

Reports 2002-2003

Office of the Speaker

FUNCTION

The role of the Speaker's Office is to provide support to the Speaker in the execution of his duties, which include:

- Presiding over plenary sittings of the Assembly;
- Chairmanship of the Business Committee;
- Chairmanship of Assembly Commission;
- Representational duties, for example, hosting events for VIP visitors, attending conferences, links with other Parliaments in the UK, the rest of Europe, and elsewhere;
- The scrutiny of legislation at pre-introduction and final stages;
- Ruling on the admissibility of Assembly questions and amendments to Bills and motions;
- Rulings in relation to Assembly procedures;
- Responsibilities in relation to the filling of vacant Assembly seats, the appointment of Ministers, including the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs;
- Nomination of Members to various bodies, for example, the Senate of the University of Ulster, the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body;
- Presenting a motion for the exclusion of a political party or Minister on the direction of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland;
- Responsibilities in relation to the summoning of witnesses to committee hearings;

- President of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Northern Ireland Assembly branch); and
- President of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland suspended devolved government in Northern Ireland on 14 October 2002. The Assembly and its Committees were unable to meet with effect from that date, and Ministers, Statutory Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs no longer held office. However, the Speaker remained in position and, with the agreement of the Secretary of State, continued to carry out those responsibilities that did not relate to plenary business, legislation or Assembly Committees.

During the period 1 April 2002 to 14 October 2002, the Speaker:

- Presided over 31 sittings of the Assembly with the assistance of the Deputy Speakers, Ms Jane Morrice, Mr Donovan McClallend and Mr Jim Wilson. On three occasions, the Speaker was absent on a plenary day due to overseas business, and these sittings were presided over by the Deputy Speakers;
- Chaired 19 of the 21 meetings of the Business Committee and eight meetings of the Assembly Commission, one of which took place during the Commission's visit to the Canadian Parliament;

- Scrutinised 27 Executive Bills, one Committee Bill and four private Member's Bills;
- Considered all amendments to Bills and to motions to the Assembly; and
- Dealt with the dismissal of two Ministers and the resignation and replacement of one Assembly Member.

During the period 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003, the Speaker:

- Arranged and hosted a visit to the Assembly by Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh;
- Represented the Northern Ireland Assembly at the funeral of Her Majesty The Queen Mother and at three Golden Jubilee events in Northern Ireland and London; Deputy Speaker Mr Jim Wilson attended a further event at Hillsborough;
- Represented the Northern Ireland Assembly at the annual Tyrnwald ceremony in the Isle of Man;
- Made an official visit to the Scottish Parliament;
- Hosted seven visits by parliamentarians from Canada, Georgia, Abkhazia, France, Kosovo, Guatemala and Colombia as well as representatives from the US Congress;
- Sponsored and launched two exhibitions in Parliament Buildings;
- Arranged for, and unveiled, a portrait of the Assembly in session and a portrait of Mr Séamus Mallon MP MLA, who retired as Deputy First Minister;
- Arranged and hosted a conference for the Presiding Officers, Clerks and senior officials from the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands;
- Represented the Assembly at a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Conference of the Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe in Brussels;
- Led a delegation of the members of the Assembly Commission on an official visit to the Canadian Parliament and the National Assembly of Québec;

- Received five visits from diplomats; a further visitor was received by the Deputy Speaker, Ms Jane Morrice;
- Organised and hosted a celebration of St Patrick's Day for Assembly Members and guests from all sectors of the Northern Ireland community;
- Sponsored and arranged a harpsichord concert in Parliament Buildings and also a concert by Tommy Sands and Friends;
- Hosted 10 receptions, and dinners for organisations visiting the Northern Ireland Assembly;
- Chaired five meetings of the Northern Ireland Assembly branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association;
- Hosted the first annual dinner of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust; and
- Chaired two selection panels for senior Assembly staff.

The Speaker, as the host of events at Parliament Buildings for a number of organisations, described and explained the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He also undertook various speaking engagements for this purpose. The Speaker worked closely with the Assembly's Education Officers to develop a programme for schools and young people and presided over two youth parliaments.

A considerable amount of work has been done by the Assembly Secretariat to prepare for the election and the next mandate. Election planning guidelines have been prepared under the Speaker's guidance and have been issued to Assembly Members. A new *Members' Handbook* is nearing completion. Finalisation of this and other publications and programmes have been deferred as a result of the suspension of devolved powers to Northern Ireland.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To contribute to achieving the objectives of the Assembly Commission and the Business Committee;

- To build on existing external linkages and to continue to develop new contacts where possible in order to gain knowledge useful to the operation of the Assembly and to assist with the establishment of other legislatures, particularly in emerging democracies and areas of conflict;
- To develop a knowledge of the work and role of the Assembly among all sectors of the Northern Ireland community, particularly young people, and to create a forum for formal and informal dialogue through the organisation of appropriate events at Parliament Buildings; and
- To oversee the preparations for the election and the new mandate, including the induction programme for new Assembly Members, and the transition to a new Speaker.