

President's address to AGM of the Irish Association 18 January 2025

I am pleased to report a successful and eventful year. The council of the association met on 5 occasions. We held 5 well attended lunches in Belfast and Dublin. Our application for financial support from the Shared Ireland Civic Society proved successful. This meant that we were able to run the first two sessions of our four part programme to look at the working of Strand Two of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement which sought to develop north south co-operation in a number of areas.

On 27 January we held our AGM meeting and lunch at Wynn's Hotel in Dublin. Afterwards we heard from Anna Walsh, former Director of the all-island Theatre Forum and now Director of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Annaghmakerrig, Co. Monaghan. Our St Patrick's Day lunch was held on 16 March at the Clayton Hotel, Belfast. The speaker was Professor Pol. O'Dochartaigh, vice president of Galway University and chair of a recent Universities Ireland report on student mobility which recommended changes to enable students from Northern Ireland to access university education in the south. At present, compared to thirty years ago, only a small number of northern students attend southern universities, a matter of concern to many association members. The main problems are the late timing of CAO offers and the unfavourable conversion of A levels to CAO points.

On 7 June an association lunch was held at Wynn's Hotel. The speaker was Lord Reg Empey, a former leader of the Ulster Unionist party. He was also a member of the unionist team at the negotiations leading to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and we valued hearing about these eventful days. On 2 November another lunch was held at Wynn's Hotel. Afterwards we heard from Evelyn Collins, chair of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission. She spoke about the work of the Commission and of her previous work as CEO of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Our final lunch was held on 3 Dec. in the Ulster Reform Club, Belfast. I spoke on the subject of 'The decade of centenaries; personal experiences and observations'. My own comments were followed by reminiscences of other association members about of this eventful decade.

In March we were pleased to learn that our proposal to the Shared Island Civic Society Fund for support had been approved. This was for a programme of events under the title 'A vision for the future of North-South co-operation? Strand 2 of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement-a generation on'. Our first symposium on the subject, was held on 9 September at Queen's University Belfast, attended by a large audience of association members and others. We looked at the work of the North-South Ministerial Council, the body responsible for implementing Strand 2 and overseeing 6 implementation bodies and 6 areas of co-operation. The opening joint keynote address was given by

Bertie Ahern and Lord Reg Empey. We then heard from the two joint secretaries of the NSMC, Richard Hill and Hilary Reilly. There followed two panels of speakers, one of ‘practitioners’ who had worked with the NSMC and the second of analysts and commentators.

Our second symposium, another well attended event, was held in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, on 25 November. Here we looked at the impact of the economic elements of the north-south implementation bodies and areas of co-operation, established under Strand 2. We considered how things had worked in the past, at present and into the future. Attention focused on Inter-Trade Ireland, Waterways Ireland and the Loughs Agency. The areas of co-operation examined were agriculture, transport and tourism. The opening keynote joint address was given by Angela McGowan, Director of the CBI, Northern Ireland, and Danny McCoy, CEO of IBEC. We then heard from the CEOs of the three implementation bodies mentioned above. Our first panel of speakers covered the relevant areas of co-operation. A second panel of commentators and analysts discussed the issues raised earlier and looked to pointers/opportunities for economic co-operation on the island of Ireland.

Finally, I want to thank members of the council for their valuable input at our meetings. Our secretary, Conor O’Malley, our vice president and acting treasurer, Dermot O’Doherty, deserve a special mention for all their dedicated work. These two, along with Stephen

Dowds, Chris McGimpsey, and Ruth Taillon have served as members of a steering committee, chaired by myself, which has dedicated much time and thought to the organization of our ongoing series of events to examine the operation of Strand 2 of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. For their input we are very grateful. Especially, I want to pay a strong tribute to our administrator Eimear Donnelly. Over the last year she has continued to give great assistance to myself and the other officers. She has played a critical part in the running of our current programme of events.

Professor Emeritus Brian M. Walker

President of the Irish Association

