



**BRITISH-IRISH
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

**COMHLACHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH
NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

THIRTY-FIRST PLENARY CONFERENCE

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OFFICIAL REPORT

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This is a win-win situation for Northern Ireland, and we are deepening North/South co-operation in order to take that agenda forward, with proposals for a single electricity market and universal mobile phone tariffs. There is a ridiculous situation — particularly in the border areas — where one can suddenly move into an area with a roaming charge and then receive a phenomenal mobile phone bill.

Dermot Ahern told me that he can get about four different providers, North and South, within his home, and that from time to time his phone bill goes absolutely bananas if he happens to be in the wrong room. That is a ridiculous situation — I am not talking about the conversations, I am talking about the size of the bill. We are in a single European market. Ireland is an island geographically; we should get mobile phone operators to co-operate as, for example, British Telecom wants to do. Our Ministers are working with the Irish Government to establish a universal phone tariff at local rates right across the island.

We are taking forward a major and radical programme of public administration reform, because Northern Ireland is over-administered and over-governed. There is no question about that. As a result of the announcement and the decisions that we have taken — based on independent advice and expert assessment — about local government, health and education, we have reduced the number of bodies from 67 to 20 and the number of local authorities from 26 to seven. This will place Northern Ireland in the uniquely advantageous position of having coterminous areas for local government, health and policing, which is a very strong public service delivery base from which to move forward.

All in all, there is the prospect of great change in Northern Ireland — I believe for the better — and the prospect of locking in the peace and hard-won stability that my predecessors, particularly Paul Murphy, have taken forward these last few years. I am genuinely optimistic that we can achieve the endgame of the political peace process in due course, and that we can put Northern Ireland on the road, not just to the peace and stability to which its people are entitled, but to the world-class status to which we aspire.

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP):

Peter, thank you for that interesting and far-reaching analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland at the moment. We wish you well in the months ahead in the negotiations that you will inevitably have to take part in. That was the easy bit; now we come to the questions.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Pardons for Irish Soldiers in the First World War

The Co-Chairman (Rt Hon Paul Murphy MP): I plan to group questions 1 and 4 together since they are identical.

1. **Senator Brian Hayes** asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales what plans he has for the granting of pardons to the 306 Irish soldiers who were executed during the First World War; and whether he will make a statement.

4. **Senator Paschal Mooney** asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales whether he will make it his policy that a full pardon should be granted to those Irish soldiers who served during the First World War who were shot at dawn; and whether he will make a statement on the matter.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales (Rt Hon Peter Hain MP): With the permission of the Plenary, I would like to answer questions 1 and 4 together. I shall begin by clarifying a point on the numbers of Irish soldiers who were executed. I understand that 26 of the soldiers who were executed during the First World War were Irish: the figure 306 relates to the total number of soldiers who were executed for the offences for which pardons are sought, the great majority of whom were not Irish.

As both Senators will know, the British Government are in regular contact with the Irish Government about this tricky question. We offered Irish officials the opportunity to review all of the relevant case files we hold to help them with the compilation of a detailed report, which they have now presented to us. We are keeping in touch with them about the progress we have made with our response. We will obviously want to discuss the contents of any formal response with them before we issue it. In the circumstances, therefore, I do not think it is appropriate for me to comment further on this matter today, although I am happy to deal with any supplementary questions.

Senator Brian Hayes: Does the Secretary of State recognise the apparent contradiction in the fact that his Government now want to offer an effective pardon to a group of people who have destabilised both Britain and Ireland over the past 40 years, while not yet having come to a definitive view on a pardon for a group of people whose only crime was to volunteer to fight for their country in the first world war?

Does he agree that he and the British Government have a responsibility to resolve this issue to the satisfaction of the families concerned, and to restore the memory of these men, who, in appalling circumstances, had their lives taken away from them on spurious grounds and for spurious military offences?

Will he further elaborate on a dossier, sent from the Irish Government to the British Government in October 2004, which cast very serious doubt cast on the safety of the convictions of the 26 Irish soldiers by military tribunals in the First World War, and which showed a clear disparity in the treatment of Irish soldiers and the lower ranks of the army?

Does he also agree that that is one of the few issues that unite Catholic, Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist people North and South?

Shame has been attached to the names of individuals who, under any set of circumstances today or in the 1920s, would not have been convicted for those crimes. His Government should now grant them a retrospective pardon.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: I understand and sympathise with those sentiments, but may I correct the Member on one thing from the outset? If he was referring to the on-the-runs situation, we are not introducing pardons for anybody in Northern Ireland. This is a judicial process from which, if the evidence stacks up, people will emerge with a conviction and a sentence; but we can revisit that issue. A pardon would mean that there would be no redress if the terms of the subsequently issued licence were broken.

I agree that those soldiers executed in the First World War are recognised by our Government as victims of a terrible war, and that the stigma of executions needs to be lifted. As public recognition of that increases, it is important that those responsible have been asked to add the men's names to the war memorials and books of remembrance throughout the country. Fittingly, those men are also commemorated in the National Memorial Arboretum. They are remembered alongside their fallen comrades, and the sacrifice of all those lives is honoured and acknowledged by all of us. I accept that we must still move forward to address the issues that Brian raised, but there is a common purpose on this.

4.30 pm

Senator Paschal Mooney: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. I appreciate the constraints under which he operates on this sensitive matter, but I am grateful to him for taking the question. What is striking about the question and the circumstances surrounding this short discussion is that there was a time when we would not have been able to discuss it. It is positive that both Governments are at one in attempting to resolve what is an extremely sensitive matter, even though it is over 90 years old.

Interestingly, the report to which the Secretary of State refers — and perhaps he might comment on this — indicates that there was no religious bias behind the disparity in Irish condemnations. It happened across the board, but it was much higher in Irish regiments than, for example, in the New Zealand regiments. Will the

Secretary of State also reflect on the fact that the New Zealand Government have granted pardons to their soldiers, which is their right as a dominion-status country? At least they have moved to resolve the issue.

With your indulgence, Co-Chairman, and I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me, I want to compliment the Shot at Dawn (Ireland) Campaign co-ordinated by Mr Peter Mulvany, who has been lobbying both Governments for some years on this issue. I hope that it has reached a point at which, as the Secretary of State indicated, it is coming close to closure.

If I may, for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the background to those cases, I have picked one at random: Private George Hanna from Belfast of 1 Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, who was executed in November 1917. Private Hanna had been charged with desertion and convicted on two previous occasions. After a third desertion his court martial was told he had not been home on leave for three years. That was three years in the trenches. In that time three of his brothers had died in the war. He had absented himself because he learned his sister was not well and he was upset because he was not able to see "his people".

The report that the Secretary of State has referred to, compiled by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, said that his failure to get home in three years undoubtedly influenced his decision to try to get back to Belfast, and that there was no evidence the military hierarchy had thought twice about taking a fourth son from the family by executing Private Hanna.

That is just one of many tragic stories surrounding the entire episode. I hope that after this length of time, and considering the general acknowledgment now in the Republic of Ireland of the sacrifices of Irish soldiers who contributed to the Allied campaign, there will be closure, finally, to a tragic episode, and dignity for those men and especially their families after 90 years.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: The Member has put that very eloquently. I was in New Zealand on a ministerial visit on Remembrance Day last year. That issue was very live at the time, and I am aware of what was decided. I am very conscious, Co-Chairman, of the fact that these were teenagers, in many cases, in a terrible war. We are now looking back at it from nearly 100 years on, and we are, I think, all of the same mind that their treatment and the summary executions at that time just cannot be justified in modern, civilised, military terms as well as any other terms. So it is a question of moving forward when we are in a position to do so.

Mr Paul Flynn MP: I welcome those remarks. That was the warmest expression of sympathy for the campaign that I have heard from a Secretary of State. Andrew Mackinlay raised the matter in his first week as a Member of Parliament, and he has pursued it with consistency and dedication

since then. Unfortunately the matter was rejected by a British Minister at the time, in circumstances that did not convince many other Members of Parliament. I believe that consensus is emerging that we must do something to remove the stain of dishonour on those soldiers, and on the Welsh, Scottish and English soldiers as well. Many of them had records of gallantry before those events occurred and were shot at dawn for behaving in a way that would now be regarded as rational and reasonable rather than shameful.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: I am grateful to Paul for those remarks. I am aware of Andrew Mackinlay's long campaign on this matter, which I respect. I cannot say any more about it at this stage, but I do think that there is an understanding on behalf of our Government of the situation and a lot of sympathy for the sentiments that have been expressed.

Proposed Introduction of Identity Cards in the United Kingdom

2. **The Lord Dubs** asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales what discussions he has had with the Irish Government about the proposed introduction of identity cards in the United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: There has been regular contact between the British and Irish Governments at both ministerial and official level since the Government first consulted on the introduction of national identity cards in 2002.

The Lord Dubs: I am grateful to the Secretary of State. Does he agree that there is concern among the Irish community in Britain, among Nationalists in Northern Ireland and among people who travel frequently from the Republic to all parts of the United Kingdom about the effect that the introduction of identity cards will have on them? Can the Secretary of State give any indication today as to the progress that is being made in these discussions to deal with these aspects of the problem?

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: The Government are in touch with the Irish Government on the matter. Only recently I discussed the issue myself. We are moving forward in a way that will satisfy and overcome some of the concerns that the Member has expressed. Many Irish people living in the United Kingdom hold or are eligible for a UK passport, and they would be eligible for a UK identity card like any British citizen and would apply in the same way. All British citizens may apply for a card showing nationality that would be valid for travel within the European economic area, or for one which does not show nationality if they do not wish to travel. Irish citizens who are not eligible for a British passport and who do not wish to obtain one will be eligible for an identity card that does not show nationality. So all those concerns can be addressed.

Mr Jim O'Keeffe TD: There may be an Irish interest in this issue. Ireland may have to follow suit, although we are not yet sure what to do. Can the Secretary of State tell us what sort of timetable he has in mind for the issue of these cards? More importantly, can he tell us what the cost will be?

Rt Hon Michael Mates MP: That is not the Secretary of State's part of the ship. *[Laughter.]*

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: I will refer the question to the Home Secretary.

There are two issues. The first is about taking forward the preparations. That will take many years, and the law regarding identity cards will not be fully enforced this decade under current plans, but it is anticipated that it will be fully enforced early in the new decade.

It also involves taking forward preparations for biometric-based identity cards, passports and driving licences. We are proceeding along the biometric route because biometric data will be needed on passports to gain entry to the United States of America. Indeed, people travelling to some European countries from outside the European Union will, in the future, also require biometric data on their passports. The world is moving in that direction.

As to whether identity cards should be compulsory, that will be the subject of a separate decision and a vote in Parliament. We will make that decision when we approach that point in several years' time.

Transport Links

3. **Mr Murray Tosh MSP** asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales what work the Government have carried out to assess the importance to the Northern Ireland economy of transport links from Northern Ireland to, and through, Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Wales: I am fully aware of the importance of strong transport links to the economies of both Northern Ireland and Scotland, and I recognise the value of co-operation between the regions in relation to economic development, trade, tourism and energy links.

I particularly welcome the continued commitment of port authorities and ferry companies to invest in Irish Sea routes between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Mr Murray Tosh MSP: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I was interested in his earlier comments about the joint work around the City of Derry airport that involved the Republic. Does he agree that there is a similar requirement for co-operative work across the three jurisdictions in the Northern Ireland Office, the Department for Transport and the Scottish Executive in relation to trunk-road routes from Stranraer through southern Scotland and into northern England and to