BRITISH IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (BIPA): 50th PLENARY SESSION

Introduction

1. The 50th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA) took place in Leinster House and Croke Park, Dublin from Monday 23 February to Tuesday 24 February 2015. The Scottish Parliament was represented at the Dublin Plenary by Deputy Presiding Officer John Scott MSP, Willie Coffey MSP, Michael McMahon MSP, Alison McInnes MSP and Mary Scanlon MSP.

Themes

2. The Plenary focussed on the theme of ‘The role of sport in promoting cultural and community development’. An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, provided the keynote address, the full text of which is attached at http://www.britishirish.org/assets/BIPA-Speech-for-An-Taoiseach-16.2.15.pdf

Other speakers at the plenary included Paschal Donohoe TD, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport; Liam Ó Néill, President of the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association); Mr Sean Sherlock TD, Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Professor John Coakley, Institute of British-Irish Studies, University College Dublin.

Plenary Summary

3. The Plenary began with the keynote address by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD, on the above mentioned plenary theme as well as the current state of UK and Irish relations, both economically and politically. Upon conclusion of his address, An Taoiseach fielded questions and comments from the Assembly members.

4. Thereafter, the Chair of BIPA Committee A (Sovereign Matters), Senator Paul Coghlan, presented the Committee’s report entitled, “Cross-border Police Co-operation and Illicit Trade”. The report calls for more serious penalties, including more lengthy custodial sentences for illicit trade activities, in order to make the island of Ireland a more difficult place for criminal gangs to operate. The committee raised particular concerns at the presence of fuel laundering plants and filling stations selling illicit fuel in border regions and further afield.
5. Other recommendations include that legislation be updated to ensure operators of filling stations, who are successfully prosecuted for selling laundered/illegal fuel, cannot simply reopen again after a few weeks. It also concluded that on-the-spot fines should be introduced for consumers found to have knowingly purchased illicit fuel, and that gaps in enforcement be identified. The committee report was adopted by the Assembly.

6. Following the presentation of the report by Committee A, the Chair of BIPA Committee B (European Affairs), Robert Walter MP, presented the committee’s report on the European Investment Bank (EIB). The report states that the European Commission must help the European Investment Bank to be less risk averse so it can step up its role supporting the EU’s economic recovery.

7. The report also identifies the Northern Irish border area as a key region that could benefit from EIB supported major infrastructure projects and calls on the UK and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive to work together to identify projects that can be presented to the EIB. The committee report was adopted by the Assembly.

8. Following the presentation and discussion of the two BIPA committee reports, the Irish Government’s Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Paschal Donohoe TD, addressed Plenary on the plenary theme of ‘the importance of sport to our shared culture and the role of sport in promoting cultural and community development’. Minister Donohoe then fielded questions and comments from the Assembly members.

9. The afternoon Plenary session moved from Leinster House to Croke Park and began with a welcome address by the President of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Liam O’Neill. Thereafter followed a discussion on the main Plenary theme of ‘the importance of sport to our shared culture and the role of sport in promoting cultural and community development’ with a panel consisting of Ryan Feeney, Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association; Claire Adams, Irish Football Association; Miriam Malone, Football Association of Ireland; Hugo MacNeill, British-Irish Association; and Trevor Ringland, Chairman, PeacePlayers International. Following a brief presentation by all panel members, discussion was opened up to Assembly members.

10. The second day of Plenary began with a continuation of the discussion on the Committee B (European Affairs) report on the European Investment Bank. This was followed immediately by the presentation of Committee D (Environment and Social) draft report entitled, “The Irish Communities in Scotland”. The draft report was presented to Plenary by the committee Chair, Lord Dubs, but was not agreed by the Assembly. The committee Chair agreed to consider some of the points raised by Assembly members and present a revised report at a future Plenary.

11. Given 2015 is the 25th Anniversary of the BIPA (and its predecessor the British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body), the penultimate item of the day was an
address by Professor John Coakley of the Institute of British-Irish Studies, University College Dublin on the history of British-Irish political relations.

12. The final item on the agenda at the 50th plenary was an address by the Irish Government’s Minister of State with Responsibility for North-South Co-operation, Mr Sean Sherlock. The Minister provided the Assembly with an update on recent political discussions between the Government of the Republic of Ireland, the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive with respect to cross-border relations.

Further Information

13. The next plenary of the BIPA will be held in Cheltenham from 16 November – 17 November 2015 (inclusive).

UK and International Relations Office
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