



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Commemorations Strategy:  
Ministerial Briefing**

17 February 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)  
Mr Declan O'Loan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Lord Browne  
Mr Thomas Burns  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr William Humphrey  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr David McClarty  
Mr Ken Robinson  
Mr Pat Sheehan

**Witnesses:**

Mr Nelson McCausland	)	Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Mick Cory	)	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Stephen McGowan	)	

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

Minister, we signalled our intention to raise a second matter, if you do not mind, and it is the commemoration strategy. The Committee had a clear understanding that the Department was taking forward a commemoration strategy. I think that I am reflecting that accurately. Members had differing views about the content of events that were going to be commemorated. Some felt

that the approach was one-sided; others felt that it was balanced. It appears now that the Department is saying that there is no such thing as a commemoration strategy. The Department is now saying that it is encouraging arm's-length bodies and local government authorities to deal with commemorations and that it will support them, not by giving them money but by giving them support, which is undefined. Is it possible to clear that up? You say that you are taking a strategic approach but that you are not taking forward a strategy. Have I got it right?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland):**

Nearly. The issue arose in so far as a number of people raised questions about specific commemorations. I, therefore, spoke to our arm's-length bodies, including museums, about how it would be addressed. In the past, we have had the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion, for example, and there was an exhibition at the Ulster Museum. There were also exhibitions for the tercentenary of the Battle of the Boyne. Some local museums hold exhibitions. Maybe a local library will do something and another arm's-length body will have another idea.

**The Chairperson:**

I hope that there is a big exhibition in Draperstown and Fintona libraries; hopefully those libraries will be retained.

**Mr McCarthy:**

I hope that Killyleagh library is retained.

**The Chairperson:**

Sorry for doing that, Minister; I could not resist.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

I am delighted to be able to say that I am going to Dungiven library in the very near future, because we heard a lot about it from the Committee in the past. A happy day for Dungiven is approaching.

It then occurred to me that we could get added value by bringing together all of those arm's-length bodies and asking them what resources they have and what they could bring to the table.

We could get added value by having some sort of strategic approach. We said earlier that, in museums and right across government, we need to do the maximum possible with what we have available. If we have less, we need to see how we can do more with it. So, there was a prospect of bringing together the arm's-length bodies to see what we could do. The strategic objective was to commemorate 400th and 100th anniversaries that occur in the period 2010-2021 in a way that delivers value for money, builds knowledge and understanding, and contributes positively to a shared and better future.

We put those bodies together and told them to discuss the issues. When they came back, my Department and the arm's-length bodies reached agreement that the themes would be the 400th anniversary of the Plantation; the Titanic, which is obviously a major opportunity for Northern Ireland; and the period 1912-1922. We have not been specific or prescriptive, other than to identify those broad themes, and those came from the arm's-length bodies. They said that those are the sorts of things that they thought were opportunities.

We do not have any additional funding available for commemorative events. However, there are opportunities: for example, if a local community group wishes to hold an event around a particular theme, it might look at festival funding, which already comes through councils, as a way of drawing down some support, or, if it was an arts-related project with a commemorative aspect to it, it might look to the Arts Council. There are a number of different ways in which money that is already there can be tapped into.

That is where we are, and that is the framework. We have identified certain themes through those arm's-length bodies. We are not being prescriptive. As was pointed out, there is no additional money available, but there are opportunities to tap into existing funding streams.

**The Chairperson:**

That begs the question, "Why bother?" It appears that, despite all that, the Department is offering no added value.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

No; you have missed the point. Take, for example, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

(PRONI). That body has a role to play in this, because it holds our national archives. Museums clearly have a role to play, and libraries quite often put on cultural or commemorative events. I attended an event in the Shankill library to mark 4 July, American Independence Day, and the Ulster connection with American independence. All sorts of events take place in libraries, museums and the different arm's-length bodies. The Arts Council has a role to play, and it was at the meetings. It is about getting those arm's-length bodies to think and work together and to collaborate.

When we were looking at the museums policy, we used the word “partnership” again and again. That is what we are bringing to the table. We want to get added value through those bodies working together. The sort of role that we had in bringing the arm's-length bodies together to think about this matter in a joined-up way is something that I think gives added value.

**The Chairperson:**

It appears from earlier correspondence that the Department would not be very enthusiastic if an arm's-length body wanted to develop an initiative around the great hunger, or the famine. Would such events enjoy your support? If, for example, people in Newry wanted to highlight Warrenpoint as a key place where people came and went during the great hunger, would the Department help? You say you are not prescriptive, but you emphasise the Plantation, the Titanic and the 1912-1922 period.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

It is a fact that centenaries and multiples of centenaries — 200th, 300th and 400th anniversaries or whatever — always strike a particular chord. Think, for example, of the way in which, in 1898, the centenary of the United Irishmen was noted and marked in Ulster and, indeed, across Ireland, and of the way in which, in 1998, the bicentenary was marked. Centenaries, bicentenaries, tercentenaries and so on tend to attract attention. Many events have an annual commemoration. We are all aware of some of the great annual commemorations that we have in Northern Ireland, which people mark in various ways.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Like Glentoran winning the cup.

**The Chairperson:**

Try to ignore Ken Robinson, if you can.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

A little humour helps sometimes.

Those centenaries, bicentenaries, and so on, strike a particular chord. Therefore, they were identified. However, that does not preclude anybody from having events to mark occasions themselves. That happens anyway.

**The Chairperson:**

There is a difference between allowing them to happen and offering them support.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

All we did was create a strategic framework for particular 400th and 100th anniversaries. To pick up on the point about the famine; people will look at the complexities and contradictions of our past, and I think that they should. Although it does not fall within that — I am just making a personal observation — there is probably an opportunity in Northern Ireland to look at all of the effects of famine in the history of Ireland. In percentage terms, there were famines in the early 1700s that caused mass emigration and that were of a scale similar to those which occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. Therefore, if you look at emigration from Ulster to America in the 1700s, for example, you can see that taxation, religious persecution and all of those things were part of the picture, but famine was very much part of the picture, too. Emigration peaked in the years when there was a famine or a bad harvest. Therefore, it is not just restricted to one famine. There is an opportunity, in the context of a shared future, to look at the impact of all famines on the history of Ulster, Ireland and emigration.

**Mr O'Loan:**

I welcome what you said, Minister. I think that we can easily move on to common ground on the issue. It is clear that the Department is actually taking a significant role in this; perhaps more so than we had understood from documentation that had come before us previously. It could

usefully do more to, if you like, declare what it is doing, and it could, perhaps, shy away less from indicating that it has a clear strategic role in the matter. These commemorations are potentially very contentious, and the Minister has indicated that. It is important that they are handled well. I have a lot of confidence that the museums sector will handle well the work that falls to it.

In our previous conversation, we talked about giving a rounded but challenging view of what happened in the past. If it is not clearly seen by different sectors in the community that all events are being explored fully and given proper attention, there is a danger of others — sometimes with political motivations that are not in the broader public interest — attempting to take over commemorations for their own purposes. For that reason, there needs to be a clear public message that the Northern Ireland Executive, through the Department in particular, is in control of the situation. In writing that message large, there is a useful job for you, as Minister, and your Department — obviously, in tandem with the North/South Ministerial Council — to see how those events are commemorated throughout the island. All that I ask you to do is to be prepared to champion that more publicly.

**The Chairperson:**

Perhaps William could ask his question now. Minister, if you do not mind, you could reply to both questions.

**Mr Humphrey:**

The point that Mr O’Loan has just made is absolutely correct. As we move forward on those commemorations, we have to be very sure that we try to minimise the possibility that certain people will use some of them negatively. I do not believe that we can eradicate that possibility, if I am being honest and realistic, because that is the nature of some organisations. Unfortunately, some of the commemorations will be hijacked.

It is not just the Assembly or the Executive that has a responsibility in this regard. We received a letter from Newry and Mourne District Council about the famine commemoration, which I queried. As I declared earlier, I am a member of Belfast City Council. We have set up a committee, on which every party is represented, to look at centenary celebrations to try to ensure that the council, the money that it gives and the city will not be projected in a negative way.

The next decade will be vital for Northern Ireland. It will benchmark the progress that we, as a society, are making in becoming a mature society that is at peace with itself and in which people learn to maybe not embrace but respect and tolerate each other's traditions. That is hugely important as we go forward each year. There is real potential for commemorations to be divisive. As far as possible, we have to try to ensure that, whether the funding comes from regional government or local government, we try to make the commemorations as inclusive as possible and not exclusive, and certainly not offensive or divisive. It is incumbent on all of us to do that in the context of progressing towards a shared and better future. Does the Minister agree?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:**

Very much so. Both members have raised an important issue about how we ensure that whatever happens is done in the context of a shared future.

Some months ago, I was down in Dublin speaking at a conference that looked at commemorations. After giving my speech, I stayed on to listen to Brian Cowen. There were very significant areas in which we said fairly similar things. He made particular reference to 1966, the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, and looking forward to the centenary. If folk are thinking about these issues, it might be useful to read both those speeches, because particularly helpful points were made in them.

We do not want to create situations in which people look to past events as an inspiration to justify violence in the future. It is very important that lessons are learned from the past and that we handle these matters carefully. They can be very positive and constructive and move us forward. However, if they are handled wrongly, they could take us in the wrong direction. I am happy to suggest that the Committee Clerk contact the organisers of that conference — it can be done through our Department — to get a copy of Brian Cowen's comments. I can provide a transcript of my comments.

**The Chairperson:**

OK. Minister and senior officials, thank you for coming along today.