

Section 1: Introduction

Context

1.1 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 and maintaining the property, services and staff required for the purposes of the Assembly. The Commission 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 with representing the interests of the Assembly and its 108 elected Members.

1.2 The Commission has had to operate in a very uncertain political environment, which has made it very difficult to progress some of the longer-term corporate objectives as quickly as the Commission would have liked – for example, senior appointments and the letting of major contracts. When the Commission was first established in shadow form in September 1998 preparations were also being made to establish the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The dates for devolution in both Scotland and Wales were already predetermined, which meant that the lead-in time could be used to put in place all of the necessary preparations. The Northern Ireland context was very different as there was no indication when devolution would occur. This made long-term planning very difficult. There was the added complication that, during what was known as the shadow period, the Commission had to ensure that plenary sittings of the Assembly and meetings of the Committee on Standing Orders and the Committee to Advise the Presiding Officer, established to make preparation for devolution, were adequately supported.

1.3 The Assembly was suspended on three separate occasions:

- 11 February 2000 – 30 May 2000
- 10 August 2001 (24 hours)
- 22 September 2001 (24 hours)

During suspension the Commission was not permitted to meet and responsibility for the development of the Assembly's structures transferred to the Secretary of State. However, with the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on 6 November 2001, the Commission felt that there was now sufficient stability to allow for the publication of this report.

Shadow Period

1.4 The Commission was first established in shadow form at the request of the Speaker on 14 September 1998 to assist, during the transitional period leading to devolution, in making preparations for the effective functioning of the Assembly. During that time the Commission operated under the authority of the Secretary of State and had no powers to employ staff or let service contracts. However, in spite of these constraints, the Commission was successful in putting in place the support arrangements required by the Assembly when devolution was finally achieved in December 1999.

1.5 The Commission met on 34 occasions prior to devolution, as well as hosting many other meetings with Ministers, Government Officials, residents' groups and a wide range of outside bodies. The Commission also built up excellent links with Westminster, the Dáil and the other devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales, which proved invaluable

in helping to understand the requirements of a legislature. The following are the main achievements of the Commission prior to devolution:

- Developed a detailed understanding of the Assembly's requirements in terms of staffing levels, parliamentary services and organisational structures;
- Compiled the Assembly's first Estimates.
- Secured the secondment of over 150 Civil Servants to support the Assembly during the Shadow period and in the early years after devolution;
- Facilitated 19 plenary sittings of the Assembly and 85 meetings of Committees; and
- Developed the Assembly's management and operational structures, including the establishment of the Assembly's Procedural Offices, i.e. the Business, Bill and Committee Offices, as well as the Office of the Official Report.

Post Devolution

1.6 Since devolution the Commission has met on 47 occasions. The high level of attendance of Members past and present, at meetings of the Commission, and at the many other meetings related to Commission business, has made a significant contribution to the success of its work and to the progress that has been made on many issues.

The Commission has had oversight of a very substantial recruitment programme. It has also put in place the full range of parliamentary and corporate services required for the purposes of the Assembly. The Commission is required to answer oral and written questions in the same way as the Executive is called to account. To date, the Commission has responded to 15 oral and 38 written questions. The Commission is very happy to be monitored in this way, as it affords elected Members the opportunity to be involved in the work of the Commission. Responding to oral and written questions also provides a regular forum for the Commission to inform the Assembly of progress on important initiatives.

1.7 The Commission introduced the first three Bills to be considered by the Assembly, dealing with Financial Assistance to Political Parties, Allowances to Members and Office-Holders and Pensions. This experience offered an early opportunity to observe the process of legislation in operation. The Financial Assistance to Political Parties Bill received Royal Assent in 2000 and provides the statutory basis for the current Party Allowance Scheme. At Consideration Stage of the Allowances to Members and Office-Holders Bill, amendments were tabled to withdraw the clauses dealing with the Office-Holders element of the Bill. The amendments were made and the Bill as amended – Allowances to Members Bill – received Royal Assent in 2000. The Pensions Bill was at Committee Stage in February 2000 when the Assembly was suspended. The Pension Scheme was subsequently brought into effect by means of a Secretary of State's Determination in May 2000. This is the basis for the current Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.

Addressing Diversity

1.8 From day one the Commission has conducted its business by consensus, with most decisions being agreed without the need to go to a vote.



'Artfrique' performing at a cultural diversity event in the Long Gallery



Ceremony to commemorate Senators Jack Barnhill and Paddy Wilson.

However, the Commission has had to deal with some of the more controversial issues, and on 3 April 2001, it had four votes around the proposal to display lilies in the Great Hall in Parliament Buildings over the Easter period. Subsequently, an emergency meeting of the Assembly was called to debate the decision taken by the Commission. This is a further example of how the Commission is ultimately answerable to the Assembly. The Commission has been giving very genuine consideration to how all traditions can be best represented in the Assembly and has had discussions with the Arts Council and the Ulster Museum in an attempt to identify suitable works of art and artefacts which could be displayed in Parliament Buildings.

1.9 Recently the Commission agreed to honour First Ministers and Deputy First Ministers when they retire from office, by commissioning a portrait which will be hung in Parliament Buildings. The first beneficiary of this honour is to be Mr Séamus Mallon. On a very poignant note, the Commission held a special ceremony on 12 December 2001 to commemorate Senator Jack Barnhill and Senator Paddy Wilson who were so tragically killed by terrorists. The event was organised to coincide with the 30th anniversary of Senator Barnhill's death. The ceremony was attended by friends

and relatives of the Barnhill and Wilson families, elected Ministers, Officers of the Assembly and Members of the Northern Ireland Executive. The Speaker, the Deputy First Minister, Mark Durkan, and Junior Minister Dermot Nesbitt, representing the First Minister, made short but very moving addresses.

1.10 The ceremony ended with Patrick Barnhill, Senator Barnhill's nephew, and Paul Wilson, Senator Wilson's son, jointly unveiling the two engravings in the Senate Rotunda to commemorate the two Senators and then shaking hands as a mark of friendship. This was a very special and momentous occasion, and the first time that members of the Nationalist and Unionist communities had been jointly honoured in this way by the Assembly.

Other Initiatives

1.11 The Commission has also been actively promoting a range of initiatives over the last three years. The Commission has formally adopted a Fairtrade policy, and Fairtrade tea, coffee, sugar and confectionery are available in the various catering outlets and in the Gift Shop within Parliament



Official launch of the Fairtrade initiative on 26 March 2001.

Buildings. The Commission has also agreed that there will be a clause in every service contract requiring the contractor, where possible, to source Fairtrade products.

A recycling policy for Parliament Buildings has been established and arrangements are now in place for the safe disposal of papers, newspapers, cardboard, glass and aluminium cans. A number of gifts made from recycled material have also been introduced to the Assembly Gift Shop. Future developments will include exploring the potential for the recycling of food organic waste for compost usage within the Stormont Estate.

The Commission is very aware of the importance of alternative energy sources and since April 2001 has been part of an initiative within the Stormont Estate which now uses 15% “green” electricity generated by a second tier supplier. The Commission will continue to monitor developments in the production of renewable energy and play its part in promoting a healthier environment.

1.12 The remainder of this report sets out the Commission’s achievements against its terms of reference.