



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

European Issues

10 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Andrew Dougal) European Movement, Northern Ireland Council
Mr William McGivern)

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

The Committee will be briefed by Mr William McGivern and Mr Andrew Dougal, who are from the Northern Ireland Council of the European Movement. Thank you for your presence, you are welcome here today. Having been present during the previous evidence session, you will have got a flavour of how we operate. The session is being recorded by Hansard for future use. We look forward to hearing your short presentation, after which you should make yourselves available for questions.

Mr William McGivern (European Movement, Northern Ireland Council):

For my sins, I am the honorary secretary of the European Movement in Belfast. I am

accompanied by the current president, Andy Dougal. The European Movement is a civil society organisation, and it has been in operation since 1972. It faces challenges because the Northern Ireland population tends to be a bit sceptical about Europe and European institutions, so we generally have a bit of an uphill struggle.

Andy Dougal and I were involved with the European Movement for 15 or 20 years, and we decided to come back to try to revitalise it and to give it a role. After attending the launch of the Committee's report, I responded by saying that we were disappointed because it does not comment specifically about engaging with civic society. Although the document is very good and, having discussed the matter at our council meeting, we all support the Committee's new engagement strategy and its recommendations, we felt that it would have been helpful if the report had encouraged greater engagement with civic society. By comparison, the document that was produced by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) 'Taking Our Place in Europe: Northern Ireland's European Strategy 2006-2010' stated:

"The Government recognises the importance of civil society organisations participating directly in Europe by working with our counterparts in continental regions and by developing working relationships with the EU institutions."

We make no bones about being a pro-Europe organisation. When asked about our stance on adopting the euro, I respond by saying that, for many years, the European Movement has been ambivalent on the matter. You do not have to support becoming part of the euro zone to be in the European Movement. You can be in favour of the concept of Europe without necessarily being in favour of adopting the euro. As Mike Smyth argued in the previous evidence session, some of us favour adopting the euro at some stage.

We want to be engaged and to be involved in consultation, and we have written to Jane Morrice and Mike Smyth about engaging with them and about adopting a consultative role on draft legislation that they will have a role in looking at. They told us that they are eager and happy to meet us. That is the current situation for the Northern Ireland Council of the European Movement.

We have had more than 100 members, although our core membership is now down to about 60 individuals. We have a small number of corporate members, and, in the next 12 months, we hope to significantly increase our personal and corporate membership and to review the European Movement's remit and role here. We also engage with the European Movement in Scotland, which is very active. The European Movement there is looked after by a part-time officer, and it

engages extensively with Scottish politicians. We expect to visit it in April 2010.

In addition, we look to and are involved in negotiations with the European Movement in the South, which is very well funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. The European Movement Ireland has offices in Merrion Square, with five members of staff, and it engages in a lot of activity with respect to information about Europe. To a degree, we look at them enviously. However, our situation is somewhat different. We were previously associated with the European Movement in London. The fact that devolution is likely to continue probably makes it more likely that the European Movement here will adopt and follow the Scottish model of engagement. That is our aim.

Mr Andrew Dougal (European Movement, Northern Ireland Council):

My day job is with the Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke Association, which is a voluntary organisation. As far back as 1991, we found it necessary, because of difficulties with information, to set up the European Heart Network in conjunction with the other heart foundations in Europe. We have an office in Brussels, and the various heart foundations fund that to increase information levels on important issues such as nutritional labelling, which is so important for the prevention of cardiovascular disease. It releases information and lobbies about tobacco control and the harmonisation of tobacco taxes, an issue on which there are huge inequities between the UK and some other European countries.

That need exists, and cancer charities have found it necessary to do the same thing. We have had to set up many of the cancer charities and heart charities because we have the resources to do so. Some smaller voluntary organisations do not have that resource, and it is important that there is an effective umbrella body that is based in Northern Ireland for voluntary organisations and other organisations in civil society. It could act as a channel and as a stimulus for discussion of European issues.

I have been a member of the European Movement for more than 20 years. Outside that organisation, I hear little discussion of European issues in Northern Ireland. The European Movement previously ran an effective schools quiz and initiated debates on many issues with the European Movement from Dublin. Sadly, we cannot resource those activities at the minute because we do not have the funds and we do not receive any support from government. If the resources were available, that would help civil society to become more effective, as the

OFMDFM report requests.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Mr McGivern said that, at times, the public in Northern Ireland do not show an abundance of enthusiasm for the European Union, or so it seems. Is that likely to suffer further as we move away from some EU funding programmes, such as the peace and reconciliation fund and the structural funds? There is also an issue of the reduction of funds because of enlargement in other places, which need those funds, and the redistribution of moneys in the EU? In any sense, will it become more difficult to sell the benefit of the EU in Northern Ireland simply because we will not receive as much funding and will increasingly become a net contributor?

Mr Dougal:

I understand what you are saying; it is very real situation. That does not mean that we should not seek to sell the benefits of Europe. In the past, Northern Ireland did not benefit as much as the Republic of Ireland because, as far as I recall, we had the problem of additionality, which was brought about because the Treasury held back money that was given to Northern Ireland.

It is important to know that Scotland and Wales have very firm links with their European offices in London, and they want more direct links with Europe. We, in Northern Ireland, should not always feel that we must go through London, because that has been a major barrier to benefits for Northern Ireland in the past. For years, Scotland has been forging very strong direct links with the European Commission and the European Parliament.

Mr McGivern:

It is something of a paradox that, although Northern Ireland, by and large, has benefitted substantially from Peace funding and structural funds, the majority of the population is turned off. It is difficult to understand that.

The Chairperson:

What is your opinion on how Northern Ireland spent the money that it was given by the EU, and perhaps by others, compared to how the Republic of Ireland spent the money that it was given? The Republic of Ireland seems to have greatly improved its transport and roads networks, and has used the money with an emphasis on more long-term tangible benefits than perhaps some of the money that has been used here.

Mr Dougal:

When we complained about that in the past, we were told that the problem was caused by the Treasury around additionality. The fact that the Republic of Ireland is a sovereign state was a benefit. In many ways, the European Movement in the Republic is in a much better position than we are, because it is the European Movement of a sovereign state, whereas we have to work through the UK European Movement, which is based in London. That is a problem and we have to face it.

Mr McGivern:

It is interesting that you raised that point. I wear another hat, as chairperson of the Belfast City Centre Management Company. I have made representations on the possibility of a rapid-transit system, indicating that other countries have benefited from those sorts of infrastructure and transport developments but that we have not, and, therefore, in my judgement, that we have ended up with a poorer system than that which we would hope to get. Cities such as Nice have benefited from funding that was available. However, we followed a different pattern, and we are where we are. Although we may not agree with the direction that was taken, we have to live with it.

The Chairperson:

Was that, in any sense, as a result of having to endure and emerge from the conflict? Was more emphasis placed on community infrastructure than on regional infrastructure and road networks?

Mr McGivern:

There is absolutely no question that that was the case. There was a different emphasis on how the money was spent. We can look back now and ask questions, but we cannot change that; we have to live with it.

The Chairperson:

The money is gone.

Mr Dougal:

There was a much greater public relations exercise and marketing around the European Union's involvement in projects in the Republic of Ireland. Big advertising slogans let the public know

that projects were funded by the European Union, and, thus, the public in the Republic of Ireland was seen to appreciate what was going on and the benefits accrued by its sovereign Government dealing directly with Brussels. We did not have that.

Mr Shannon:

The papers that you presented to us mention the future of the European Movement and how it can be promoted and become more involved through education. The paper refers to engagement with secondary schools and universities and to ways in which you can develop those relationships. When we were visited Europe two years ago, my colleague Jimmy Spratt brought up the issue of how we could enhance and further that relationship. At that time, there seemed to be moneys available, through Europe, to encourage that. Are those moneys still available, and, if so, how can we use them to our advantage?

Mr McGivern:

Some money is available. Before the meeting, we talked to Jane Morrice and Mike Smyth about the possibility of holding a session that brought in people from the University of Ulster and from Queen's, who are interested in European affairs, to discuss pending and draft legislation. The universities have indicated that they would be quite willing to do that.

A number of European funding opportunities exist. However, it is difficult for us, as a civil society, to access those. Currently, we are looking for funding to hold a conference on the European Movements in Scotland and Wales, which have almost separated from London. We see our group very much in that light. We would also invite the European Movement from Dublin. We have drafted an application to Brussels under one of its schemes — support for projects initiated by civil society organisations — and we are active on that front.

We get encouragement from the Commission office. We hold our monthly meetings in the Commission boardroom, and have done so for the past 10 years.

Mr Dougal:

I think that what has been referred to is money that is available through the European Movement International. To get our hands on that money, we have to make a proposal to the European Movement UK, which, in turn, will forward it to the European Movement International. The money has been really hard to get at over the years. Much of our work was sponsored by the

private sector; UTV sponsored the school quizzes, for example. We needed private-sector funding because the European money is so difficult to access.

Mr McGivern:

We made a trip to Brussels to see the head of the European Movement International to discuss whether we could apply for the money separately. We were given to understand that we could not and that funding could only be accessed through London. However, over the years, the European Movement in London and, indeed, the British Government have been ambivalent about whether the UK should be in Europe or not. That attitude has caused us difficulty in accessing funding.

Mrs Long:

I want to explore some of the issues a bit further. You said that the Irish Government fund the European Movement Ireland. Are the European Movements in Scotland and Wales funded by the devolved Administrations there or by the UK Government? What is the balance of their funding?

Mr Dougal:

As far as I know, funding for the European Movement in Edinburgh comes from the Scottish Government. I am certain that its funding does not come from London, because I used to be a member of the European Movement UK council.

Mrs Long:

Does the same hold for the European Movement in Wales?

Mr Dougal:

I must confess that I do not know, but I can tell you that its funding does not come from London either.

Mr McElduff:

I want to talk about substitution rather than additionality. Is the European Movement aware of the history of European investment in the water infrastructure here? Is it not correct that a significant amount of money came from Europe for the development of our water infrastructure but that, when the British Government learned of it, they took the same amount of money out of the system?

Mr Dougal:

I do not know about that particular instance. However, we received complaints in so many areas about the “evil additionality”. The common view was that there was no point in applying for European funding because HM Treasury would hold back any money that had been gained from Europe.

Mr McElduff:

Many people did not have a water supply over Christmas. I got in touch with engineers —

The Chairperson:

Are you referring to Galbally?

Mr McElduff:

I am referring to all those places. A water service engineer told me that one of the problems was that money had been taken out of the system. I wanted him to go to Sixmilecross, but he told me that there is a problem at the strategic, macro-level. A multimillion pound package for the development of our water infrastructure was coming from Europe, but the British Government took away the same amount of money at source.

The Chairperson:

I am sure that you were impressed by that argument.

Mr McElduff:

I got the engineer back to the townland of Tursallagh. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

It was another political rod on Britain’s back, was it?

Mr McElduff:

I just wanted the people to have water.

Mr Spratt:

Is the European Movement, Northern Ireland Council, making a pitch for Government funding? There has been an opportunity to engage with the Committee and the Assembly since devolution.

As Jim Shannon said, our evidence is that universities do very good research and development work; they maintain a regular networking presence in Europe in an attempt to secure funding. You referred to social events, and some people might suggest that the European Movement is no more than an expensive luncheon club.

Mr Dougal:

That is an incorrect interpretation.

Mr Spratt:

You pay for that out of your own pockets, but you now seek Government funding for it.

Mr Dougal:

Queen's University has a European affairs institute. When it started to organise serious debates on European issues, we ceased doing so. I am now told, however, that the institute has ceased doing that; we asked the institute why, and it said that it had put the debates on hold for a while. There is a need for sensible, intelligent debate, and some of our members are not keen on remaining members unless we debate serious matters. They do not want a social events club.

Mr Spratt:

Do you recognise that we are in difficult economic times?

Mr Dougal:

Yes, absolutely.

Mr Spratt:

Your chances of getting funding are probably zero.

Mr McGivern:

I take that point. However, we are also seriously interested in engagement, and part of our role, for example, is engaging in giving evidence to the Committee. If there is to be legislation, we would like at least to have some input into it. We made the representation because we felt that if civil society was at least recognised as having a role, that would make it easier for us to make a pitch for funding to the appropriate body, whatever that may be.

I will give you a simple example. I am writing the application for our current civil society project for a conference with the other European movements. We get no help whatsoever, yet the application takes days to complete. That is the sort of chicken-and-egg situation we are in: if we get no assistance, we cannot engage and write good project proposals and make the applications.

Mr Dougal:

We are very interested in the advisory panel on European affairs, because it could stimulate debate and allow us to recreate the activities in which we used to participate. We handed those over to the institute of European affairs at Queen's, which is not continuing those activities, at the moment anyway.

The Chairperson:

I do not think that we had a formal submission from you during the Committee's consultation on its European report, although, given your presence now, we envisage having ongoing contact with you to enable you to make an input. We cannot guarantee membership of anything, because the Committee's recommendations will be largely a matter for others to implement, including OFMDFM and the Assembly Commission. However, your genuine interest in European affairs is not disputed.

Mr Elliott:

I take it that your movement in Northern Ireland is pro-European.

Mr McGivern:

Yes.

Mr Elliott:

However, you said that the movement in England, or London, as you referred to it, is ambivalent.

Mr McGivern:

The European Movement in England is pro-European; however, it has an issue with the British Government's ambivalence to UK involvement in Europe.

Mr Elliott:

OK. However, the movement itself in England is pro-European.

Mr McGivern:

Yes.

Mr Dougal:

In the Republic of Ireland, during the Lisbon treaty debate, the European Movement took an independent stance and said that it was neither in favour of nor against the Lisbon treaty; it merely presented objective information to the public on both sides of the argument so that there could be informed debate. There was no referendum in the UK; I will not say whether that was a good or a bad thing. However, we lacked the debate that a referendum would have brought. I am not saying that a referendum would have been appropriate —

Mr Elliott:

Would you have been in favour of or against a referendum here?

Mr Dougal:

Some members were in favour; some were against. Some members of our movement are —

Mr Shannon:

That sounds like the Alliance Party approach. Sorry, Naomi.

Mr Dougal:

There is a view about taking an eclectic approach to these things.

Mrs Long:

You are not always so united yourselves these days.

Mr Shannon:

We are OK now.

The Chairperson:

Order.

Mr Dougal:

The European Movement is a broad church of people from different political parties; there are no articles of faith, so to speak.

The Chairperson:

Loose on theology, then.

Mr Dougal:

A broad church.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. It has been a useful exchange of views, and the Committee is open to any further representations that you may wish to make.