INTRODUCTION

1. The 46th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Association (BIPA) took place in the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, County Donegal, Ireland from Monday 4 March to Tuesday 5 March 2013. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Donegal Plenary by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Mary Scanlon MSP, Alison McInnes MSP and Siobhan McMahon MSP.

THEMES

2. The Plenary focussed on the theme of “Energy across Borders - Delivering the Economic Opportunities”. An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, provided the keynote address, the full text of which is attached as an Annex to this paper. Other speakers at the plenary included Pat Rabbitte TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; Philip Lowe, Director General for Energy, European Commission; Pat O’Doherty, Chief Executive of ESB (Electricity Supply Board); Fintan Slye, Chief Executive of EirGrid; Tim Cowhig, Chief Executive of Element Power; Sue Barr, Environment and External Affairs Manager of OpenHydro and Eddie O’Connor, Chief Executive of Mainstream Renewable Power.

PLENARY SUMMARY

3. The Plenary began with an address by the Irish Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Mr Pat Rabbitte TD. The Minister spoke of the recent commitment given by the UK and Irish Governments, through a Memorandum of Understanding, to work closely together to secure economic benefits for both countries through trade in renewable energy. The Minister informed plenary that the Memorandum of Understanding affirms the two States’ commitment to maintaining a strong partnership on energy issues; achieving closer integration of electricity markets, and maximising the sustainable use of low carbon renewable energy resources. The Minister concluded by taking questions from the Assembly on these and a wide range of other energy related issues.

4. Thereafter, Mr Frank Feighan TD, Chair of Committee A (Sovereign Affairs), provided Assembly members with a progress report on the work of that
Committee. This was followed by the presentation by the Chair of Committee C (Economic Affairs), Jack Wall TD, of his Committee’s recent report on Credit Unions. The report examined the role and provision of credit unions and the future potential of the sector. Copies of this report have been placed in the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), Bib No. 54775.

5. Brian Britton, Chairman of the National Offshore Wind Association of Ireland and Board Member of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce; David Manning, Director of Corporate Affairs for Scottish and Southern Energy (Ireland); Neil Stewart, Managing Director of Renewables for Glendimplex; Sue Barr, Environment and External Affairs Manager at Open Hydro; and Tim Cowhig, CEO of Element Power led a panel discussion and Question and Answer session with Members on, ‘Opportunities for Growth and Employment in Energy’.


7. Philip Lowe, Director General for Energy at the European Commission, provided the Assembly with details of EU energy targets and the challenges and opportunities in meeting these targets. The Director General then answered questions on a wide range of energy related issues from Assembly Members.

8. The second day of plenary began with the Chair of Committee B (European Affairs), Robert Walter MP, presenting the Committee’s report entitled, ‘The Atlantic Strategy: Benefits for Britain and Ireland’. The report calls on the British and Irish Governments, collectively and through the British Irish Council, to engage with the European Commission and other Member States to produce an action plan that outlines a small number of priority action areas. The reports states that the plan should clearly set out how these areas add value to the economy and the kind of programmes that fall within their scope. Copies of this report have been placed in the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), Bib No. 54775.

9. Thereafter, Lord Alfred Dubs, Chair of Committee D (Environment and Social), provided Assembly members with a progress report on the work of that Committee.

10. The 17th Annual Report of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly was also presented at plenary and noted and agreed by Assembly Members. Copies of this report have been placed in SPICe, Bib No. 54775, alongside the aforementioned Reports of Committees B and C.

11. Pat O’Doherty, Chief Executive of the Electricity Supply Board (Ireland), addressed Assembly Members on the subject of ‘How Energy will Evolve in the Next Decade’. This was followed by an address by the Chief Executive of EirGrid, Mr Fintan Slye, on ‘Delivering Secure, Sustainable and Competitive
Energy to all Consumers’. Both Mr O’Doherty and Mr Slye concluded by fielding questions from a number of Members.

12. The final session of the 46th plenary was with Madeline Boughton, Showcase Manager, Culture Ireland on developing cultural links between Britain and Ireland.

Further Information

13. The next plenary of the BIPA will be held in London from 21 – 22 October 2013. The theme of the London plenary will be discussed and decided at the next meeting of the Steering Committee, to take place in Belfast in June 2013.

UK and International Relations Office
April 2013
Co-chairs, distinguished members, fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted to be able to join you again today, and to thank you for the time you are taking to be here, and for all the work of the Assembly throughout the year. I know how active the Assembly has been since I met with you in Dublin last May, including your very successful meeting in Glasgow in November.

I know from my own time as part of this body the importance BIPA has played over many years in building relationships between parliamentarians across these islands, as well as on the island of Ireland. Key to the success of BIPA in recent years has been the inclusion of representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and the legislatures of the Crown Dependencies. This allows the building of trust, of mutual respect, of an appreciation of our differences as well as recognition of how much we share. While political differences are necessary to the functioning of a healthy democracy, we are all here, in our respective roles, to work in the best interests of those we represent, wherever and whoever they may be.

In working for our citizens, we are in very challenging times

Two years ago this week, the Government that I lead was given a strong mandate by the Irish people to implement their core plan of fixing our economy and getting people back to work.

It was just two years ago that the Irish economy we inherited was in freefall, with unemployment soaring. Public finances were out of control and the banks were near collapse. We were locked out of the markets.

While I know we still have a way to go, the Irish economy has stabilised; our international reputation has been restored, and it is clear that Ireland is pointed in the right direction. Our plan is working.

At the core of our plan is job creation. Our unemployment rate remains too high, and in addressing this, the government has already taken major steps. In 2013, the Action Plan for Jobs will build on this as we work towards achieving our target of creating 100,000 new jobs by 2016.

If we are to meet this target, we must continue to work together. We must work not just harder but smarter, being innovative in finding new solutions, in supporting business, growing our economies and delivering jobs.

In this respect, BIPA is once again playing an important role. I was very struck by the focussed nature of the programme for this plenary. I would like to congratulate my friend and colleague Joe McHugh, and his very able co-chair Laurence Robertson
and their respective teams for the efforts that have gone into arranging such a relevant series of discussions.

As you will have heard earlier today, energy policy and energy cooperation is an element which goes to the core of the British Irish economic relationship. This is evident from the strong focus in the joint statement on British-Irish relations, Prime Minister Cameron and I agreed last year.

When I spoke to you in Dublin, last May, I had recently met with Prime Minister Cameron. We had agreed an ambitious programme for cooperation, but had – at that point - yet to advance many of the provisions of the statement.

I am happy to be able to report to you that substantial work has been ongoing across all areas covered in the statement to turn the aspirations and ambitions contained within it into concrete results. The signing of the memorandum of understanding on energy cooperation earlier this year is a clear example of this.

Another example is the Joint Study on the economic relationship, which will highlight areas where cooperation will bring advantages to both the Irish and British economies.

I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister again in a week’s time to review progress with him, and consider our programme for cooperation over the coming year.

As well as developing and growing our close economic ties and our beneficial and cooperative relations as partners in the EU, both Governments remain committed to working together to realise fully a peaceful, prosperous and reconciled Northern Ireland. And, of course, the positive impact of a peaceful, prosperous and reconciled Northern Ireland will resonate across these islands, no-where more particularly than here in Donegal which, other than a 20km stretch at its southernmost tip, is bordered fully by Northern Ireland.

This is why, despite budgetary pressures, the Government is maintaining its commitment to vital infrastructural projects as part of the North West Gateway Initiative. This is just one example of the potential for greater North-South cooperation, both on the economy and in the delivery of public services.

Speaking of North-South cooperation, it would be remiss of me not to offer my condolences on the sad passing of Sir George Quigley at the weekend. Sir George was a tireless champion for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, as well as an advocate for greater North-South cooperation. My thoughts are with his family and friends at this sad time.

No doubt Sir George would have been saddened by the increased tensions and street protests in parts of Northern Ireland in recent months. More generally, significant sections of Unionism feel that the benefits of peace and economic opportunity have not been evenly spread, while many nationalists are frustrated that, fifteen years on from the Good Friday Agreement, there has been limited progress.
made on a number of pivotal issues. These include dealing with the past and reconciliation; promoting genuine respect and esteem for differing cultures and identity; dealing with contentious parades; finding alternatives to segregation in housing and education; and fundamental to all of these; rejecting sectarianism.

These are difficult issues. And no number of votes for any political party or in any border poll can in itself, and on its own, resolve them. They require a broad societal and political response.

Above all, they require political leadership, if we are genuinely to break new ground, to build on the foundation of the Good Friday Agreement and to deliver real and lasting reconciliation and peace.

Since September 2012 I have initiated a series of meetings with families of victims on all sides of the community in Northern Ireland as a sign of the priority I and my Government attach to helping to find a lasting resolution to the hurts of the past.

I met with the sole survivor and with family members of the ten Protestant workmen killed in the 1976 Kingsmill massacre in South Armagh. I invited the families to Dublin so that I could hear at first-hand how their lives had been affected by one of the worst atrocities of the Troubles. This is a very important process. Many of these families and relatives are only speaking about what happened to them for the first time.

I also met with a delegation from the South East Fermanagh Foundation led by Minister Arlene Foster. These were mostly farming families from Fermanagh whose lives and livelihoods were so affected by the malign activities of the IRA.

I also attended a Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen on Sunday, 12 November, the same day the Tanaiste attended a Remembrance Day ceremony in Belfast. I want to pay my respects to those from all traditions who gave their lives in the great war, and in particular to remember those killed in the Enniskillen bombing as they attended the corresponding ceremony on Remembrance Sunday 25 years ago.

I also attended the service of remembrance in St. McCartan's Cathedral at which the former Archbishop Lord Eames delivered a very powerful homily on the need for reconciliation. After the service I met privately with some of the families of the victims and those injured in the bombing. I also met with members of the British Legion and their families at the British Legion Hall.

I was deeply touched by the stories of some of the victims and the families of victims at these meetings and have a deep personal commitment to the peace process to make sure that these horrific atrocities are consigned to the past.

In each case, I expressed my deep sympathy with the families for the indescribable loss they have suffered. I assured them that there is no hierarchy of victims, and that their concerns are every bit as important to me as the concerns of other victims and their families.
The Good Friday Agreement and the resultant peace process have moved Northern Ireland on immeasurably from darker days. That Agreement is the bedrock upon which much progress has been made, and upon which we must seek to build further.

The Good Friday Agreement is not owned by any one political group, or any one generation of politicians. It is the expressed will of the people of Northern Ireland and more widely across these islands, and it provides for the peaceful co-existence of people with different traditions, cultures and aspirations. It is the responsibility of those of us who have the privilege of holding political office to defend, to underpin, and to reinforce its principles, its values and its institutions.

As co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the British and Irish Governments are keenly aware of our responsibilities in this regard. It is clear that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and elsewhere across these islands, want to see peace and prosperity flourish, and reject the attempts of a tiny minority whose offering is only a return to the emptiness of terror, bloodshed and murder.

Far better that our collective efforts be on tackling sectarianism and, symbolically, aspiring to the ending of the so-called peace walls which serve to reinforce division and difference rather than support cross-community engagement and reconciliation.

When I meet with Prime Minister Cameron in London next week we will discuss these issues and the importance of the principles, values and institutions of the Agreements in underpinning the goal of peace and prosperity for all of the people of Northern Ireland.

Our approach to dialogue on this island is characterised by openness and respect, which aims to harness and nurture relationships with those within troubled communities who have the will and the ability to work to resolve issues peacefully, using politics to succeed where violence never can.

Positive engagement can build a virtuous cycle of respectful and honest conversations give community leaders the impetus to carry on when it seems, as it may sometimes do, that the fear and anger are too big, too intractable, to be overcome. They can be overcome. And many good people are working long and hard to ensure that we will learn and grow from the challenges facing us.

Without embarrassing Deputy McHugh, I want to acknowledge publicly here the work which he has done in his capacity as Chair of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in this work of outreach.

As Governments, we are united in our view, in the context of forthcoming parades, that the Parades Commission’s determinations must be respected.

Dialogue between parade participants and resident communities continues to be the most effective way to prevent outbreaks of violence.

Many local communities in Northern Ireland continue to be affected by the blight of sectarianism. This can be particularly pronounced for those living close to
interfaces, such as in the Short Strand, and I am acutely conscious of the potential for further increased tensions during periods around contentious parades in particular.

The persistence of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with the absence of political agreement on how to make progress towards a truly reconciled society, contributes to the likelihood of incidents such as those we have witnessed in recent weeks. This crisis will not be resolved other than by a cross-party, cross-community response.

In my view, therefore, the party leaders must live up to their responsibilities and agree a framework to address the issues that have arisen in relation to flags and symbols. These are political issues that require a political solution. The sooner the framework is agreed the better.

In the meantime, in terms of helping the process of reconciliation and integration on the ground, there has been very welcome progress in securing practical support for ongoing programmes to address sectarianism in Northern Ireland, in particular the inclusion of a new EU Peace Programme (PEACE IV) with funding of €150m in the EU Budget proposed for 2013 to 2020.

Healing divisions within Northern Ireland remains a challenge. And yet it is also the case that across Northern Ireland there are inspiring stories and examples of communities and grass-roots organisations who are challenging ingrained sectarianism and whose lives are inspired by reconciliation.

Just over the border in Derry there are remarkable examples like the Leafair Community Trust which brings together former combatants, victims and others to engage locally on difficult issues through practical projects and events; or Youth Action Northern Ireland which build life skills and tolerance in young people living at sectarian interfaces; or the City Centre Initiative which has established a Parades Forum and who together with the Apprentice boys of Derry and the Grand Orange Lodge of Londonderry are leading examples in showing how engagement based on respect can be to the advantage of all.

The cooperation last year between Orange Lodges in Donegal and the County Museum, which resulted in an exhibition and public lectures to increase understanding of the Donegal signatories of the Ulster Covenant is another such example. Last year also saw a series of events not just in Northern Ireland but across Ireland, as well as in Britain, marking the centenary of the signature of the Ulster Covenant, a key event in Irish history, the first of many significant anniversaries we will mark over the coming decade.

We will remember not just important events on this island, but also global events 100 years ago which shaped our history. In particular, the tragedy of the First World War casts a shadow over the period. It decimated communities in every corner of Ireland, was truly a shared tragedy, irrespective of the differing motives of those who went to fight. The history of those men who died on the battlefields of France, Belgium, Gallipoli and elsewhere was, for too long, almost forgotten in the newly independent Ireland. I am glad that, in more recent times, their stories have been rediscovered in
all their complexity, and their sacrifice is now marked on both sides of the border.

Just as we mark the 15\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in a few weeks, next November will also see the 15\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the opening of the Island of Ireland Peace Park, in Messines, by President McAleese, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and King Albert II of Belgium.

Located on the site of the Battle of Messines Ridge, where men of the 36\textsuperscript{th} Ulster and 16\textsuperscript{th} Irish Divisions, from all corners of this island, fought side by side, the Peace Park stands as a testament to how a shared and sensitive reflection on the past serves to bring us together in the present. I would like to pay tribute to the key role played by our Donegal colleague, Paddy Harte, as well as Glenn Barr and others, in the development of the park over many years.

As we remember the events of the past over the next decade, including the legacy of the First World War, I would hope that our commemorations will be more than just a recollection of the past. We should be brave, be imaginative, and seize the opportunity to reflect carefully on who we are as a people, as countries, how we have arrived at where we are, and where we want to be in ten years’ time.

In that context, I want to acknowledge the work of BIPA itself, and the excellent report on the decade of commemorations which you produced last year.

But it is not just in remembrance of the past that we grow closer together. It is also in what we do every day, how we live, work and relax together. Meeting each other in formal and informal settings, through work, sport, cultural activities

Derry is, of course, the closest neighbour of Donegal. I know many people cross the border either way each day for work, or to see family and friends. I’m certain that a great many people from Donegal are enjoying the event of the Derry UK City of Culture year. The profile of Derry, and the whole region, is being raised this year. Artists from the whole island are working together to show the rest of the world what we have to offer. I have no doubt that the benefits for this region, and the whole island, will continue for many years.

The Other Voices television series is an Irish success story, with a tradition of bringing together international and Irish artists in performance, which has reached beyond this island. It now attracts audiences from around the world.

The recent recordings in Derry have given an international profile to the city; to its wonderful music venues and, most importantly, to the exceptional local talent.

To see young musicians from all parts of the island being given such a wide audience, is an example of the kind of impact the City of Culture can have for Derry. Derry has long been known for gifted musicians and writers. It is fantastic to see a younger generation coming through who share those talents.

I am aware that you will be having a discussion tomorrow on developing cultural links. I am sure that it will be a very productive session, and I know that in the course
of your deliberations, the vital role that culture can play in bringing people together will play a key part.

It is in reflecting on our culture, on our pasts, and on the symbols that represent our own identities that we learn to appreciate not just our differences from others, but what we share. It is by reaching out to others, to those of differing traditions within our communities, as well as to those from different countries, that we build a stronger and peaceful future for all our citizens.

BIPA has been at the forefront of such work for many years. I would like to thank you for everything you have done, and wish you continued success for your efforts into the future.

ENDS