BRITISH IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (BIPA): 43RD PLENARY SESSION

Introduction

1. The 43rd Plenary Session of the BIPA took place at the Grand Hotel, Brighton, England from Sunday 23 October to Tuesday 25 October 2011. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Plenary by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Michael McMahon MSP and Mary Scanlon MSP. Apologies were received from Alison McInnes MSP. No Associate (Alternate) Members were available to attend the Plenary. Steven Bell from the UK and International Relations Office accompanied the delegation.

Themes

2. The agenda focussed on establishing work programmes for the four BIPA Committees for the years ahead and providing context by reporting back on previous Committee business. The Assembly also heard from a number of speakers on issues relating to the banking crisis, human rights, and the law and order situation in Northern Ireland.

Plenary Summary

3. Given the significance of the hotel venue of the 43rd plenary, the Assembly began with a minute's silence for all the victims of the Troubles.

4. Thereafter, Lord Dubs, Chair of Committee D (Environment and Social), began by providing a verbal report on the work of the Committee over the last couple of years; of government responses to them; the Committee’s current work and their suggestions for future work.

5. Regarding past work, Lord Dubs advised that the following reports have been published by Committee D in the last two years:

   - Climate Change and Renewable Energy (2009)
   - Returning the Unemployed to Work (2010)
   - The Irish Community in Britain: Follow-Up Report (2010).

6. Lord Dubs also informed delegates that the Committee, following a meeting earlier that morning, had agreed to carry out inquiries into the following areas over the next few years:
7. Meetings of Committee D are currently scheduled to take place in Dublin (January 2012) and Belfast (March 2012).

8. Mr Martin Howe QC, member of the independent Commission on a Bill of Rights (established by the UK Government in March 2011) addressed the Assembly on the Commission’s investigation into the creation of a UK Bill of Rights that (a) incorporates and builds on the UK’s obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (b) ensures that these rights continue to be enshrined in UK law, and (c) protects and extends individual liberties. Mr Howe also advised that the Commission will examine the operation and implementation of these obligations.

9. Mr Howe informed members that the Commission also provided interim advice to the Government, following the conference in Interlaken considering the future of the EC Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This interim advice was provided ahead of the UK’s Chairmanship of the Council of Europe. The Commission will, he advised, also consult with the public, judiciary and devolved administrations and legislatures, and aims to report no later than by the end of 2012. Mr Howe then fielded a number of questions from BIPA members on the work of the Commission.

10. An address followed from the UK Government Spokesman on Northern Ireland in the House of Lords, Lord David Shutt, on recent announcements by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, and of UK Government policy relating to Northern Ireland. Lord Shutt’s address was followed by a question and answer session and debate by Members of the Assembly.

11. The Chair of BIPA Committee B (European Matters), Robert Walker MP, provided Assembly Members with a summary of that Committee’s work over the past few years, including their recent draft report on ‘The Recession and EU Migrant Workers’. Mr Walker also announced that the Committee will undertake an inquiry into Human Rights legislation in a European context. As part of that inquiry the committee will consider, among other issues, (a) the operation of the Human Rights Act 1998 in the UK and the European Courts of Human Rights (b) the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Irish Human Rights Commission (c) the introduction of a ‘British Bill of Rights’; and (d) the implementation of human rights legislation across the jurisdictions of the British and Irish Isles.

12. Mr Walker advised that the Committee will be meeting in London and Dublin over the next few months to take forward this inquiry.
13. Consideration was given of Government responses to the motion adopted at the 42\textsuperscript{nd} plenary session in Cork, Ireland on the murder of PSNI officer Ronan Kerr.

14. There followed an address to the Assembly Members by Mrs Sally Scutt, Deputy Chief Executive of the British Bankers Association and Managing Director of the International Banking Federation. This related to the banking crisis and current economic situation facing the European Union.

15. Jack Wall TD, Chair of Committee C (Economic), updated Members of the Assembly of the Committee's work over the past few years. Mr Wall advised that the Committee will meet in Dublin in January of next year to discuss their future work programme.

16. The Chair of Committee A (Sovereign Matters), Frank Feighan TD, provided Members of the Assembly with an update on that Committee's recent work as well as an outline of possible future areas of inquiry. His session concluded with questions from the floor.

17. Mr David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice, the Department of Justice for Northern Ireland (DOJNI), then addressed Assembly Members on the work of his Department. This included the challenges the DOJNI and its agencies face in relation to the prison service, police service and judiciary in Northern Ireland. The Minister of Justice then fielded questions from Members.

18. The Plenary concluded with a general debate on the role of the Assembly and its functions in relation to Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement. There was a general recognition by Members that more should be done to report back to individual institutions the work of the BIPA committees.

\textbf{Further Information}

19. Deputy Presiding Officer, John Scott MSP, on behalf of the Scottish Parliament Members on the BIPA, conveyed to the British and Irish Co-Chairs that Scotland would be content to host the next UK plenary, scheduled to take place in autumn 2012. This offer was welcomed by the Co-Chairs who advised that a decision would be taken at the next meeting of the UK Board members of the Steering Committee, currently scheduled for January 2012.

20. Lord Cope of Berkeley announced that he is stepping down as British Co-Chair of the Assembly. His successor will be in post ahead of the next plenary, scheduled to take place in Dublin, Ireland from 13 May to 15 May 2012.