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Cross-border Cooperation on Criminal Justice Matters: December 2015 Ministerial Trilateral

Summary: The Minister for Justice David Ford provided the house with a statement on the recent bilateral meeting under the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation on criminal justice matters. The meeting covered elements of the Fresh Start Agreement, dealing with crossborder organised crime. Significantly, Minister Ford noted that, “North/South cooperation on criminal justice matters has been both increased and intensified since devolution. The local accountability under devolution has provided the environment to further improve cooperation and working relationships between criminal justice agencies in the two jurisdictions. The cooperation that we have now has never been better, and I am proud of the work that has been undertaken at ministerial and official level under the auspices of the IGA. Consequently, solid foundations already exist that can be built on in order to meet the tasks and challenges ahead.”

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I will make a statement regarding a bilateral meeting under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation on criminal justice matters, which was held in Farmleigh in Dublin on Monday 21 December, and the ministerial trilateral meeting that followed, focusing on the elements of the Fresh Start Agreement dealing with crossborder organised crime, including the establishment of a joint agency task force. I intend first to cover the IGA meeting, before turning to the trilateral meeting.

I represented the Executive at the bilateral meeting with Frances Fitzgerald TD, the Minister for Justice and Equality, who was attending her fourth meeting under the auspices of the IGA. It was the eleventh formal ministerial meeting that I have attended under the IGA since the devolution of justice in April 2010. As I have previously said, I am committed to keeping the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the agreement on the same basis as North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meetings.

The bilateral meeting on 21 December provided Frances Fitzgerald and me with an opportunity to review early progress against the 2015-16 joint work programme, which runs through to summer

2016. Members will recall that I previously shared the work programme with the House following agreement of the programme in June.

Further discussions took place about maximizing opportunities to access European funding for justice-related initiatives, and it is hoped to revisit progress in that area by the early summer. In the interim, officials have been tasked with undertaking further exploratory research into appropriate potential European funding streams arising from Horizon 2020.

Five project advisory groups (PAGs) currently provide the mechanism by which work is taken forward. They are focused on the areas of public protection; youth justice; forensic science; support for victims of crime; and social diversity. The PAGs continue to promote and support cooperation across the broad spectrum of criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border. Examples include further work to develop proposals to improve cross-border information-sharing on persons unlawfully at large from custody; the exploration of opportunities for sharing knowledge in the area of diversity; and exploiting increased opportunities for enhanced cross-border awareness relating to policing minority communities.

It was encouraging to note the progress that has been made against the current work programme, which this year contains an enhanced focus for the project advisory groups by assigning to each of them specific activities with anticipated outcomes. An excellent example arising out of the work programme was the successful staging of the sixth annual joint public protection seminar, held in Belfast City Hall on 20 November. The theme of the seminar was innovation for safer communities. It provided a forum for professionals from various justice agencies, North and South, to discuss a number of key topics, including a most relevant session on tackling hate crime. Indeed, through the public protection PAG, the probation services have been cooperating to prepare a research paper relating to 'Working with hate crime offenders: Perspectives from the Probation Service' for the law faculty at the University of Limerick.

It is anticipated that the final paper will be published by the summer. The seminar also saw the launch of volume 12 of the highly professional joint Irish Probation Journal. Having addressed the five previous annual seminars, which were introduced following the devolution of justice powers in 2010, I was very pleased to open the sixth annual seminar.

The IGA had a presentation on the mutually beneficial cooperative support that exists from the co-chairs of the support for victims PAG. The co-chairs gave a joint presentation that covered the transposition of the EU victims' directive, which was effective from November, and developments in victim services in our respective jurisdictions. Good working relations and the sharing of best practice and expertise between the forensic science services continue. That has resulted, for example, in instances of informal and practical assistance between the laboratories on DNA profiles, an important area in criminal investigations. Through the youth justice PAG, staff exchanges and information sharing between the juvenile detention facilities in the two jurisdictions has proved extremely beneficial, particularly in the development of the Oberstown facility in County Dublin. Those are just a few examples to demonstrate the ongoing cooperation between criminal justice agencies across the island.

As the Assembly is aware, it is not primarily the intention of the IGA to provide for discussion on the full range of cross-border security issues. However, I used the recent opportunity to briefly discuss

with Frances Fitzgerald some crossborder security-related issues as well as the work being undertaken to tackle fuel laundering.

The intergovernmental agreement provides an extremely helpful framework for supporting North/South cooperation on criminal justice matters. It is that level of mature cooperation that, along with the current Irish Justice Minister and her two predecessors, I have worked at over the past six years, being committed to striving to keep all the people of this island safe and secure. I am grateful for the support of so many individuals in all the relevant agencies. I also want to take the opportunity to update Members on the ministerial trilateral that followed the IGA on 21 December. The Fresh Start Agreement stated that a trilateral crossborder ministerial meeting would take place in December 2015, involving the United Kingdom Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive and would agree new measures to enhance law enforcement cooperation aimed at tackling organised crime and criminality, including that linked to paramilitarism. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Justice, the UK Government by the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Executive by the then First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Justice.

Following detailed work by officials in both jurisdictions, I am pleased to say that those present were able to agree the working arrangements of the new cross-jurisdictional joint agency task force, which will be chaired by the two police services. Organised crime is a scourge on civilised society across the island of Ireland and is a source of funding for further criminality and paramilitarism. Many organised crime groups on this island take advantage of the existence of a land border and commit the classic cross-border crimes of smuggling and excise evasion. They also use the ability to move easily between jurisdictions to cover their activities and to evade the authorities. The resulting criminal activity affects everyone in society, but the impact falls particularly heavily on those living in border areas, who have the same right as all of us to live free from the fear of criminal activity. The new task force brings together a range of law enforcement agencies from both jurisdictions to work jointly and equally to tackle this crime and make it clear that it is totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

In addition to the task force, the funding provided under the agreement will allow my Department, together with law enforcement bodies, to take forward a comprehensive range of actions designed to tackle criminal activity. The £25 million that Westminster has committed over the next five years, along with the additional £25 million provided by the Executive, will allow increased investigative and specialist capacity in addition to scope for research and awareness raising. That major programme of work will be based on the work of the new three-person panel, which will make recommendations to the Executive on a strategy for disbanding paramilitary groups. The members of the panel — Professor Monica McWilliams, Lord Alderdice and Mr John McBurney — met for the first time on 23 December, and their independent report is due to be presented by the end of May.

The agreement, of course, builds on the existing excellent working relationship between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and an Garda Síochána, which provides a firm basis for practical and strategic cooperation between the two services. The 'Cross Border Policing Strategy', published in December 2010, highlights the breadth of cooperation that exists and the determination of both services to use all the tools available to them to ensure that those who would seek to exploit the border for criminal ends will not succeed. The strategy has been reviewed by both police services,

and it is anticipated that the revised strategy will be launched in the very near future. The document is particularly relevant at this moment, with a focus on the island on paramilitaries and organised crime.

In concluding, it is worth noting that North/South cooperation on criminal justice matters has been both increased and intensified since devolution. The local accountability under devolution has provided the environment to further improve cooperation and working relationships between criminal justice agencies in the two jurisdictions. The cooperation that we have now has never been better, and I am proud of the work that has been undertaken at ministerial and official level under the auspices of the IGA. Consequently, solid foundations already exist that can be built on in order to meet the tasks and challenges ahead.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-11-01-2016.pdf>

11 January 2016

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

Summary: Here the deputy First Minister provided a statement to the house following the twenty-first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the twenty-first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held in Armagh on Friday 11 December 2015. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have agreed that we can make this report on their behalf. Our delegation was led by the then First Minister and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Minister Bell, Minister Farry, Minister Ford, Minister Foster, Minister Hamilton, Minister McIlveen, Minister Ní Chuilín, Minister O'Dowd, Minister O'Neill and junior Minister McCann. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD.

The following Irish Government Ministers were also in attendance: Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton; Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charles Flanagan; Minister Bruton; Minister Fitzgerald; Minister Reilly; Minister Donohoe; Minister Humphreys; Minister of State Hayes; and Minister of State McHugh. At the start of the meeting, the Council discussed the tremendous achievement of Professor William Campbell, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine the previous day, and it extended its congratulations to him.

Ministers then went on to discuss the recent Fresh Start Agreement and the work to be undertaken by officials to review North/South infrastructure projects. In addition, the Council welcomed the commitment in Fresh Start to tackle paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime and to bring to justice those involved. We then moved on to the main agenda, which opened with a discussion on the financial and economic challenges faced within each jurisdiction and the work being taken forward in each jurisdiction to promote economic growth and employment.

The importance of tourism, trade and investment and of supporting companies accessing overseas markets was recognised. We are all pleased to see that economic recovery is under way, but we

must not be complacent and we must ensure that the conditions are right to support growth. We then moved on to talk about EU matters, in particular how we can work together to maximise the drawdown of EU funds. Discussions are continuing at the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meetings on identifying opportunities for collaboration to draw down EU funding. Those discussions will continue throughout the next round of meetings. The Council noted that, under the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, €19.36 million was secured in the first year for specific joint projects involving both jurisdictions. Horizon 2020

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-12-01-2016.pdf>

Agriculture: Cross-border Cooperation

Summary: Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how cross-border cooperation will be enhanced by the rural development programme 2014-2020.

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's rural development programme (RDP) for the 2014- 2020 period was formally adopted by the European Commission on 25 August last year. The programme is a €623 million package of support that will benefit the farming and food sectors, rural communities, rural businesses and the environment. An important element of the rural development programme is the opportunity for cooperation between us in the North and those in other member states, including the South.

A distinct scheme within the programme supports cooperation between local action groups (LAGs) that will deliver the LEADER measures of the RDP. Through the all-island cooperation scheme, LAGs will be encouraged to collaborate with groups in other regions to share knowledge, innovate and acquire skills. An allocation of £4 million has been ring-fenced to meet the cost of projects funded through the all-island cooperation scheme, and my officials are in contact with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales and with colleagues in the South to develop common principles that will reduce the red tape associated with cross-border and transnational cooperation. My officials and their colleagues in the South have also met to discuss a mechanism to facilitate cooperation between our LAGs.

I am pleased that officials are proposing an event, to be held during the spring of this year, to which LAGs and relevant stakeholder organisations from across the island and beyond will be invited. A call for cross-border cooperation projects will also be opened later this year. The benefits of cooperation are multidimensional, and through the rural development programme, cross-border projects could help industry to target new markets, introduce new approaches to rural tourism or provide economy of scale to enable activities that would not have been feasible within a single area.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-12-01-2016.pdf>



Thursday, 14 January 2016

North-South Interconnector Bill 2016: First Stage

Summary: Here TD moved a motion on the North-South Interconnector Bill 2016 that:

“That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate the North-South interconnector providing regulations for erection adjacent to dwellings and public places, rerouting of disputed interconnector parts underground following opposition during public consultations and related matters.”

Peadar Tóibín: I am proposing the North-South Interconnector Bill 2016 in conjunction with my colleagues, Deputies Ó Caoláin and Colreavy. The purpose of the Bill is to ensure the North-South interconnector, which is a necessary piece of infrastructure, is developed. It is being held up at the moment by the Government's pig-headed attitude that it needs to be built overhead. If it continues to pursue this approach, it is not likely that the interconnector will ever be built. I suggest that it should be put underground.

I will give a bit of context. For approximately a decade, the decent and ordinary people of County Meath have been campaigning day and night - week in, week out - to try to ensure their families are kept safe, their businesses can continue to thrive and their properties do not collapse in value. EirGrid plans to build hundreds of 45 m pylons throughout the county, up through counties Cavan and Monaghan and into County Tyrone on the northern side of the Border. This has created great fear and anguish among the people of County Meath. People are worried about health, for example. There is a strong body of opinion, not least among the members of the European Commission's scientific committee, that the previous conclusion that extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields are a possible carcinogen, which was chiefly based on childhood leukaemia results, is still valid. This very strong statement puts the wind up most families that are threatened with this form of infrastructure. This Bill addresses that fear and asks the Government to carry out an independent investigation to make sure knowledge and proper research are brought to the people's attention and are in the people's hands before decisions are made. Another problem that arises when people are trapped in the curtilage of these pylons is that house prices immediately collapse.

They will not be able to move out of an area should they want to do so, because there is no value in their homes. Where that fear exists, this legislation allows for independent research to be carried out and to be provided to the host community who live along the length of the North-South interconnector.

There are also fears on the part of businesses in the local area. People in the businesses of tourism, heritage, agriculture and bloodstock fear that these pylons will pose an enormous threat to their livelihoods. This legislation simply tasks the Government with producing independent research to identify what exactly the threat is to the business community, the agricultural community, the bloodstock community, etc., and to put that information into the hands of the citizen.

We were told that it was an impossibility to put this underground as it would be too expensive. First, we were told it could not happen - it was just not feasible. Then we saw the rush to Batterstown and the east-west interconnector put paid to that mistruth. In 2007, EirGrid stated it would be 25 times the cost of putting it underground but in 2009 it said it would be seven times the cost to put it underground. Deputy Pat Rabbitte, the previous Minister, stated it would be three and a half times the cost to put it underground. In the nine years of this particular plan, the cost of putting it underground, even as arrived at by the proponents of putting it overground, is collapsing. We have spoken to experts who firmly believe the cost is far less, at perhaps some one and a half times. I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister asking what the cost would be to customers of electricity in the State if it was put underground and the Minister replied that he could not say.

We want to make sure we put democracy back into the planning process. The Fianna Fáil-Green Party Government created the Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act which took democratic influence out of the planning process. In other words, the normal planning process in the county council would no longer apply. That forces potentially dangerous pieces of infrastructure onto communities and that should not be done in a democracy. This Bill seeks to put democracy back into the picture. If a number of people in the host community alongside the North-South interconnector feel that this is a threat to their livelihoods or their lives, they have an opportunity to organise a meeting chaired by An Bord Pleanála. If, after collecting all the independent evidence and deliberating over it, the people are against the putting overground of these 400 kV lines in their area, they have the right to vote on it. If over 50% vote against overheading, then the chairperson of An Bord Pleanála sends a letter to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Minister is obliged to proceed with putting it underground.

There has been a lot of political debate on this over the past nine or ten years and I see that a Fine Gael Deputy for Meath is present today. The campaign feels betrayed and aggrieved about the actions of this Government when it comes to implementing its wishes. I appeal to Deputies to stand up for the citizens they represent and make sure this legislation is implemented before the Dáil closes.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2016-01-14a.409&s=border#g410>