

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM

FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Dé Máirt, 29 Meán Fómhair 2020

Tuesday, 29 September 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Frances Black,
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Emer Currie,
Patrick Costello,	Annie Hoey,
Pádraig Mac Lochlainn,	John McGahon,
Brendan Smith,	Niall Ó Donnghaile.
Peadar Tóibín.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Elisha McCallion.

Teachta / Deputy Fergus O'Dowd sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Seo an chéad chruinniú den choiste seo agus tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeimis in ann comhoibriú le chéile. Níl aithne agam ar gach duine anseo, so b'fhéidir go gcuirimis muid féin in aithne ar dtús. This is the first meeting of our joint committee. I do not know everybody here and I apologise for that. If members' names are in front of them, that is fine, but the staff may not be familiar with everybody, so we will go around the room and members can introduce themselves.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: Michelle Gildernew, Sinn Féin MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Brendan Smith, Fianna Fáil Teachta Dála for Cavan-Monaghan.

Senator Annie Hoey: Senator Annie Hoey of the Labour Party, Agricultural Panel.

Senator Emer Currie: Senator Emer Currie.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, Teachta Dála for Dún Laoghaire.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Niall Ó Donnghaile, Seanadóir de chuid Shinn Féin.

Chairman: Tá fáilte romhaibh. Because of the Covid-19 restrictions, some members are seated away from microphones but are properly and appropriately present.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Deputy Patrick Costello of the Green Party, representing Dublin South-Central.

Senator Elisha McCallion: Senator Elisha McCallion of Sinn Féin.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Teachta Dála up in Donegal.

Senator Frances Black: Senator Frances Black, Independent.

Senator John McGahon: Senator John McGahon of Fine Gael.

Mr. Chris Hazzard: Chris Hazzard, Sinn Féin MP for South Down.

Chairman: Everyone is very welcome. One of the problems we have is that, because of Covid, we have to have distance between attendees. If all members turn up, this room will not suit us, so we have to think about that, not today but for our next meeting. If we could get a different room, perhaps the Seanad Chamber or even the Dáil Chamber, it would be more appropriate because this is such an important committee and we want to encourage all members to attend, but we will just see how that works out. The protocol is that the clerk to the committee will be aware of what we are saying and we can follow it up.

A number of people could not make it today, and a number of members are chairing other committees. The first item on the agenda is the election of a Vice Chairman. Deputy Lawless is chairing the justice committee. The clerk to the committee was not aware of the full membership of the committee until Friday evening. I am in members' hands as to what to do. It might

be wiser to wait until next week to elect a Vice Chairman if people cannot be here because of the short notice. We could put the election as the first item on the agenda for next Thursday. The clerk to the committee has been working with the other secretariat staff and the proposal is that we meet, as we did previously, at 2 p.m on Thursdays. That would suit people who may have to travel.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I do not wish to pre-empt any decision of the committee, and we may not need to take a decision on it today, but I am sure that those who were members of the committee during the previous Dáil will agree that 2 p.m. on Thursday is not an ideal time for the work of the committee. It very often clashed with the voting block in the Dáil, although I realise that will be moved around in the current circumstances. Despite the important work of this committee, to which the Chairman rightly referred, Thursday afternoon here was very often like the *Mary Celeste*. Groups invited to make presentations were being brought into a vacuous, empty LH 2000. I am very conscious of how this looks to witnesses, but also to members. It was deeply frustrating that meetings clashed with the voting block. Where press coverage of this committee's work was concerned, information was going out on a Thursday night or Friday and not getting any kind of lift at all. My preference is to pick a day other than Thursday. I understand, however, that there are new members. We do not necessarily need to rush to a decision today. I would like to hear the views of members who were members previously.

Chairman: Everybody has a right to make a contribution. We held meetings on Thursday afternoons to allow those travelling from the United Kingdom to come here. The decision is entirely in the hands of the members, however. We must remember other committees also have times allocated. The alternative is to sit on a Monday or Friday, when there would not be a problem over publicity and with giving due notice.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I congratulate the Deputy on his election as Cathaoirleach of this committee.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Smith: He was a member of the previous committee. As Senator Ó Donnghaile said, very few of us were here most Thursday evenings, unfortunately. At times, this was embarrassing when deputations came from far and near. Our meetings clashed with those of other committees.

In 2011 and 2012, I believe we were asked to sit on Thursday afternoons to facilitate Westminster MPs. Quite a few of them were attending at that time. There was a clash with other committee meetings early on Thursdays and, as Senator Ó Donnghaile said, the voting block tore the back out of it altogether. Votes were going on for a long time, meaning our committee often started late. That was also one of the problems. I would like a time that would facilitate most members, but not a ludicrous time late in the evening when there would be no hope of getting any coverage or of a good attendance. I would have no difficulty with a Monday or Friday, if that is the best option to facilitate all members as much as possible.

Chairman: I acknowledge Deputy Tóibín coming in. He is very welcome. I do not know whether there is a seat with a microphone at which he can sit. If not, there are seats at the back or the side. We will facilitate the Deputy whenever he wishes to make a contribution.

It is not the tradition for the clerk to the committee to speak in public session so we may go into private session in a minute, if necessary. The clerk to the committee will know what other

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slots are available and tell members the options as soon as he can identify them. Members may think about the options when they get them. We can stick to next Thursday week for our next meeting because that is the slot we have been given. If that is not satisfactory, we can change it. Monday or Friday seems like the best option because there would be no impediment. There would be a decent environment and nobody would have to sit to the side and their contributions could be recorded at any time.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: The Chair summed it up very well. We must ensure we are available for the MPs who attend.

Chairman: Absolutely.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Even they would probably agree that Thursday is not great. To return to the Chairman's point on having the Chambers available to the committee, a Monday or Friday would be ideal because it would tick all the boxes. I endorse fully what the Chairman has proposed.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: Most of the MPs go over on a Tuesday, either in the morning or the afternoon. Friday tends to be a constituency day for many. A slot might work on a Monday, or a Friday if necessary. A Monday would also enable the MPs to attend.

Chairman: We have many ideas. We will draw on our collective wisdom and communicate to the clerk to the committee the dates that are available and the options. We shall meet next Thursday week with a view to solving this issue.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There is a difficulty with Monday, because Deputies are down on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays so asking them to be here Monday or Friday is not going to work. That is the reality of it.

Chairman: We will leave it for the moment. We will meet Thursday week, think about it and look at all the options and we can make a decision then. Is that fair to everyone? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.45 p.m. and adjourned at 4.20 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 8 October 2020.