

Section 1

Introduction

Context

The Assembly Commission finds its statutory basis in section 40 and schedule 5 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission, as the body corporate, is responsible for providing the property, services and staff required for the purposes of the Assembly. It is chaired by the Speaker, Lord Alderdice, and has five other members Mrs Eileen Bell, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr John Fee, Dr Dara O'Hagan and Mr Jim Wells who are tasked to represent the interests of the Assembly and its 108 elected Members.

During the period of this report the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended from 14 October 2002 until 31 March 2003. Although this long period of suspension has curtailed much of the Assembly's business in plenary and committee, a total of nine Bills received Royal Assent. In all, 22 Bills had not completed their passage through the Assembly and were subsequently taken through as Orders in Council at Westminster. Committee Office staff also serviced and supported 300 committee meetings, including 13 meetings outside of Parliament Buildings, and have organised and supported 22 committee visits.

The Commission met on eight occasions prior to suspension, including one occasion during a visit to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa and the National Assembly of Québec. The Commission received and answered three questions for oral answer and eight questions for written answer.

During suspension the Commission was not permitted to meet and responsibility for functions of the Commission were transferred to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

House Committees

The Commission established the Catering and Functions House Committee, as a subgroup of the Commission, to make recommendations on the development of Assembly catering and refreshment services.

The Committee also has responsibility for the development of the Assembly Gift Shop and has undertaken an extensive review of the current provision. It is expected that the recommendations arising from this review will be effected in the coming year.

On 7 May 2002 the Commission established the Environmental Best Practice Committee with the primary objective of developing and implementing an environmental management plan and charter for Parliament Buildings.

As part of its commitment to environmental awareness, the Commission is progressing towards obtaining environmental accreditation (ISO14001) for Parliament Buildings.

Promoting Equality

As part of the Commission's commitment to equality, and in preparation for the Commission being designated as a public authority, an internal equality scheme working group has been established.

The remit of the group is to contribute to the co-ordinated development of Section 75 statutory obligations in the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat. A draft equality scheme has been developed for consideration by the Commission following restoration.



Her Majesty The Queen with the Speaker on a visit to Parliament Buildings on 14 May 2002

The Commission has also agreed a series of improvements to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Induction loops have been installed in the Members' Bar, the Press Bar and the Senate Chamber. The Commission has also agreed to conduct a review of accessibility to all areas of Parliament Buildings.

Key Events

- During the period of this report the Commission was responsible for a number of events. The most notable was the visit by Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh on 14 May 2002.
- The Stormont estate continued to be used as a venue for international concerts. The latest, held in July 2002, saw Rod Stewart, Gabrielle and Juliet Turner attract a crowd in excess of 13,000.

- In order to commemorate the new Northern Ireland Assembly, a portrait of all Members, including the late Tom Benson and the late Arthur Doherty, was commissioned from a young Northern Ireland artist, Noel Murphy. The portrait was unveiled by the Speaker on 10 February 2003.
- In addition, a portrait of the first Deputy First Minister, Mr Séamus Mallon, was commissioned, and it was unveiled during a ceremony on 25 March 2003 to mark his retirement from office.

Visit to Canada

The Commission undertook a visit to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa and the National Assembly of Québec between 28 September and 4 October 2002 to consider best practice in the delivery of corporate governance.

In the course of the visit the Commission undertook 12 meetings, attended five working

luncheons and five working dinners. The Commission met the Speakers to the House of Commons and the Senate in Ottawa, the President of the National Assembly of Québec and representatives of the Canadian branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Members of the Commission were guests at the Speech from the Throne in the Senate Chamber in Ottawa.

The Speaker attended an evening reception as a guest of Her Excellency the Rt Hon Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada. Members also met with representatives of the UK High Commission and the Embassy of Ireland. Members of the Commission individually met senior officials associated with their relevant directorate responsibilities.

In addition, the fifty-fifth meeting of the Commission was held on 2 October 2002 in Québec City. The Commission also conducted a tour of the Irish Memorial National Historic Site on Grosse île, Québec.



Assembly Commission delegation meeting with members of the Board of Internal Economy in Ottawa, Canada

Information

The Commission continues to provide information on the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly in an open and transparent manner. The Northern Ireland Assembly web site is currently being developed to allow for easier



The Speaker and Mr Eamon Maillie unveil a portrait of the Members of the new Northern Ireland Assembly



Home page of the Northern Ireland Assembly Internet web site

access to information pertaining to the work of the Assembly. It is intended that this will be available following restoration.

As part of the Commission's ongoing commitment to education, a strategy was drawn up, following extensive consultation with the main customer

groups, and educational materials and programmes for visits to Parliament Buildings have been developed, and are now in use.

Shared learning continues to factor high on the Commission's agenda. A Conference for Speakers, Presiding Officers and Clerks of the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands was held on 27 and 28 June 2002 in Parliament Buildings. The aim of the conference was to exchange information on matters of mutual interest, to provide a momentum for the development of inter-parliamentary co-operation and to build on the networks already flourishing at Presiding Officer and official level.

Members of the Commission also recently welcomed delegates from the Assembly of Kosovo to share information on establishing an effective Assembly against a backdrop of community conflict.