



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE  
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY  
FIRST MINISTER**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Membership of the Conference of  
Peripheral Maritime Regions**

20 January 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND  
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**Membership of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)  
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Martina Anderson  
Mr Alex Attwood  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr Francie Molloy  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jim Shannon  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

Ms Evelyn Cummins ) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister  
Ms Colette Fitzgerald )

**The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):**

I welcome Evelyn Cummings and Colette Fitzgerald from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) who will brief the Committee on the Executive's membership of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR). I invite you to make a short opening statement to the Committee, and, following that, to leave yourselves open for questions.

**Ms Evelyn Cummings (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):**

Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the recommendations about Northern Ireland's membership of the CPMR.

Colette Fitzgerald is on secondment to the Department. She has been on secondment to Northern Ireland from the European Commission for four years to provide advice and co-ordination on European policy and engagement. With the Committee's agreement, I will bring Colette in at some stage during the discussion to speak briefly about her role and to provide some wider context on European networking opportunities.

Essentially, the Department's recommendation to Ministers is that our membership of the CPMR should cease. That is because membership of the CPMR costs the Department more than £20,000 per annum and Northern Ireland Departments and Ministers have not been able to avail themselves of the opportunities that the CPMR provides. The Department carried out some research and consultation about our membership, which led us to recommend to Ministers that it should cease. Ministers, in turn, decided that they wanted to refer the question to the Committee for review before a final decision is taken.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. We are now more than six months into the financial year; therefore, will there be any cost if the Committee decides to agree with the Department's recommendation?

**Ms Cummings:**

We are committed to paying our membership for this year. We must formally notify the CPMR of our decision to withdraw before June 2010 or we will have to pay a further year's membership fee.

**The Chairperson:**

Will we potentially still receive the full benefits of membership until the renewal date?

**Ms Cummings:**

Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:**

Therefore, we will still be a member until the cut-off date, and our membership will cease only when we send the letter that confirms our withdrawal.

**Ms Cummings:**

That is correct.

**Mr Shannon:**

Evelyn, I am aware that you are going to retire shortly, so I want to be the first to thank you for all your help over the years and to wish you well for your retirement. This is being recorded by Hansard, so it will be on the record for ever. Everyone here has had a relationship with your office and with yourself in particular and we are aware of your interest in the people of Northern Ireland and the energy that you put in. In particular, you have an interest in our fishing industry, and it is to that that my question relates.

When peripheral maritime regions are mentioned, the one that comes to mind right away is the fishing industry. When we examined the background of the CPMR, it was evident that our membership has delivered very little for that industry.

You may be in your position for another month. I am not sure who will be taking over from you, it may be Colette; I do not know what the case may be. Can we be assured that the very important and critical support for the fishing industry is there as a major priority for the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels? To be honest, I thought that the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions was maybe just a reason to go to Cyprus for a wee bit of time or something. Maybe that coloured what was said on the issues. Was it worth £20,000 a year? I doubt it. Can you just assure us that we will be in the loop and that the issues that concern us as a peripheral region, and fishing is an integral part of that with the quotas being decreased. We need to know whether we can still be there and still fighting for the fishing industry. That was long and convoluted, but there were one or two questions in the middle of it, along with my grateful thanks for all that you have done for us.

**The Chairperson:**

It will make interesting reading in the Hansard report.

**Ms Cummins:**

Thank you for your very kind remarks, Jim. It has been a great pleasure to work with the Committee, both here when I have been called to give evidence and in Brussels.

I reassure the Committee on the important point that Jim raised: fisheries and other policy areas will remain as priorities for our Administration. Our attention to that and our engagement on behalf of sectors will in no way be diluted by exiting from this organisation.

Jim is quite right to say that, given the organisation's title and the policy areas that it covers, fisheries and maritime issues are very much a part of its remit. Its coverage is intended to ensure that the peripheral maritime regions are not disadvantaged by their very geography. Its purpose is to lobby the European Commission and the European institutions to take account of those regions in their policy deliberations.

Having said that, there are many ways to do that. We have the advantage, through having an office in Brussels and our relationship with the institutions, of directly lobbying on behalf of the Department and the industry. In fisheries in particular, bearing in mind that the negotiations are held at a certain time of the year and are so public and so important to fisheries areas, I do not envisage any diluting of that approach.

By exiting from the CPMR, we are not doing away with wider networking opportunities. Those exist, we are part of some of those networks and there is scope to enhance that for the benefit of Northern Ireland. I want to reassure you that I do not see this being a disadvantageous move for the fisheries sector, or indeed for any other sector.

**Ms Anderson:**

Thank you very much for attending, Evelyn. You said that Departments were unable to avail themselves of opportunities that the organisation provided. I would like you to unpick a little more about the opportunities that the organisation provides, because from reading the documentation that we received last week, it would appear that there is no verifiable evidence of the benefits of membership of the CPMR. I am not sure whether that would be applicable across other member states or just here.

The Barroso report commented on our need to strengthen our relationship with Europe. In

light of some of the work that the organisation is supposed to be doing on the participation of the region in the design and delivery of EU policy, I wonder whether it has an impact, because other member states who are members of the organisation have had outcomes that shape the design of policy.

**Ms Cummins:**

Thank you, Martina. If you are happy for me to do so, I will address the first part of your questions about the CPMR and its opportunities, and I will then ask Colette to talk about the recommendations in the Barroso task force report and the wider networking opportunities.

The CPMR typically produces commentaries and policy papers on key European policy matters; for example, on the common fisheries policy, the economic policy and the cohesion policy. It analyses proposals, produces papers, and runs conferences and seminars about specific policy areas. The CPMR writes to Northern Ireland Ministers and those from other regions to offer them, civil servants and representatives the opportunity to take part in the conferences, read the papers and take part in voting on a particular position in a policy area.

It has been very good at publicising its events and papers, so it has not been found wanting in promoting what it does and getting all regions of Europe to participate. We put those papers to Ministers and Departments, and with few exceptions, those opportunities have not been taken up. There have been a number of reasons for that, one of the main ones being the time that is involved. Most of the events involve travel, mainly to the country that holds the presidency of the EU at the time. There is also the question of whether attendance at that wider network would give a particular region the opportunity to influence and to network. Some Departments take the view that we already have the mechanism to go directly to the Commission and to lobby on behalf of the region through our office in Brussels and our established links.

I do not think that we are talking about totally lost opportunities. I am not saying that the CPMR is a bad or ineffective organisation; we are simply recommending that there is little to suggest that we can derive or have derived maximum benefit from it because of what we have and because of the consultation that we undertook. We believe that we should take stock of better ways of doing that and of picking up the recommendations that you mentioned, especially when we are spending more than £20,000 a year. I will pass over to Colette.

**Ms Colette Fitzgerald (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):**

Thank you. I am happy to have the opportunity to speak with the Committee today.

Networking is absolutely crucial, as Ms Anderson said. It was one of the key recommendations of the Barroso report. There is a plethora of EU networks, both formal and informal. The Barroso report and the Northern Ireland action plan, which was drawn up in response to it, were clear that Northern Ireland should carefully choose the networks that it wants to formally join. That is the distinction that can be made: a region can be a formal member of a network, pay the money and travel, but opting out does not mean that any opportunities are missed. A region can still participate and be aware of what is happening in conferences that are coming up, for example.

The key networking opportunity for Northern Ireland is through the task force having direct access to the Commission, the individuals in each of the relevant Directorates-General or commissioned departments. That is where Northern Ireland can use its influence at ministerial and official level, and through the office in Brussels, which is an important focus for formal and informal networking.

I am seconded from the Commission specifically to help Departments and wider Northern Ireland institutions, such as local government and other bodies, become aware of the networking opportunities, to point them in the right direction to take part, and to help Northern Ireland offer its experience to other regions. Some of the networks that we are examining, in the area of research and development for example, would be important to businesses and companies in Northern Ireland, particularly in the current economic climate. The message is that we should carefully choose the networks that Northern Ireland will benefit most from, but also be aware of other opportunities. That is partly what I am here to help Departments to do.

**Mrs Long:**

Thank you for your presentation; it was very helpful. The questions are couched in terms of what we have been doing on the EU report, because we were talking about some lost opportunities in which we may have common cause with other member states on issues that are specific to Northern Ireland and not necessarily to England or other regions of the UK or Ireland. That is one of the things that I am a bit concerned about. If we have that link with other regions in being peripheral maritime regions, there may be some common cause that we can find with other

people.

You answered the question that I was going to ask about what opportunities we are missing and why we are missing them. The other question I wanted to ask concerns value for money, which you mentioned. Is that assessed based on what we have got from our level of participation, or is it based on the potential for that? That changes the context slightly. If we engaged more fully, would that be worth what it costs, or is it the case that, by not engaging fully, we are not benefiting, and that makes it look pointless?

**Ms Cummins:**

That is a very good economic point. On the first issue you mentioned, I perhaps should have elaborated a bit more on the networking that the office in Brussels does. I will not go into a lot of detail, but we have very firm networks with the other UK regions, Ireland and quite a number of other European regions. We collaborate with them on projects, particularly during open weeks each October in Brussels, when all the regions hold seminars about their different policy areas. That will not change if we cease to be a member of the organisation.

You made an important point; we are spending money but we are not taking full advantage of membership of the CPMR. However, to take full advantage of it, we would have to spend more money and time. There is no getting away from that.

**Mr Spratt:**

I wish you well, Evelyn. I am sorry that you are leaving. Thank you for the presentation. It is quite obvious that our membership of the CPMR no longer provides value for money. Obviously, OFMDFM will retain the money in its budget and be able to use that for better networking. When we visited the office in Brussels last year, we saw that our counterparts in other regions, particularly in the South, were fully networking. I welcome the examination that you are carrying out. It is admirable that you are coming to the Committee to ask us to agree not to sponsor that organisation. My understanding is that additional money would have to be spent to enable staff from the office in Brussels to attend some of the conferences and other such events. I would rather see that money spent on networking on the ground, as opposed to sitting at some conference for two or three days.



**Ms Cummins:**

I think that there is a loud resonance of agreement with that point of view, particularly in the area of research and innovation, which Colette mentioned. There is scope to compete for significant moneys in that area, and inevitably that will be achieved only if we network and work in conjunction with other member states. I will certainly take those comments on board.

I forgot to address a point that Jim raised about my successor and what is happening. I am retiring on 12 March 2010. A competition is ongoing for someone to replace me. I think that the interviews are due to take place next week. Colette will be staying where she is; she is not in the competition, but I hope that she will continue to be a part of the European division and to give valuable support.

**Mrs Long:**

I have a supplementary question to the point that Jimmy made. Is it correct that the money will stay with the Department for other networking and will not have to go back to the centre and get lost?

**Ms Cummins:**

I hope so. We are in very difficult times, but we did recommend that we leave the membership of the organisation. I do not think that we will have an extra £20,000 to play with. We await our position on next year's budget. We will still be able to spend money on European networking.

**Mr Molloy:**

Thanks for your presentation. Evelyn, I wish you a long and healthy retirement. Thank you for your work when we visited Brussels.

Are there any other recommendations of groups that we should be involved with in order to benefit from European connections?

**Ms Fitzgerald:**

At present, I am working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest Northern Ireland to start to investigate research and development networks. One in particular, the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN), is very much project-based and, therefore, practical. A key point to consider in networking is whether

something can be gotten from it; for example, a direct benefit for companies, businesses or the wider sector, depending on the topic. ERRIN is led by the West Midlands, so other UK regions are involved. We are taking soundings about its possible use for Northern Ireland.

There are other examples and many networks. One member mentioned fisheries. Part of my job is to work with Departments to identify key networks, to participate in their events and, importantly, to attract people from other regions to come to Northern Ireland.

**Ms Cummins:**

Leaving the CPMR does not mean that we are totally throwing the baby out with the bath water. When we identify a useful event, we still have the opportunity to attend it. Recently, I attended an ERRIN networking event in Brussels and was able to provide Invest Northern Ireland with contacts from the development of research projects. Those opportunities still exist. It is our job to ensure that they are seized.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much indeed. That completes members' questions. Evelyn, it was my intention at the end of our briefing, not only to thank you for your attendance today but for your previous attendance at the Committee and your help and co-operation when the Committee visited Brussels. I wish you well in your retirement — I am not sure that that is the correct word; certainly, your retirement from official duties. I hope that you enjoy it very much. That comes with every good wish from every member of the Committee.

**Members:**

Hear, hear.

**The Chairperson:**

We also wish Colette well in the work that she is undertaking. It is good to keep in with the new as well as the old.

We have asked for a research paper to be provided. When we receive that, we can make our final recommendation.