Introduction

1. The 49th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) took place at the Ashford International Hotel, Ashford, Kent on Tuesday 21 October 2014. On Monday 20 October 2014, BIPA members also travelled from Ashford to Flanders, Belgium to take part in a series of First World War commemorative events. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Plenary, and these commemorative events, by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Michael McMahon MSP, Gordon MacDonald MSP and James Dornan MSP.

Themes

2. Given the unique nature of the 49th Plenary – taking place in the centenary year of the start of the First World War - the primary focus was one of reflection and commemoration. Due to the visit to Flanders on Monday 20 October, the usual two day Plenary was shortened to one. At Plenary, members of the Assembly were presented with reports and/or updates by BIPA Committee A (Sovereign Matters), Committee B (European Affairs), Committee C (Economic Matters) and Committee D (Environment and Social). In addition, members of the Assembly were addressed by Professor Keith Jeffery, Queen’s University, Belfast, on the subject of Ireland (North and South) and the First World War and by the UK Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Andrew Murrison MP on political developments in Northern Ireland and the current state of relations between the UK and Republic of Ireland.

Plenary Summary

3. The Plenary began with a progress report on the work of Committee A (Sovereign Matters) by the newly appointed Chair of the committee, Senator Paul Coghlan. Senator Coghlan informed Plenary that Committee A had started a new inquiry into smuggling and cross-border police co-operation. In particular, the committee aimed to examine how the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and An Garda Síochána, as well as the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, work together in light of the devolution of policing and justice powers and the launch of the cross-border policing strategy in 2010. Senator Coghlan informed members that the committee had already taken evidence from a number of individuals and bodies and hoped to be in a position to present their completed report at the next Plenary in Dublin.
4. Thereafter, the Chair of BIPA Committee B (European Affairs), Robert Walter MP, presented the Committee’s report entitled, “The Impact of the HGV Road User Levy Act 2013 on the Free Movement of Goods on the Island of Ireland”. The report stated that the HGV road user levy resulted in a net increase in costs for HGV operators from Ireland who use roads in Northern Ireland. It stated, further, that hauliers operating in the cross-border regions were concerned that the levy will affect their ability to trade across the border and ultimately will result in a loss of employment in Ireland.

5. The report recommends that the UK Secretary of State for Transport should reconsider the decision not to provide exemptions for Northern Ireland roads, particularly the A5. It stated that an exemption to the A5 would assist Irish hauliers who travel to and from the north-west region. A copy of the full report can be found on the BIPA website at:

http://www.britishirish.org/assets/BIPAHGVReport.pdf

6. The Committee Chair also provided the Assembly with an update on other work the committee is currently undertaking, including its inquiry into the European Investment Bank. The Chairman stated that he hoped this report would soon be finalised and presented to members at the next Plenary in Dublin.

7. Finally, the Committee Chair informed members of the next report the committee hoped to undertake into the rules that apply in the Schengen area and the common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, focusing on the impact those two different visa systems have on tourism, business, labour and the education sector. The Chair advised, further, that the committee aims to look at the advantages and disadvantages of not being a member of the Schengen area and consider how the common travel area could operate more effectively with the Schengen area and determine what administrative and cost burdens are incurred through operating within two systems.

8. Following the presentations by the Chairs of Committee A and Committee B, Plenary was addressed by Professor Keith Jeffery of Queen’s University Belfast. Professor Jeffery spoke on the subject of Ireland (North and South) and the First World War. Following his presentation, Professor Jeffery took a number of questions from members.

9. The final item of business before the Assembly in the morning was a debate on the British and Irish economies. Contributions to this debate were made by members of all legislatures and a link to the official report of this debate (and the full morning Plenary), can be found on the BIPA website:

http://www.britishirish.org/plenary-transcripts/

10. The first item on the agenda for the afternoon Plenary session was an address by the UK Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Andrew Murrison MP. Dr Murrison provided the Assembly with an overview of political developments in Northern Ireland and of the state of relations between the UK and Republic of Ireland. Following his presentation, the Under-Secretary of State took a number of questions from Assembly members.
11. The penultimate item of business was an update on the committee’s work from the Chair of Committee D (Environment and Social), Lord Dubs. Lord Dubs spoke to the Assembly on the committee’s report entitled, “Travellers, Gypsies and Roma: Access to Public Services and Community Relations”, a copy of which can be found at: 
http://www.britishirish.org/assets/CommitteeDRomaTravellerReport.pdf

12. Lord Dubs informed Plenary that one of the reports key recommendations is the need for co-operation between all jurisdictions represented on BIPA, specifically through the holding of a joint conference involving the support of representatives from the Traveller, Gypsy and Roma communities. The committee also stated that they would like to see access to health, housing and education as a basic right for everybody and, in that regard, there should be a multi-agency, region-wide and national approaches to these issues.

13. The final item of business was an update by the Chair of Committee C (Economic Affairs), Jack Wall TD. Mr Wall informed the Assembly of the progress the committee is making into its inquiry into youth unemployment and that it hoped to conclude this inquiry, and present its completed report, at the next Plenary in Dublin.

Further Information
14. The next plenary of the BIPA will be held in Dublin, Ireland from 23 February – 24 February 2015 (inclusive).

UK and International Relations Office
October 2014
Thanks very much. Joe said to me, “When you come here speak to them in Irish”, so tâ mé chun caint as Gaeilge an t-am ar fad agus tuigfidh sibh céard atá á rá agam. That means we will conduct this entirely as Gaeilge, and you are all very welcome. [Laughter.]

Co-Chairmen, distinguished Members, fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham. I thank Joe and Laurence for their diligence and the commitment they are showing in the co-chairing of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. I know the Members have had a fairly busy time since we met last in Letterkenny and that they had their 47th Plenary in London in October. I recall the first Plenary in London many years ago when the advice from a well-known former Leas-Cheann Comhairle of the Dáil was to engage with the British, show them we do not have horns and that it is well worthwhile negotiating with and talking to the Irish. We went there and they came here, and that continued for a number of years. There were outings on the golf course, long discussions afterwards and things began to work very well. That has evolved to become a very strong point.

My own experience of being a Member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly when it was first set up, and all the years in between, has given me an insight into British politics and the way the mother of Parliament works. That relates also to the understanding I have with the British Prime Minister in the context of what we do, both at the European Council and in respect of the bilateral arrangements between Ireland and Britain. The Members are building new relationships with different politicians, new politicians and people in the different communities. It is great for this BIPA, with its new Members, to get to know other new Members from the Commons and across the different parties in the sense of what we all stand for and how we can work together in the common interests of our two countries.

Twenty years ago, imagination only would have led us to believe that Her Majesty, the Queen of England, would come here on a royal visit and that the President of our country, President Michael D. Higgins, would go on a return formal state visit to Britain. Not only is Her Majesty able to speak our language, and it was very well spoken with a fluency—the Irish word for that is blas—I understand the British Monarchy are tweeting in Irish. They learned this from Commander Hadfield in the space station and last Friday, Buckingham Palace sent its tweets as gaeilge—that means in Irish—about the visit of our President to Britain next week.

The last time I was in Windsor Castle was as a tourist in the 1970s. I have the privilege to go there next week to accompany the President and his good wife to a state occasion in Windsor Castle. A celebration of our Irish spirit and culture will be demonstrated at the Albert Hall also.
If we think about it, the Members have helped bring about an understanding and a negotiation either way that allowed these events to happen. Her Majesty, the Queen, was able to come here on a royal visit, and our President will be able to return that formally.

I have to say, and Irish Members will know it, that when the Queen came here she made an exceptional effort to engage with the Irish people. There was a reticence in the beginning as to whether people should turn out in numbers to see the Queen passing by but by the time she got to Cork, there was a homely, warm atmosphere, epitomised by Pat O’Connell’s demonstration to her of a mother in law fish in the English Market. He is a gregarious character, with great experience. The people charged with protocol went to Cork and asked him how he thought he would be able to greet the Queen. He said, “Well, first of all, you should not have the counter between me and her. She is a very welcome visitor”. He showed her an exceptionally ugly fish with its mouth wide open. She asked the name of the fish and he said, “It is a monkfish, but here we call it mother in law fish”. That was the point of laughter between the two of them. The picture of the Queen of England engaging with an Irish fishmonger, whom she received in Buckingham Palace last week, went around the world.

The state visit highlights the warmth now generated between our two peoples. The age we are now in is one where there is a very strong relationship between the two islands that will bring prosperity to peoples North and South on this island and on both sides of the Irish Sea. That is why, Joe and Laurence, I am pleased to see the twin themes of work and jobs dominate your plenary programme. Our Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, spoke to the Members this morning, and tomorrow they will hear from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, who has carried out a very difficult job here given the very difficult economic circumstances in recent years in putting a programme of reform into the public service and dealing with the difficulties in expenditure ceilings in this country.

On these islands our economies are open. Obviously, we are not immune to the vagaries of the world in which we conduct our trade, export our goods and do more and better business. Increasingly, we have to rely on each other.

It is important to note that only two months ago the first troika, so to speak, travelled to Singapore on a comprehensive trade mission, and Secretary of State Villiers will understand this, with participation from Northern Ireland, Britain and ourselves. Clearly, there are niche areas each can cover comprehensively, and it was a triumvirate that travelled to Singapore.

In March of 2012, Prime Minister Cameron and I concluded our joint statement, which we entitled British-Irish relations—the next decade. That set out a vision of closer co-operation between Britain and Ireland and identified a range of areas where we could advance that.
We know there are 50,000 Irish people on the boards of British companies who have made a significant contribution over the years to the British economy and the infrastructure of Britain.

Obviously, there is a great deal of work to be done in an extensive programme through the annual summit meetings, and I must say there is a great deal of interaction between senior officials on many of these areas.

The second annual summit took place recently in Downing Street where the Prime Minister and I discussed the progress made in the past 12 months and looked at what we might achieve in the next 12 months. In fact, in the past 12 months we have achieved a great deal. We published our joint economic study. We had the joint trade mission to Singapore to which I referred. We are continuing work on the introduction of a reciprocal short-stay common travel area, CTA, visa. There is a real energy, from a hospitality and tourism perspective, to be able to market Britain and Ireland with a common visa, particularly with interest now from China and India from where huge numbers of people are beginning to travel on an annual basis. That is a real demonstration of commitment to economic engagement and expansion by two countries on a common visa in an area about which there is very little difficulty.

Last year, I was privileged to be able to go to Flanders Fields with Prime Minister David Cameron. An Irish Taoiseach and a British Prime Minister stood there under the Peace Tower in Messines and visited the grave of Willie Redmond from County Clare, who was an MP in the Commons for 32 years. He joined the British Army in the Great War, the centenary of which we commemorate this year, and urged others to do so on the basis of the freedom of small nations and the hope that were Britain to win that war, Home Rule would apply for Ireland. These were difficult times for our people afterwards, having lost 50,000 people.

Members should believe me, if they have not been there, that it is an emotional experience to go to Flanders and see the craters made by the greatest man-made non-nuclear explosion in history, which took place on the Messines ridge, and the Menin Gate, with the more than 50,000 names, including three brothers from Dublin who died over two days with the Fusiliers. The Last Post is played at that gate every Friday by local buglers. It is a powerful evocation of what war was about, and for young people it has a striking impact.

The day we visited, Laurence, was very cold. The local school children came down and sang “Stille Nacht” in the place where the Germans played the British in the famous match during the truce on Christmas Day. Believe me, cold or not, it is a poignant moment to pass by all those little graveyards and headstones of unknown soldiers who were nothing more than young lads and young men fighting in that war. When Queen Elizabeth came here and recognised the contribution they had made at the Memorial in Islandbridge, that, too, was a significant moment because when the survivors from Ireland came back here after the Great War they were not recognised by the Governments for many years. It was only many years afterwards that an amnesty was given to them, and they had a right and a belief to fight for the freedom of small nations or for King and country, whichever was their issue.
There are peace parks springing up throughout our country where those from every county, Protestant and Catholic, who fought in all the wars are commemorated in various ways. Members would be surprised at the numbers who travel from abroad to see the place from where long-lost relatives came. Prime Minister Cameron was able to locate the final resting place of a number of his ancestors who fought in the Great War. In many ways, that was for me a powerful moment of connection between our two countries.

I understand, Joe, that a committee of the Assembly has been undertaking an analysis of the progress to date on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement, with a view to identifying outstanding issues and bringing forward recommendations for further action. I know that is difficult, but I very much welcome this work and look forward to any findings or recommendations that are brought forward here.

Through the Good Friday Agreement the people on all parts of this island, North and South, have made clear their commitment to peace and to a society founded on mutual respect, equal rights and opportunities.

The Good Friday Agreement has opened up not just economic opportunities. It opened up hearts and minds and a great sense of a future where all the communities dwell deep in each other’s shelter and never in each other’s shadow, in other words, connection and interdependence are very important. It is vital that the parties work to develop and enrich this sense across our land.

The peace process shows that politics really does matter, and that politics can make a difference.

The political situation in Northern Ireland remains more fragile than we would have wished but all parties must stay focused on the prize of enduring peace, and the solidity of peace. That is why I welcome the recommencement of party leader talks. I met with Dr. Haass in New York recently during the St Patrick’s week celebrations and had a reflection with him on the outcome of the talks he had on the parades, past activities and so on. It is a difficult journey, but our destination of peace and prosperity is very well worthwhile.

As Taoiseach I met groups from both sides of the community in Northern Ireland who have a raw emotion inside them that has never been concluded. That is difficult, whether it be the families of the so-called disappeared or the relative of the single survivor of the Kingsmill massacre. I talked to them. I brought them down to Government Buildings and spent three hours listening to the reservoir of unmended hurt that these issues were never concluded. I met also the people of Ballymurphy, who lost so many loved ones over a two or three day period. While that happened many years ago, that emotion is as raw as it was very shortly afterwards.

I mentioned this to the Prime Minister when I was in Downing Street because these issues are powerful but at the same time it is very important for people to be able to speak to the political process about what might be done, and I know we have to inch forward in a slow but sure fashion.
What we have said, following the invitation from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is that both Governments are very supportive of what has to be done by the parties in Northern Ireland. I noted President Clinton’s words in Derry: finish the job. We started this process 20 years ago and we have moved a very long way. There are a number of issues that need to be dealt with, and dealt with they must be, but they cannot be dealt with from outside, as many might assume. It must come from the inside, with encouragement from the outside, because essentially this is about the peoples of the North.

I genuinely do not want to see a type of blockage by the political process clinging to the past when so many young people want to get around that and open up the adventure of the future. The world we live in is changing rapidly and the digital frontiers, and the opportunities that present, are global in reach and available at the touch of a button. We must be able to build on the confidence levels in Northern Ireland, and we are happy to support our colleagues in this regard, be it cross-Border activities in health, education or infrastructure. We are not flush with money ourselves but we want people to understand we can do that with the co-operation we have, and we get co-operation from the United States and the European Union. That is why, during the Presidency last year, we were in a position to get extra moneys for the peace dividend, which is to be used for sensitive communities where young men in particular are often driven down the wrong road to criminality and who see no hope or way out. In that sense we must really commit to working with communities all the time. I spoke to President Obama about this in the White House during the St Patrick’s week celebrations in the US and a number of Senators, Congressmen and others.

Joe and Laurence, I want to give recognition here to the steps that have been taken by First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness in continuing on the journey to a more united and reconciled Northern Ireland. These issues are important and while we can have differences of opinion, it is important that people see the First Minister and Deputy First Minister working in the interests of the Northern Ireland economy and therefore its people. When they travelled to China we were able to make available to them the facilities of our ambassador, who was a fluent Chinese speaker. The same applied in Japan and other places around the world where trade missions might be taking place in parallel or might cross their paths. In that sense, we are very happy to continue to work with our colleagues in the interests of demonstrating what peace can bring in terms of jobs and opportunities.

Both Governments are making every effort to speed recovery and economic cohesion throughout the island. We have had discussions about that as part of our programme in Downing Street. With the Northern Ireland Executive we are looking to see how best public funds can be used in the delivery of the services people need to make their lives and their communities work better. We want to see good results this year, and we hope to see those good results.

The Members of this Assembly know better than most the importance of political engagement at all levels to provide the leadership that drives that reconciliation
because politics on its own is not good enough. It will not deal with all the issues. Civil society is crucial in shaping a genuinely reconciled society. There must be that sense of trust and belief from one community to the next.

It is not enough to forgive. I believe we have to fore give as well. That means that each of us give a little bit in advance, like a down payment of trust or a step to a better future. We have to look beyond the curve and consider where we want Northern Ireland to be in six months, two years, five years or ten years. What is our picture, and what can those of us who have some measure of responsibility do to assist that?

Co-Chairmen and Members, we will support every move we can that helps this process. Each year, our Reconciliation and Anti-Sectarianism Funds provide almost €3 million to hundreds of groups, large and small, in the community and voluntary sector working to create understanding of the different traditions in this island.

I was in the Short Strand some years ago and they had children from both sides of the community in the jerseys of the different sporting clubs, which showed them that the game is played irrespective of traditions, beliefs or backgrounds.

I often say that for the sake of coming generations the only “other” we should think of has to be “each other” because a wall between people does not differentiate from the fact that we have a shared humanity and a shared island. We should work, therefore, in every way we can to make that possible. That is why young people are key, and we focus on them to give them hope, a shared and prosperous future, and a sense of understanding that they have an opportunity to play their part. The groups we support demonstrate the will of the majority to forge and nurture reconciliation throughout the island.

We can be sure that relationships were forged and nurtured across that divide in Flanders, and on the fields and the farms of the Somme. When Willie Redmond was shot and very badly wounded on the Messines ridge, he was carried by a Protestant, on his back, for half a mile to the convent where he received treatment. He died there. The convent was moved later but the grave remains in the middle of a ploughed field. For the first time, as a result of that Great War to end all wars, where Protestant and Catholic fought in the interests of the Allies and the British Army north and south—the first time it ever happened—the opportunity to harness that type of connection is an unstoppable force, if we get it right in peacetime, for the good of the economy and jobs.

As Members know, we are starting the decade of commemorations encompassing the Ulster Covenant, the Great War, the Easter Rising and through to Independence and partition. We set up a committee here, with the assistance of professional historians, to ensure these events are done sensitively and comprehensively, with understanding on all sides of what is involved. We take the opportunity of new relationships on and across the islands to build understanding and trust over this decade of commemorations.
The period 2012 to 2022 sees a range of centenaries and other milestones in the history of the island of Ireland. We have to use them to reflect not just on what we have done but what we have yet to consider doing for, with and on behalf of each other for years to come.

This Assembly has done important work in considering these issues. I am pleased that the Irish Government is supporting a number of commemorative projects through the Reconciliation Funds. The events of this period shaped relations between Britain and Ireland for the century that followed. British-Irish partnership on significant commemorative events is therefore an important aspect of the commemorative programme. That is why the exhibitions have taken place in the Great Hall in the Commons and in Dublin, Belfast, and North and South. The Tánaiste laid a wreath in the North on Armistice Day. I was in Enniskillen. It was poignant to be there but also to see the co-operation in the laying of a laurel wreath among all the poppies, showing the singularity of peoples and their wish to live in peace.

Certain historical events will call for joint co-operation and attendance and with plans taking shape for the centenary commemoration of the 1916 Rising, it is the hope that representatives of the Royal Family and the British Government will be hosted in Dublin when those commemoration ceremonies take place.

Ceremonial events around the First World War, including the commemoration of the outbreak of war, the Battle of the Somme, and the Armistice, are also opportunities to reflect on and better understand our shared experiences through that war. The lamps may have gone out all over Europe, but with the Good Friday Agreement the flame of hope was lit, and the partnership we celebrate allows us to strengthen that hope and light.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly has been a light for a very long time. Its Members have been at the forefront of the development of British-Irish relations for many years. I would like to thank them for what they have done and wish Joe, Laurence and all the Members continued success with their efforts into the future.

This is a time for confidence. This is a time for courage. This is a time for steadfastness and understanding that if the peoples and the Governments work together, the opportunity for prosperity and peace for the future for millions of people is at hand. Thank you.