

# BACKGROUND, AIMS AND PRINCIPLES OF THE BRITISH-IRISH INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY

## Note by the Steering Committee

### Background

1. The Body was established in February 1990 with the consent and co-operation of both Governments and at the request of Members of both Parliaments. This followed the references to such a Body or Parliamentary Tier in the Joint Studies Report 1981, following discussions at the highest level between the two Governments, and Article 12 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 which gave the formal consent of both Governments to the creation of such a Body, should their Parliaments so wish. The parliamentary momentum to take advantage of this situation and to create the Body was provided by the improved relations between the two Parliaments made possible by the continuing contact, at home and abroad, of the British and Irish Groups of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

### Ethos

2. The ethos of the Body from the process of its creation onwards has been to act in every way possible as 'One Body' across the whole spectrum of its activities. In terms of the Constitution, as stated in its agreed Rules, the British and Irish parts of the Body are only relevant as to the numbers of the membership and the numbers required for other functions such as quorums and amendments. It has been a feature of the Body that it works according to proper Parliamentary rules. All decisions of the Body, from the steering Committee, through the Committees to the Plenary Sessions, are taken as a Body and not by any national component part of it. In Plenary Session the Body sits in alphabetical order there and, generally, gives the members of the two Parliaments the opportunity to function as one parliamentary assembly. For all the historical inheritance of the British-Irish relationship, it is our close association and sharing of traditions that gives the Body an unique opportunity to do this.

3. A further and vital part of what the Body stands for is complete equality in the relations between the two countries at Governmental and Parliamentary level. This is again central to our ethos and an essential ingredient in enabling us to work as one parliamentary assembly.

#### Aims and Activities

4. The Body's purpose is to bring members of both Parliaments together on a regular basis to participate jointly in the maximum possible number of Parliamentary non-legislative functions and to carry out these activities in a Parliamentary manner. These activities are as follows:

(i) The holding of two Plenary Sessions of the Body a year alternating between each country and not always being held in the capital cities. The Body debates matters of political and general concern to it; its own committee reports; the replies of the two Governments to its Reports; motions coming from a sufficient number of individual members or from the Steering Committee according to the Rules of Procedure; and, last but not least, hears ministers of both Governments and conducts a Parliamentary Question time with them.

(ii) The four Committees of the Body namely Committee A - Political and Security; Committee B - European and International Affairs; Committee C - Economic and Social; and Committee D - Education, Culture and the Environment, have a membership of twelve members of the Body, six from each of the two Parliaments. They meet on a regular basis between Plenary Sessions and work on inquiries chosen by the Committees. Reports of inquiries are presented for debate at the Plenaries, after which a formal reply is made by both Governments. Committees frequently meet in the Palace of Westminster or at Leinster House. The presence of the Committees on a regular basis in each of our Parliaments makes a valuable contribution to the overall relationship between their Members. An important part of the work of committees is also to travel, be seen and conduct hearings relevant to their work around both countries, including Northern Ireland, and in Brussels. The work of the Body and its Committees often include matters related to the European Union. In this regard the Body encourages contact with Members of the European Parliament and hopes that they will increasingly appear before, or assist in, the work of its

## Influence

8. The development of the Body as a source of constructive influence upon Governments and Parliaments is an important aspect of concern to the Body. Our reports need to achieve maximum exposure and influence on our respective Governments. This can be better achieved by drawing attention to the work of the Body in our national parliaments. A variety of opportunities are available, for example through meetings and committees, and by encouraging debate in our Chambers. It is important that Ministers from time to time be called to account not only by the Body in Plenary but also in the Chambers of each of our Parliaments.

## The Future

9. The Body will develop in the future against a background where there will always be a need, quite apart from the Peace Process, for good Parliamentary relations between Britain and Ireland.

10. The Peace Process in its present, or any future equivalent form, will inevitably take time to deliver the settlement we all want. During that period it is most important that a forum such as the Body exists. The value of mature cross-national debate in the present situation speaks for itself and the Body also provides a ready made safety valve; a forum for various interests to represent their views; a monitoring role; and hopefully the source of sensible suggestions to assist the process as it goes forward.

11. The Body's role is 'East-West' in the British-Irish context: a meeting of the British and Irish Parliaments. While sadly the Body meets without the Unionist Parties at present (although two seats remain available to them), much of our work is inevitably concerned with 'North-South' issues. This state of affairs will remain until the hoped-for settlement leads on to the future shape of 'North-South' institutions. That said and whatever may be the shape of those 'North-South' institutions there will, in the light of the history of British-Irish relations and the contribution made by the Body to their improvement, inevitably remain a need for some larger parliamentary dimension between Britain and Ireland together in a context that includes Northern Ireland as well. The Body

therefore intends to play a constructive role in future constitutional developments on the island of Ireland.

12. In practical terms the future of the Body has to depend on the outcome of the Peace Process and the institutional pattern that results. There is much work to be done by the Body before we get to that stage and the Body can hardly change before the wider constitutional picture is known and a settlement is forged. In the interim, the Body will seek to enhance the effectiveness of its Committees, the impact of its Reports and the relevance of its debates.

13. The Body will publish an Annual Report for each calendar year covering the whole range of its activities.

14. Whatever its final future role, the Body will work towards achieving the maximum possible official recognition within the two Parliaments, and from the two Governments, as being an important parliamentary assembly dedicated to the development of trust, understanding and co-operation between our two countries.