BRITISH IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (BIPA): 44th PLENARY SESSION

Introduction

1. The 44th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Association (BIPA) took place in the Seanad Chamber, Leinster House, Dublin from Monday 14th to Tuesday 15th May 2012. This was the first occasion on which Seanad Éireann, the upper house of the Irish Parliament, has been the venue for a Plenary of the Assembly. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Plenary by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Michael McMahon MSP, Mary Scanlon MSP and Alison McInnes MSP.

Themes

2. The Plenary focussed on the theme of “Making business easier between Britain and Ireland”. An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, addressed the plenary theme in his address to the Assembly. The plenary was also addressed by the Irish Minister for Health, James Reilly TD, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Leo Varadkar TD, and the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Brian Hayes TD. The Assembly also heard from other guest speakers from the agrifood, manufacturing and pharmaceutical sectors.

Plenary Summary

3. Given the significance of the Assembly being held for the first time in the Irish Parliament, the Plenary began with opening remarks and a welcome from the Cathaoirleach (Speaker) of the Seanad, Senator Paddy Burke.

4. Thereafter, the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism & Sport, Leo Varadkar TD, addressed plenary on the extension of the Common Travel Area between Britain and Ireland to provide a single tourist visa for people travelling to both countries.

5. In addition to an extension of the Common Travel Area, which Minister Varadkar said he would like to see pursued by the Assembly, he spoke on the following areas before fielding questions from Members:

   - a common travel area for hauliers by setting up a functional area of Britain and Ireland for cabotage;
   - pursuing the delivery of mutual recognition of driving penalty points; and
organising a parliamentary Gathering for 2013, as part of the year-long Gathering festival of festivals being held in Ireland next year.

6. Jack Wall TD, Chair of Committee C (Economic Affairs), provided Members with a summary of his Committee’s recent report into the Small and Medium Enterprise Sector in the UK and Ireland. A copy of this report can be found on the BIPA website at the following link: http://www.britishirish.org/committee-c-reports/

7. Frank Feighan TD, Chair of Committee A (Sovereign Matters) provided Members with a progress report on the work of that Committee on the subject of ‘A Decade of Commemorations’.

8. Darina Allen of the Ballymaloe Cookery School in Shanagarry, County Cork, addressed plenary on the opportunities for the food sector in Britain and Ireland. This was followed by a question and answer session with Members.

9. Plenary discussed, and agreed, a motion on the closure of RTE's London office. The motion read:

"That the 44th plenary of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly notes with concern the proposal of the Irish public service broadcaster, RTE (Radio Telefís Éireann), to close its London bureau and cease operations from September 2012.

Pays tribute to the illustrious record of service provided by the bureau and its staff in keeping viewers informed about British economic, political and cultural life, contributing to the peaceful resolution of conflict and promoting increasingly close relations between Britain and Ireland and the people of our respective islands.

While recognising the drastic fall of broadcasting revenue at a time of economic crisis; further notes the concerns of the Irish community in Britain for the long-term consequences of not having an RTE correspondent in Britain.

And that Parliamentarians here assembled from jurisdictions throughout Britain and Ireland believe that on-the-spot access for Irish-based media and engagement in public life in Britain supports the fulfilment of the vision of future British-Irish relations as set out by the Prime Minister and Irish Taoiseach in their historic statement of 12 March 2012; and urge the two Governments to support the case for retention of the RTÉ London correspondent and assist in the search for alternatives to closure”.

10. There followed an address by Dr James Reilly TD, Irish Minister for Health, on the topic of the potential of shared services in the area of health provision. The Minister followed his address by taking questions from the floor.

11. An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, addressed Members on the subject of UK-Irish relations in the areas of business, trade and commerce. He also spoke of the significant role BIPA has played in the peace process and of Her Majesty the
Queen’s State visit to Ireland last year. The Taoiseach concluded by fielding questions from Members on a broad range of subjects.

12. Lord Alfred Dubs, Chair of Committee D (Environment and Social), provided Members with a summary of his Committee’s recent report into Flooding in the UK and Ireland. A copy of this report can be found on the BIPA website at http://www.britishirish.org/committee-d-reports/. There followed a brief progress report on the work of Committee B (European Affairs), on the European Convention on Human Rights, presented by the Committee D Chair, Robert Walter MP.

13. Consideration was given to BIPA’s 16th Annual Report which was subsequently agreed. A copy of this report can be found on the BIPA website at: http://www.britishirish.org/annual-reports/.

14. There followed an address by senior business leaders from the agrifood, manufacturing and pharmaceutical industries on the theme of ‘Developing trade opportunities between Britain and Ireland’. Contributors at this session were Sean O’Driscoll, Chairman, and CEO, of Glen Dimplex; Eoin Tonge, Group Development Director of Greencore, and Sally Storey, Vice-President and General Manager of GlaxoSmithKline (Ireland) Ltd. This was followed by a question and answer session with Members of the Assembly.

15. Following the panel discussion, the Irish Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Brian Hayes TD, addressed the Assembly on the topic of ‘Economic relations between Britain and Ireland’.

16. Deputy Presiding Officer, John Scott MSP, formally moved the Adjournment Motion bringing to a close the 44th plenary of the BIPA. The Deputy Presiding Officer also noted, on behalf of all Scottish Parliament Members on the BIPA, how they looked forward to welcoming all BIPA colleagues to the next UK plenary, in Glasgow, on 22-23 October 2012.

Further Information

17. Since the close of the 44th BIPA plenary, inaugural debates on the work of the BIPA were held in the Chambers of both the Dail and House of Commons. Links to the Official Report and Hansard of these debates are found at http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2012/05/17/00009.asp and http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm120621/debtext/120621-0001.htm#12062137000001, respectively.

UK and International Relations Office
June 2012