, as we go forward, we treat everyone the same and do not single out any specific group.

The Co-Chairperson (Mr Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Gerard. I call Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

There is probably a fair bit of agreement here. I do not think that anyone is going to say that our starting point has to be anything other than looking after those people and families who have not got justice. We could have a conversation about the causes of the conflict, but I do not imagine that there would be a huge level of agreement—we will all have our own ideas in relation to history and what happened.

We will see what the legislation holds, although, as Conor Murphy said, we obviously have particular worries about where it is going. I have no problem with looking at the ECHR from the point of view of streamlining or whatever else, but we cannot be looking at it in terms of a diminution of rights. The fact is that we are dealing with families who the state has taken on and who have not been able to get vindication or the truth about what happened to members of their family.

I accept what Tom Elliott says about his personal history, his community and the pain that has been caused, largely, in those cases, by republicans. However, I would say that, when they were directly involved, British state forces have always been protected by the British state. Beyond that, if we are to talk about collusion, we should talk about exactly what it is. With regard to the murders of Pat Finucane and Sean Brown or the Sean Graham's shooting, we are talking about the state protecting those responsible for the assassination and execution of people who it would determine to be its citizenry, and, in some cases, directing those acts.

There is an absolute necessity for us to facilitate families as much as possible, but let us be absolutely clear about what went on. The British state was involved in a dirty war. It does not want to deal with that. I can understand why, but we have to approach this issue from the point of view of looking after those families who have been fought tooth and nail. Many republicans went to jail. The law was turned on its head and used as a weapon against republicans—tens of thousands went to jail and, obviously, at certain times, the British state took even more ruthless action. That is the reality.

We all want to move on to something better, and I think that that is absolutely necessary. I will say two things. I have no difficulty with what Tom Elliott says, as I believe that there needs to be reciprocation from the southern state in relation to information. That is only correct.

In addition—I cannot believe that I am going to agree with Gerry Craughwell—there are outstanding issues relating to former political prisoners. I was looking at equality legislation that has been passed in the South from the point of view of dealing with those issues that still impact on people, whether those impacts involve insurance, adoption, wider travel or whatever.

Paul Murphy put it well: we could have dealt with an awful lot of this at an earlier stage, while accepting that there would be difficulties at certain points. However, we are where we are, and this is not the perfect spot—it is like the guy in Kerry: “I wouldn’t start from here if I was you.”

We will see what the legislation is, but first and foremost has to be the intention that we provide as much truth and justice as possible for those families and that we at least meet them part of the way, as they have been utterly failed.

I apologise, as I have to go and do a radio interview now—it does not relate to BIPA, I might add.

The Baroness O’Grady of Upper Holloway:

I will speak briefly. I strongly welcome the report from Lord Dubs and the progress that has been made in bringing legislation to Westminster. I welcomed Paul Murphy’s emphasis on the fact that the victims must be at the heart of this—the victims, from whatever quarter, deserve something.

In my former life at the Trades Union Congress, I was involved in a number of truth and justice campaigns, from Orgreave to Hillsborough. I know that this is a different context, but I hope that I am right in thinking that I appreciate the impact of these situations, particularly on working-class communities that do not have the same resources, access, networks and so on as other communities to get the truth and justice that people desperately want. People fight for decades to get that truth and justice, and it has an impact not only on that generation but on subsequent generations when that truth and justice is denied. That is why I appreciate the principle of placing victims at the heart of the approach.

One of the key strands of the Hillsborough campaign was the duty of candour that was placed on the state. There was a recognition that the state can act against working-class communities who are trying to get at the truth—never mind the justice aspect; people desperately want to understand the truth of what happened. I think that that notion of a duty of candour on the state is really important. From a Westminster perspective, as we look at the detail of the legislation, I hope that that spirit and that substance will be contained in the detail.

Dame Karen Bradley MP:

I thank Alf Dubs for putting forward the motion. I hesitated to contribute to this debate, because I lived through a lot of the discussion around this issue when I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and I am aware of the sensitivities around it and how difficult it is to address it.

Some important points have been made, and I would make the point that we are here because we believe in dialogue and engagement. Every politician in this room is here because we believe that words are more powerful than deeds. We believe in the power of arguing with one another and not turning to violence. That is an incredible thing. The word “Parliament” comes from the Norman French word “parler”, meaning “to speak”. We are here because we do not believe in violence. However, too much of the history of Northern Ireland has involved people who did not take that view and did not believe that words could be more powerful than deeds.

I always cite the Good Friday Agreement as being one of the greatest achievements of politics, because it brought together people of very different views and created power sharing—an absolutely unique concept in the world. If we look at what is happening in the Middle East at the moment, the idea that there could be power sharing there is beyond anyone’s sensibilities. We cannot imagine that it could happen there, but, because we put aside weapons and talked, we have done it in Northern Ireland, and it has worked for 27 years—although not always successfully, and there has not always been agreement.

We have to see what the legislation actually says. I have concerns, because victims must be at the centre of this. As Lord Murphy and others have said, victims are critically important. The problem with the previous proposals that were put forward by my party—which I did not vote for—was that they did not have the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

I also think that this issue should be being handled at Stormont, rather than by the two Governments. There are steps that the two Governments need to take involving changes in legislation. The Irish Government changed its legislative response to the Stormont House Agreement, but a problem has arisen because of the disconnect between Westminster and Stormont and the lack of understanding at Westminster.

When I was first appointed, colleagues said to me that, 20 or 30 years ago, all members of Parliament would visit Northern Ireland—it was almost compulsory for them to do so—because their constituents were serving there, and, because of that, MPs understood what was happening there and the sensitivities around the issues. However, that stopped in 1998, and ever since there has been more and more of a disconnect between Westminster and Northern Ireland. I am afraid that the view at Westminster is that we all represent our constituents and, when those constituents are the veterans, not the victims, they are the ones MPs prioritise. Rightly or wrongly, that is the way in which our democratic system works: MPs hear from their constituents who served, not the victims.

I used to say to MPs, “It happened in Derry, but you might feel differently if it had happened in Derby.” Frances O’Grady has referred to the Hillsborough inquiry. I was at the Home Office when Theresa May did the work to start off that inquiry, which was incredibly important. Those campaigners had worked for years to get to the truth. I said, “Why shouldn’t we have the same level of truth in Northern Ireland? Why do we feel it’s different because it happened not in mainland Great Britain but in Northern Ireland, a place that’s become more and more distant to politicians in Westminster?”

11.15 am

I will make another point. Two weeks ago, there was an attack on a synagogue in Manchester, and I know that everyone in this room will absolutely condemn that attack. Only one person was responsible for it—the terrorist—but one of the two victims was killed by a stray bullet. They were killed not by the terrorist but by a police officer, but the police officers are all being treated as witnesses, not as criminals. The reality of the situation that we have always been in is that, as Senator Craughwell said, there will be moments when somebody in uniform does something for absolutely the right reasons, with the right intent—trying to stop people being hurt—but someone gets hurt as a consequence. I am sure that that officer will be going through utter hell. They were doing the right thing, but they ended up taking a life.

I hope that what has been agreed can take us forward, because we have spent too long trying to get there. I urge the parties at Stormont to please do their bit and work on this. Justice and home affairs are devolved matters, and I want them to be dealt with at Stormont, with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. I want the victims to get what they desperately need, which is some form of closure. That will be very difficult, and closure might not be possible for some families, but I really hope that we can start to move forward, because this incredibly difficult and sensitive issue needs to be dealt with in a sensitive way.

Senator Niall Blaney:

A couple of years back, I never thought that we would get to this point, with the two Governments working together on issues relating to matters east, west, north and south and, moreover, those relating to legacy. There have been so many efforts over the years to try to deal with legacy. To say that the issue is complex would be the understatement of the day. If it was not so complex, it would have been dealt with long before now.

We all wear our political hats from time to time, but I agree with other speakers that the approach must be victim centred. I heard what Tom Elliott said about having simultaneous investigations on both sides of the border, but I do not know how such investigations would work and come together. From talking to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in the South, I know that there is an open door in relation to collaboration with investigations. In previous such investigations, justices from the North have come south to interview personnel in the gardaí and so on, which has worked very well in the past, so that might be a better approach in relation to the Omagh bombing. As everyone else has said, the devil will be in the detail.

As politicians, we should note that time is ticking, because the generations of people in police forces in the different jurisdictions are moving on. If we do not deal with the issues now, lots of victims will not get to have their cases heard and have some outcome through this process. Time is of the essence, so it is important that we move forward in consultation with all involved.

The Lord Bew:

I merely want to add a footnote to this important discussion. In the United Kingdom Parliament, running alongside the previous legislation from the Conservative Government and, as Lord Murphy said, the new legislation that we will now have, there has been discussion about having a new public history or official history project. That was not in the previous legislation, so it will not be affected by the new legislation, but the Government has decided to continue with such a project. I will not be working on it, but, as one of the two historical advisers to the Bloody Sunday tribunal, I am convinced of the value of the state making a decision to open up documents beyond the usual in order to throw light on a particular event. I do not think that there is any doubt that, in the lead-up to the Bloody Sunday tribunal, the state's decision to do that helped to clarify what happened on that tragic day—and there have been many days like Bloody Sunday with different actors.

I think that, in principle, the thinking of the previous Conservative Government and the current Labour Government that some sort of official history project or public history project—different names have been used at different times—should go ahead along the

lines of the sort of work that occurred in the lead-in to the Bloody Sunday tribunal was good, and I welcome the decision in principle in that respect.

That is my footnote. It is not covered in the new legislation, but it is the position of the current UK Government that such a project should go ahead.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson:

I very much welcome this motion. As Lord Dubs has said, it involves a painful part of our history, which we have to deal with whether we like it or not.

I very much look forward to the publication of the legislation and to reading it carefully to see what angles it covers—hopefully, it will cover every angle in its entirety.

As Lord Elliott said, there have been horrific atrocities carried out during the Troubles. However, there is no hierarchy of atrocity: an atrocity is an atrocity. One area that I would like dealt with is the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, in which 33 civilians were killed and more than 300 people injured. We all have areas that we want covered. I would also like the Belturbet bombing, in which two young people lost their lives, to be covered.

I very much welcome the motion and look forward to reading the legislation. Given the chance that we have, I hope that this legislation covers every angle possible.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Are there any other contributions? As there are not, I thank you all sincerely for the contributions on this extremely difficult subject. We sincerely hope that the legislation that will be published—perhaps today—will meet the needs of the victims and their families. All of this must be victim centred.

Before I call Lord Dubs to make concluding comments, I note that, in his introductory remarks, he talked about whether legislation is necessary in our Parliament. I will quote from a reply to a parliamentary question that I put to an Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade last week. He said:

“The Framework is underpinned by a commitment to reciprocal cooperation and places obligations on this Government. It commits the relevant Irish authorities to cooperating with the Legacy Commission. This includes an undertaking by the Government to enable cooperation by relevant authorities in this jurisdiction with the Legacy Commission once established, and to legislate, if that is required to make that possible. The detail and timeline for the enactment of any legislation will be dependent on consideration of the legislation to be brought forward by the UK Government to reform the Legacy Act ... A dedicated unit within An Garda Síochána will be established by the end of the year as a single point of contact for cross-border cooperation on Troubles-related cases and as a central point of contact and coordination for victims and families in relation to Troubles-related investigations undertaken by An Garda Síochána. Its full operation will also be dependent on the progress of the legislation reforming the Legacy Commission and that body becoming fully operational. The Government is committed to the establishment of the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval”.

I think that it is important to put that on the record.

I should also say that some of us in the Oireachtas tabled parliamentary questions in relation to co-operation with the Omagh bombing inquiry, and Minister O’Callaghan, as Minister for Justice, and his predecessor, Minister McEntee, gave firm commitments that relevant information would be passed on to the statutory inquiry. I think that a

memorandum of understanding is in place between the relevant authorities in relation to the transfer of such knowledge and access to papers. I happen to know some of the victims of that awful day in 1998, and their families, and we all want to see the truth established.

Like my constituency colleague, Diarmuid Wilson, I know where the bomb that killed two teenagers in Belturbet on 28 December 1972 came from—it came from across the border. We know the people who are alleged to have committed that crime.

Unfortunately, all of us know of atrocities that were inflicted on people of different communities. There is no justification for bombing, whether the bomb was brought from Northern Ireland into our state, or from our state into Northern Ireland, and there should be no hiding place for terrorists anywhere. That is the bottom line. That is what all of us, as democrats, should always say, loud and clear.

In our Parliament—in the Dáil and the Seanad, and in every committee—we have discussed ad infinitum the legacy issues and the needs of the victims and families, as well as the need to get our approach right and make sure that nobody is excluded from the proper process. We sincerely hope that what Hilary Benn brings forward today will meet the needs of the victims, who have to be at the centre of all parts of this process.

I call Lord Dubs to make some concluding comments.

The Lord Dubs:

It is very difficult to do justice to such a wide-ranging debate, with different views being expressed. However, without sounding too pompous about it, I believe that this has probably been as important a discussion as we have had in the history of BIPA. It is important because we still have to move forward—this is one of the un-dealt-with issues. We have simply got to move forward. I hope that the debate in the Oireachtas and Westminster—and, indeed, any debate in Stormont—will reflect the range of views that have been put forward. I am apprehensive, but I will welcome the chance to debate and to reflect the issues that have been raised today when we come to debate these issues in our Parliaments.

We have discussed such a wide range of issues. We have discussed everything, from what you said, Lord Elliott—yours is an important voice because you reflect a view that is significant—to your very important contribution, Senator Craughwell. I shall think about what you said and the way in which you said it for a long time. There were many other contributions, including those from my friend Lord Murphy and, indeed, the other Mr Murphy, Senator Conor Murphy. Those were very important contributions indeed. I hope that the debates in our Parliaments will reflect what has been said today and that they will be of as high a standard as our debates today.

I am aware of the enormous pain that still exists—pain that has been left across Northern Ireland, across Ireland and in the UK. That pain must somehow be dealt with. If we cannot bring closure, we are failing. We owe it to the people who have a sense of being victims—those who have suffered through the loss of their loved ones and those who are suffering now because of the consequences of what they did when they were young men. We owe it to them to try to achieve closure. As has been said today, one of the most important things is truth. The truth has to come out, and that will help in the process of achieving closure.

11.30 am

We have to achieve some form of consent. It may be difficult, given the range of views that we have heard today, but we have to strive to achieve it. After all, in the past, some sort of closure has been achieved in relation to some notorious cases, including Bloody Sunday and Ballymurphy, and progress has been made on the Finucane case. There is a possibility that we can achieve closure for the victims and the people who are suffering and have suffered. That is the important challenge to us all.

I feel privileged to have been able to listen to such a wide-ranging and important debate, and I hope that its tone augurs well for the way in which people will tackle the legislation that I think is being published at Westminster today, to be followed by legislation in Dublin. We owe it to people to do our best and to take on board from this meeting the arguments that we have heard and the important sense of what we are about, and to take those things into our respective Parliaments.

As I said, I feel privileged to have been able to hear this debate, and I am grateful to the Steering Committee for making it possible. I feel very humbled by what I have heard today.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Lord Dubs. Again, I offer my sincere thanks to everyone for their genuine and sincere contributions on this very difficult subject, on which we all hope to make progress.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly notes the publication on 19 September 2025 of the joint framework agreed between the UK Government and the Government of Ireland on the legacy of the Troubles.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Our clerks will arrange for the text of the resolution to be sent to the British and Irish Governments.

ADJOURNMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Our business is now concluded. On behalf of us all, I thank our speakers and our secretariat. I particularly acknowledge the valuable work that was done by Amanda Healy—I cannot see her, but she will be here somewhere—as well as by Veronica and Una, supported by the rest of the team from the British secretariat, and by the staff of Oatlands Park hotel and everyone else who has helped to make the 67th plenary session such a successful event. I also thank the Hansard people, who are recording this, for all their patience and hard work over the past few days.

I call Senator Gerard Craughwell.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you, joint Chairs. I propose an adjournment. In doing so, I thank my colleagues. This is the first time that I have attended a BIPA meeting. We came here as colleagues, and I hope that we leave as friends. We have had interesting debates and have been able to air views on issues regarding which it is difficult to confront each other. That is what being a Member of Parliament is about. As one of my colleagues said some time ago, we come here to do good; we do not come here to accuse anybody or make life difficult for people. We have dealt with some difficult things here. We have dealt with issues concerning the security of our states and legacy issues. I look forward to meeting again and thrashing out more things.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I now declare the 67th plenary session of the Assembly closed. We will next meet in plenary session in Ireland in the spring of 2026.

Adjourned at 11.35 am.