



Houses of the  
Oireachtas Commission  
Coimisiún Thithe  
an Oireachtais

*Minutes of the Commission  
Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2009*

1. The fifth meeting of the Commission of 2009 took place at 5 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, Senator Cecilia Keaveney, Deputy Séamus Kirk, Deputy Michael Mulcahy, Deputy Dan Neville, Deputy Pat Rabbitte and Senator Jim Walsh.

**3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS.**

The minutes of the meeting of 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2009, were agreed by the Commission.

Arising from the minutes, the Commission requested clarification from the OPW on the estimated cost of restoring Leinster Lawn.

**4. REVIEW OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY (*resumed*).**

The Commission had before it for consideration the following documentation in relation to the review of the Communications Strategy:

- (i) Commission spokesperson options [05-01-09],
- (ii) Communications Unit Work programme and revised budget for 2009 [05-01a-09].

***Commission spokesperson options:***

The Commission discussed the following possible options in relation to the nomination of a Commission spokesperson:

- (a) recruitment of an external spokesperson and suppression of an equivalent post,
- (b) the Head of Communications to act as spokesperson,
- (c) the Ceann Comhairle and a cross-party panel of members nominated by the Commission to act as spokespersons.

A general discussion ensued and the Commission welcomed the pro-active approach being adopted by the Communications Unit in strongly invoking a right of reply and rebutting factual inaccuracies and misleading statements in the media, and in the national newspapers in particular. The Commission acknowledged the difficulty in identifying an ideal solution which would represent the views of all members of the Houses as well as defending the institution of parliament given the adversarial nature of the political system. The Commission agreed that the nomination of a panel of members on a cross-party basis warranted further consideration as does the desirability of researching how other parliaments approach this issue.

As in interim measure the Commission agreed that-

- (i) the Head of Communications would continue in his present role, including fulfilling the spokesperson role, subject to involvement of the Ceann Comhairle in media interviews where circumstances so warrant, pending the teasing out of a long-term solution at parliamentary party level,
- (ii) the Communications Unit would continue to pro-actively monitor and respond rapidly to inaccurate and misleading statements in the media in relation to the Houses and their members and rebuttals would be published to the Oireachtas website where required, and
- (iii) the Head of Communications would report to the Office's Management Advisory Committee and the Commission on a quarterly basis on ongoing developments in the roll-out of the Communications Strategy and on specific communications challenges facing the organisation.

***Communications Unit Work programme and revised budget for 2009.***

The Commission approved the Communications Unit programme of works and a revised budget for 2009 which represents a 63% reduction in the original estimate for 2009.

## **5. FINANCIAL MATTERS.**

(i) **REPORTS FROM FINANCE COMMITTEE:**

- (a) Financial Report for Quarter ended 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2009.

Deputy Seamus Kirk, Chairperson of the Finance Committee, presented the report of the Finance Committee [05-02-09].

The Commission noted the report.

- (b) Three-year budget overview [2007-09].

The Commission noted a high level overview report of the Commission's current three-year budget up to the end of March 2009 [05-02a-09].

- (c) 2008 Commission Accounts.

The Commission noted the 2008 Accounts as signed by the Secretary General and submitted to the Comptroller and Auditor General by 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2008, pursuant to the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 and 2006 [05-02b-09].

(ii) **CO-OPERATION AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE HOUSES OF THE OIREACHTAS COMMISSION – LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENT.**

The Commission had before it for consideration a proposal from the European Parliament seeking the agreement of all national parliaments to be a paying agent for the parliamentary assistance expenses of MEPs and to recoup such payments made from the European Parliament [05-02c-09].

The Commission approved the proposal and, in view of the fact that the Office has no legislative basis on which to conclude this agreement, agreed to propose to the Minister for Finance the inclusion of an enabling amendment to the Commission Acts in the forthcoming European Parliament (Irish Members) Bill 2009, in order to empower the Office to conclude this agreement prior to the European elections in June.

## **6. COMMISSION EXPENDITURE CUTS PROPOSAL TO THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE / RATIONALISATION OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES REVIEW.**

### *Rationalisation of members' allowances.*

The Commission noted the changes pertaining to members' allowances as announced by the Minister for Finance in the Budget in April. The Commission also noted correspondence received from the Minister for Finance stating he is currently considering the Commission's proposal for a composite single parliamentary allowance and that he will revert to the Commission as soon as possible with his decision [05-03c-09]. To advance this issue, the Commission agreed to seek a meeting with the Minister to recommend an early positive decision in this matter. The Ceann Comhairle and Deputies Tom Hayes, Seamus Kirk and Pat Rabbitte were accordingly nominated to meet with the Minister on behalf of the Commission.

### *2009 budget for Committee travel.*

The Commission had before it for consideration correspondence received from the Working Group of Committee Chairmen (WGCC) expressing concern at the extent of the Commission's reduction in the budget for Committee travel for 2009 and seeking a meeting with the Commission to discuss the matter further [05-03f-09]. The Commission re-affirmed its decision to reduce the travel budget for Committees for 2009, which was prompted by the worsening economic climate, and emphasised that only essential travel should be undertaken by Committees in this climate. In that respect the Commission recommended to the WGCC that, in apportioning travel budgets between Committees from its 2009 revised budget, the WGCC should give priority to the Foreign and European Affairs Committees whilst also taking into account other emerging developments at Committee level. The Commission agreed to seek the input of the WGCC on the 2010 travel budget prior to finalising the 2010 Estimate later this year.

## **7. RESOURCES – GOVERNMENT MORATORIUM AND UPDATE ON MEETING WITH THE SPECIAL GROUP ON PUBLIC SECTOR NUMBERS AND EXPENDITURE PROGRAMMES.**

### **(a) Government moratorium on public sector numbers [effective from March 2009 to end December 2010].**

The Commission had before it for consideration a letter from the Minister for Finance regarding the Government decision on public sector numbers [05-04-09] and a recommendation to the Commission on a response to the Minister's letter [05-04a-09].

The Commission noted that the Minister's letter-

- (i) refers to the fact that section 12 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003, allows the Commission to determine its staff requirements and to appoint staff up to and including the grade of Principal (Standard); and
- (ii) asks the Commission, in view of the present state of the public finances, to take account of the Government Decision on the implementation of savings measures on public service numbers in its deliberations on staffing levels and the filling of vacancies between now and the end of 2010.

The Commission, in approving the recommended response to the Minister, agreed to comply fully with the principles outlined in the Minister's letter, and agreed that no public service post in the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, however arising, will be filled by recruitment, promotion or payment of an allowance for performance of duties at a higher grade. When vacancies arise, the Secretary General will allocate or reorganise work or staff accordingly. The Commission also agreed that any exceptions to this principle, which will arise in very limited circumstances only, will require the prior sanction of the Commission, and that, in its consideration of any such exceptions, the Commission may require the suppression of a post or posts within the Office, yielding an equivalent payroll saving. The Commission further agreed that any critical short-term vacancy which cannot be met by re-allocation or re-organisation of existing resources e.g. arising from maternity leave, may be filled but only with the approval of

the Secretary General. Any guidelines which may be received from the Department of Finance in relation to vacancies arising from maternity leave will be applied by the Office.

**(b) Application of the Government moratorium to the secretarial facilities provided by the Commission to members and parties under the Scheme for Secretarial Assistance.**

The Commission was advised that the Government moratorium applies to public sector posts only and does not apply to the staff employed by members and parties under the Commission's Scheme for Secretarial Assistance. The Commission discussed the possibility of applying the principles of the moratorium to the scheme but concluded that this was not practical given the nature of the scheme and the fact that staff employed under the scheme are assigned to individual members and therefore work for that member only. The staff employed by the Parties under the scheme were in a different category and the application of the principles of the moratorium would be reviewed in this context.

**(c) Coverage of absences / short-term extension of staff contracts in the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisor.**

Having regard to the decisions made at paragraph (a) above, the Commission considered a proposal in relation to existing and pending absences on maternity leave and the expiry of contracts in the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisor [05-04c-09].

The Commission in approving the proposal noted that it is cost neutral does not increase overall numbers employed, and ensures the ongoing provision of essential legal advice services to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

**(d) Memorandum on meeting of 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2009, between the Secretary General and the Special Group on Public Sector Numbers and Expenditure Programmes.**

The Secretary General updated the Commission on his meeting of 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 2009, with the Special Group on Public Sector Numbers and Expenditures Programmes. Arising from the discussion, the Commission requested details of the facilities provided by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to certain external persons/groups based in Leinster House who are not directly engaged by the Office and the associated cost of providing such facilities.

## **8. STRATEGIC PLAN 2007-09 – 2008 PROGRESS REPORT.**

The Commission noted a progress report on the implementation of the Strategic Plan from the Secretary General, as required by section 16 of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003 and 2006 [05-05a-09].

In a related matter, the Commission noted that on costs/value for money grounds the following changes will be made with regard to the preparation and publication of the 2008 Annual Report which is due to be published in June:

- the report will be prepared in-house with no external graphic design input.
- a "photo gallery" will be placed on the Oireachtas website in conjunction with the Annual Report showing photographs of members at work in the Houses/Committees during 2008 as well as promoting parliament activities rolled out by the Communications Unit, such as the Education Programme, Family Day, the Ploughing Championships and Culture Night.
- the Report will not be externally published in hard copy and a limited supply of hard copies will be produced in-house.

## **9. ICT - PROVISION OF SECOND REMOTE SITE FOR MEMBERS.**

The Commission noted the decision of the Office's Management Advisory Committee, chaired by the Secretary General, that the proposal to provide a second remote site for member not be progressed at this point in time given the current economic situation and the low level of demand from members for the service.

## **10. INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS (IIEA) WEBSITE PROPOSAL – REQUEST FOR FUNDING.**

The Commission noted:

- (a) the decision of the Office's Management Advisory Committee, chaired by the Secretary General, that the request for funding be declined due to-
  - (i) the legal risk identified by the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisor;
  - (ii) the opinion of the Communications Unit that the proposal does not offer value for money; and
  - (iii) the opinion of the eDemocracy Unit that the case has not been made for the value to the organisation of the tools/functionality to be developed.
  
- (b) that co-operation will be given to the IIEA on the provision of content (in particular the re-use of content available on the Oireachtas website) subject to the Standing Orders that apply and subject to the rules of coverage.

## **11. INFORMATION NOTE ON COMMISSION OPERATING PRINCIPLES.**

The Commission noted an information paper on Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Operating Principles.

## **12. CORRESPONDENCE RECEIVED FROM DEPUTY CIARÁN CUFFE REGARDING LEINSTER LAWN.**

The Commission noted that correspondence received from Deputy Ciarán Cuffe proposing the provision of a vegetable garden on the restored part of Leinster Lawn has been referred to the OPW for its consideration.

## **13. ADJOURNMENT.**

The meeting adjourned at 6.55 p.m.

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