

RESTRICTED Mrs Black

FROM: TONY McCUSKER
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT

DATE: 24 AUGUST 1998

ASST TO 355/8.
SEC 25 AUG 1998
CENT SEC

Mr Devenney 27/5/8
LO 25 AUG 1998
25/8



NI Permanent Secretaries

The next phase of "East/West Issues" which he used to deal with 25/8

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AT BRITISH-IRISH COUNCIL MEETINGS

1. The Belfast Agreement (page 14) states that a British-Irish Council will be established under a new British-Irish Agreement 'to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of the relationships among the people of these islands. In essence, the new Council will bring together the British and Irish Governments, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly together with the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man to discuss and, where agreed, take action on matters of mutual interest. Each administration will remain responsible for decisions and actions within its own jurisdiction and the various administration will be free to enter into bilateral or multilateral agreements as they see fit. It is envisaged that our own Secretary of State together with those for Scotland and Wales will attend.
2. The Agreement requires that an inaugural meeting of the BIC, in its shadow form, should take place as soon as practically possible after the Assembly elections. In practice we expect this meeting to be held in late September/early October. Between now and then a number of issues need to be settled including items for the agenda.
3. Although it had originally been envisaged that the first meeting would simply provide an opportunity to settle some preliminary

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issues, the Cabinet Office BIC Planning Group has come to the view that the agenda should allow for some debate on substantive issues. Accordingly, Central Secretariat would like Departments to indicate which subjects they consider might be suitable for discussion at meetings of the BIC. Paragraph 5 on page 14 of the Agreement provides some useful pointers. It mentions that suitable areas for early discussion in BIC mode could include agriculture, education, the environment, cultural issues, EU matters, health and transport.

4. This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive and there is, in theory, no limit to the number of subjects which could be put forward for discussion. However, topics might have some or all of the following broad characteristics:

- they should be of current and ongoing interest to some, if not all, of the participants bearing in mind, of course, that the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly do not yet exist and that the level of interest is likely to vary from one jurisdiction to another;
- they should be of sufficient weight and importance to demonstrate that the Council is a serious body which, while primarily focused on exchanging information rather than taking decisions, will nevertheless make a real and significant contribution. They should allow for the possibility that the significance of the body will develop over time, in terms of the decisions and actions it is able to take; and
- they should avoid issues, at least in the early stages, which would be likely to cause controversy, division or open conflict between

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the different administrations. EU business is likely to fall into this category.

5. I should be grateful if you could provide me with suggestions for topics for discussion at BIC by **Friday 28 August**. Once an agenda has been agreed with the Cabinet Office, who will be providing the BIC secretariat, relevant Departments will be asked to work up (probably at short notice) detailed briefing for mid-September.
6. It would also be helpful if Departments could nominate a single contact point, at grade 5 level to deal with BIC issues.

TONY McCUSKER

cc: PS/PUS(B&L)
PS/Mr Semple
Mr Jeffrey
Mr Watkins
Mr Brooker
Mrs D Brown
Mr T Smyth
Mr Gamble
Mr A Smyth

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