BRITISH IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (BIPA): 45th PLENARY SESSION

Introduction

1. The 45th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Association (BIPA) took place in the Hilton Grosvenor Hotel, Glasgow from Monday 22 October to Tuesday 23 October 2012. This was the first occasion a plenary session has been held in Glasgow and only the second time it has been held in Scotland; the first plenary taking place in Edinburgh in 2005. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Glasgow Plenary by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Mary Scanlon MSP and James Dornan MSP.

Themes

2. The Plenary focussed on the theme of “The Scottish Economy and Irish/Scottish Relations”. The Scottish Government's Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, Fergus Ewing MSP, and the UK Government's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP, both addressed Plenary and fielded a variety of questions from Members. The Plenary theme was also addressed by Mr Graham Smith, General Secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and Mr Iain McMillan CBE, Director of CBI Scotland. Professor Sir William McKay KCB, Chair of the Commission on the Consequences of Devolution for the House of Commons, spoke on devolution and the ‘West Lothian Question’. The Assembly also heard from other guest speakers from the food and drink and tourism sectors.

Plenary Summary

3. The Plenary began with an address by the newly appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers MP, on her priority to revive Northern Ireland's economy. The Secretary of State also spoke on the good relations between the UK and the Republic of Ireland before taking questions from the Assembly on a wide range of issues.

4. Thereafter, Plenary discussed, and agreed, a motion by Senator Cait Keane on signed languages of the UK and Ireland. The motion read:

"That this Assembly recognises unequivocally the signed languages of the Deaf communities in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, namely British Sign Language and Irish Sign language respectively, and calls on the parliaments of the two countries to
proceed with the official recognition of these signed languages without delay”.

5. Grahame Smith, General Secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) addressed Plenary on the trade union perspective on the current state of the Scottish economy and the labour market. There followed a question and answer session with Assembly members.

6. Mr Riddell Graham, Director of Partnerships, Visit Scotland provided the Assembly with a summary of the tourism sector in Scotland; what steps the Agency is taking to encourage tourism into Scotland and how the tourism sector, generally, can contribute to the economic performance of a country.

7. Professor Sir William McKay KCB, Chair of the Commission on the Consequences of Devolution for the House of Commons, addressed the Assembly on the work of the Commission and on the topic of ‘devolution and the West Lothian Question’. There followed a question and answer session with Assembly members on the Commission’s work and the wider constitutional debate.

8. Mr Frank Feighan TD, Chair of Committee A (Sovereign Affairs), provided Assembly members with a summary of his Committee’s recent report, entitled ‘A Decade of Commemorations’. The report oversaw a year-long consultation with a range of academics, government officials, national and local politicians, community organisations and representatives from the different parts of Britain and Ireland. One of the key recommendations contained in the report is to establish a cross-border educational initiative to arrange, on a single day on an annual basis, exchanges and the teaching of the history of a particular anniversary.

9. Other key recommendations included in the report are that the British and Irish governments should establish a fund to support joint commemorations over the next decade; that an annual commemorations forum should be established to bring together a range of parties involved in commemorative activity; and that the British and Irish governments develop a joint approach, through a working group, on the British-Irish dimension on World War One commemorations. A copy of this report can be found on the BIPA website at: http://www.britishirish.org/assets/BIPA-Commemorations-Report-FINAL.pdf

10. The second day of plenary began with an address by Mr Iain McMillan CBE, Director of CBI Scotland, on the employers’ perspective of the current state of the Scottish economy. There followed a question and answer session with Assembly members.

11. The Plenary was then addressed by Ms Ailish Forde, Head of Industry Affairs and Alcohol Policy, Diageo Ireland and Ms Jane Richardson, Corporate Relations Director, Diageo Scotland on the Food and Drink Sector in Ireland and Scotland. This was followed by a question and answer session with Members of the Assembly.
12. The final address of the 45th plenary was by the Scottish Government’s Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism, Fergus Ewing MSP, on the plenary theme, “The Scottish Economy and Irish/Scottish Relations” ‘The Minister concluded by fielding a number of questions on this and a wide ranging number of issues.

Further Information

13. Since the close of the 45th BIPA plenary, an inaugural debate on the work of the BIPA was held in the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 13 November 2012. This was a Members’ Business debate on motion number S4M-04327 in the name of John Scott MSP. The Official Report of this debate can be found at http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=7533.

14. The next plenary of the BIPA will be held in Donegal, Ireland from 4 – 5 March 2013. The Donegal plenary will focus on the development of an energy strategy for Britain and Ireland and the building of economic links.

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