



Houses of the
Oireachtas Commission
Coimisiún Thithe
an Oireachtais

*Minutes of the Commission
Wednesday, 25th March, 2009*

1. The fourth meeting of the Commission of 2009 took place at 5.10 p.m. in Room 2, Leinster House.

2. MEMBERS PRESENT.

Deputy John O'Donoghue, T.D., Ceann Comhairle (Chairperson), Senator Pat Moylan, Cathaoirleach of the Seanad (Deputy Chairperson), Senator Paul Bradford, Mr. Kieran Coughlan, Secretary General, Deputy Tom Hayes, Deputy Séamus Kirk, Deputy Michael Mulcahy, Deputy Dan Neville, Deputy Pat Rabbitte and Senator Jim Walsh.

Apologies for inability to attend were received from Senator Cecilia Keaveney.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS.

The minutes of the meetings of 11th and 18th February, 2009, respectively, were agreed by the Commission, subject to amendments to the minutes of 11th February as follows:

- In paragraph 5(b), line 2, by the deletion of “a minimum” and the substitution therefor of “approximately €400,000”.
- In paragraph 6(c)-
 - (i) by the deletion of “An Bord Snip Nua” and the substitution therefor of “the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure” in each place where it occurs.
 - (ii) by the insertion of “A written memorandum of the discussions at the meeting between the Secretary General and the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure will be circulated to Commission members following the meeting.” after the last sentence in the paragraph.

4. ACCOMMODATION ISSUES – MEETING WITH THE OPW.

Deputy Martin Mansergh, Minister of State with responsibility for OPW, Commissioner John McMahon and Mr. Frank Fingleton, OPW, were admitted to the meeting.

(1) Restoration of Leinster Lawn [04-01-09 - 04-01b-09; note04-01-09].

Arising from previous consideration of this issue, the Commission had before it for consideration the following options as regards how to proceed at this point in time:

- (a) an OPW report and correspondence recommending the restoration of Leinster Lawn in Summer 2009 in order to comply with the terms of the original Part 9 planning permission granted to facilitate the construction of Leinster House 2000 which stipulated that the lawn be re-instated on the completion of the new building;
- (b) a report from the Management Advisory Committee of the Office of the Houses of the Oireachtas recommending that the Commission seek a five year extension of the temporary car park at Leinster Lawn under the Part 9 planning process on value for money grounds in the light of the need for further programmed works on the Houses which will impact on car parking over the next five years and taking into account the feasibility of integration of Agriculture House into the Leinster House campus.

A general discussion on the two options proposed ensued and the following points were made:

- there can be no reduction in the number of car parking spaces made available to members of the Houses of the Oireachtas;
- 68 car parking spaces would be lost on the restoration of the lawn;
- the OPW was committed to sourcing and funding the 29 spaces previously permanently lost from Kildare House when the Oireachtas printing facility was located there;
- the Office would revert to its original car parking allocation of 254 spaces;
- the OPW confirmed there would be no adverse impact on the newly restored lawn as a consequence of the works proposed to be carried out in Leinster House during the recess periods during the next few years, and into the future once the full conservation works on Georgian Leinster House commence;
- of the 438 Commission civil service staff, 95, or 21%, have full parking and this apparently represents the same percentage as in the Department of Transport and the OPW, so the Office is not out of line with other Government Departments and Office who operate more regular working hours.

Following discussion the Commission agreed option (a) as proposed by the OPW subject to the following conditions:

- (i) adherence by the OPW to its commitment to source and fund in the immediate vicinity of Leinster House the 29 car parking spaces which were permanently lost from Kildare House as a consequence of the location of the Oireachtas printing facility there;
- (ii) in the management of the allocation of car parking spaces by the Office administration, that the long standing principle, namely, absolute priority be given to members of Houses at all times, would be maintained;

Mr. Kieran Coughlan, Secretary General, Deputy Dan Neville and Senator Jim Walsh dissented from the decision.

(2) ***OPW programme of Summer works for Leinster House*** [04-01c-09].

The Commission was briefed by the OPW on the programme of health and safety and accessibility works planned for Leinster House for the Summer Recess 2009. These works are in addition to the restoration of the lawn project and primarily relate to fire safety and structural works, as follows:

- Second floor fire and safety works which will require the second floor to be vacated and the relocation of staff on that floor to Kildare House and consequential moves from Kildare House to Passport Office.
- Installation of a ramp to the plinth to make it wheelchair accessible.
- Improvement of ramp in front of Leinster House on the Kildare Street side to make it fully compliant with modern standards.
- Upgrading of lift in Leinster House to meet emergency first safety standards.

The Commission approved the programme of works as proposed by the OPW.

(3) ***Leinster House accommodation strategy*** [04-01d-09, note04-02-09].

The Commission welcomed the fact a that feasibility study is now underway on the possibility of consolidating Oireachtas accommodation in Agriculture House in view of the potential to connect Agriculture House directly to Leinster House via a bridge or corridor. The Commission requested that priority be given to the Houses of the Oireachtas on the allocation of accommodation in

Agriculture House once decentralisation is completed given the current spread of accommodation across the Leinster House complex and environs at this point.

The Commission thanked Minister of State Mansergh and his officials for their attendance at the meeting and they withdrew from the meeting.

5. PUBLIC RELATIONS SERVICES AND REVIEW OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY.

The Commission had before it for consideration documentation in relation to a post-implementation review of the Communications Strategy together with a work programme and revised budget for the Communications Unit for 2009 representing a 63% reduction in the original 2009 estimate [04-02-09 - 04-02c-09].

A general discussion ensued and the Commission welcomed the various initiatives rolled out during the year, such as the schools outreach programme; Family Days; attendance at the National Ploughing Championships; improved coverage of Committees as a result of the engagement of Committee press officers; and the “week in the Oireachtas” articles published in the regional newspapers. In discussing the public relations element of the Strategy, members acknowledged the particular challenge facing them in rebutting the frequent inaccurate and highly negative portrayal of the role of members in the media.

The Commission agreed that the Communications Unit would table a set of recommendations for the next Commission meeting to take account of the various issues as raised by members, to include options on the appointment of a spokesperson on behalf of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

6. LEGAL ADVICE SERVICES FOR THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ON CHILDREN.

The Commission had before it for consideration a revised proposal from the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children seeking sanction for additional funding of €78,976 for legal advice services to cover the Committee’s legal costs (including fees payable to special advisers to the party groups represented on the Committee) up to its new report back deadline of 9th April, 2009 [04-03-09, 04-03a-09].

The Commission referred to the fact that when it last sanctioned funding for legal advice services for this particular Committee, a stipulation of the sanction at that point was that should additional funding be sought, the issue of the engagement of the three legal advisers for the political parties would need to be re-evaluated in view of the cost implications associated therewith.

Arising therefrom and in view of the current economic climate, the Commission agreed to sanction an amount of €35,235 to cover the fees for the legal advisers to the Joint Committee only with no further sanction to be granted for funding for the legal advisers to the political parties.

7. COMMISSION EXPENDITURE CUTS PROPOSAL TO THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE / RATIONALISATION OF MEMBERS’ ALLOWANCES REVIEW.

Arising from its consideration of this issue at the last meeting, in the context of the proposed introduction of a single parliamentary allowance, which as yet awaits ministerial approval, the Commission noted revised bands making appropriate provision for members living long distances from Leinster House [note04-03-09].

8. FACILITY TO RESPOND TO MULTIPLE EMAILS.

The Commission was informed that this issue had now been satisfactorily resolved and it was now possible to reply to several separate emails at the one time.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS.

African Schools Project.

Senator Walsh highlighted a request received from *Camera Technology* requesting that Oireachtas computers which are to be decommissioned and recycled would instead be made available to this company to be reused in its African schools project and he asked that this issue would be considered by the Office.

Siemens Contract.

Members questioned when the Siemens ICT support contract is up next for renewal.

10. ADJOURNMENT.

The meeting adjourned at 7.05 p.m.

JOHN O'DONOGHUE, T.D.,
Ceann Comhairle and Chairperson of the Commission.
Dated: