

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR, TURASÓIREACHT AGUS SPÓRT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT, TOURISM AND SPORT

Dé Céadaoin, 3 Iúil 2019

Wednesday, 3 July 2019

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Ruth Coppinger,	Mark Daly,
Imelda Munster.	Frank Feighan,
	John O'Mahony,
	Pádraig Ó Céidigh.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Stephen Donnelly and Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile.

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

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: The joint committee is in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputy Catherine Murphy. Before we begin, I remind members to switch off their mobile phones completely as they interfere with the recording equipment. We will continue in private session.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.09 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.30 a.m.

Business of Joint Committee (Resumed)

Chairman: Before we begin, I remind members of the committee and people in the Public Gallery to make sure their mobile phones are switched off completely. If mobile phones go off, they will interfere with recording.

I wish to turn to some housekeeping matters. The minutes of the meeting of 26 June 2019 have been circulated. As there are no matters arising, are the minutes agreed? Agreed.

I refer to the correspondence list, transport, tourism and sport, of Wednesday, 28 June 2019. Correspondence item 2019/490a/b is an email from Mr. Leo Curley, public Bills Office, and notification. The notification was sent to the sponsors of the Private Members' Bill and it is now a matter for the Members concerned to request the committee to include the Bill in our work programme, and this request is awaited. It is proposed to note the correspondence. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/491 is an email received from Ms Arlene Woods, Irish Tourism Industry Confederation, seeking a meeting before the joint committee to discuss the state of the tourism industry and the challenges and opportunities that the industry faces. It is proposed to schedule this meeting after the summer recess. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/492 is an email received from Mr. Des Whelan, chair designate of the Port of Waterford. We were told that the Minister wished to process this by inviting him here but he has declined and is seeking an alternative date that suits. We will schedule this meeting as soon as we can. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/493 is an email from the Chairman, that is myself, forwarding an email from Deputy Alan Farrell concerning the recent "Prime Time Investigates" programme on greyhounds. I have been advised it is a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine is dealing with this. We will forward the Deputy's letter to that committee, if that is agreed. Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/494 is an email from Ms Aoife McQuillan, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, concerning the future appointment of Ms Rose Hynes as chairperson designate of the Shannon Group. It is proposed to schedule this meeting after the summer recess. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/495 is an email received from Mr. Michael O'Connor, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, inquiring as to the scheduling of the general scheme of

the air navigation and transport Bill 2019. The Minister's office has said that this proposed legislation is urgent and has asked us to deal with it. The clerk to the committee has arranged that we would deal with it, if we can agree, on Wednesday next. It is proposed to schedule this meeting for next Wednesday. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Correspondence item 2019/496 is an email from Ms Mary Daly, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, stating that the chair designate of Fáilte Ireland is unable to appear before the joint committee and is seeking an agreeable date as soon as we can. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: I now turn to EU scrutiny, Schedule A. On COM (2017) 648, it is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed. On COM (2018) 279, it is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed. On COM (2018) 286, it is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed. On COM (2018) 438, it is proposed that this proposal does not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed. It is proposed that the proposals listed in Schedule B, that is, COM (2019) 159, COM (2019) 221, COM (2019) 223 and COM (2019) 255, do not warrant further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

International Recognition for Irish Athletics

Chairman: I, again, remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to please turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the recording equipment.

I welcome to the meeting today the following representatives from Friends of Irish Athletics: Mr. Larry Larkin, Mr. Willie Keane, Mr. Colm Rennicks and Mr. Darragh Rennicks. Before we commence, and in accordance with procedure, I am required to read the following to all witnesses. By virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. However, if witnesses are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, witnesses should not criticise nor make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that members should not comment on, criticise or make charges against either a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I advise the witnesses that they have submitted an opening statement in advance, which we have circulated. The clerk to the committee informed me just before the meeting commenced of a further three opening statements, which have not yet been seen by the members. I will ask the clerk to the committee to circulate those to the members. I ask the witnesses to keep to their original, fairly comprehensive statement and as questions are asked, make their other commentaries, if that is acceptable. I now invite Mr. Larkin to make his opening statement.

Mr. Larry Larkin: On behalf of my group, I thank the Chairman and committee for inviting us here today.

We are a group of former all-Ireland medal winners in athletics and we are here to speak about an ambiguity regarding the representation of Irish athletes competing in international competition. I am accompanied by Willie Keane, the holder of 56 all-Ireland titles, from Killee, County Clare; Colm Rennicks, the holder of many all-Ireland titles, from Bohermeen, County Meath; and his son, Darragh, who has the distinction of winning six County Meath seniors in a row and is on the verge of making a number of Irish teams. We have the older generation and the newer generation to pass on their views to the committee today.

The athletics situation all started in 1934, when the International Amateur Athletic Federation, as it was then named, the world governing body for athletics, adopted a new political boundary rule, which divided the country into the 26 counties of the Irish Free State and the six counties of Northern Ireland, with Britain claiming jurisdiction over the Six Counties. The introduction of the political boundary rule split the sport of athletics in Ireland for the next 85 years and deprived generations of Irish athletes the honour of representing the island of Ireland in international athletics.

There was an agreement in 1999. The inter-association agreement was based on a new all-Ireland structure for athletics, both at home and at international level. Recognition of this agreement by all the parties involved would have resolved this dispute, but this has not happened.

As a basic outline, the memorandum and articles of association of the Athletic Association of Ireland, AAI, or Athletics Ireland, state that the AAI is an all-Ireland body, the object of which is to foster and develop athletics throughout the island of Ireland. It defines Ireland as meaning the island of Ireland and it states that a county board may be formed in any of the 32 counties of Ireland. We now find ourselves in a situation where the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Sports Ireland and the president and previous presidents of the AAI are stating that the AAI must comply with the IAAF political boundary rule, which they say restricts the AAI international recognition to representing the Republic of Ireland.

The area causing the most concern for our group and for many Irish people from the 1999 inter-association agreement is the international recognition of Ireland by the International Association of Athletic Federations, IAAF. There are two opinions being expressed. The first opinion is that Athletics Ireland is an all-island body and accepted as such by the IAAF and United Kingdom Athletics since 1999, with Irish teams representing the island of Ireland at European and world championships. The second opinion is that Athletics Ireland is an all-island body at home on the island of Ireland, but when we go to the European and world championships the IAAF recognises Ireland as the Republic of Ireland and not the island of Ireland as per its political boundary rule. Our group and many more groups around the country believe that because of the 1999 inter-association athletic agreement, Irish athletes should be accepted as representing the island of Ireland at European and world championships and enjoy the same recognition, which is granted by the Federation of Ireland, to represent the island of Ireland at the Olympic Games.

I will give a brief history of Irish athletics. We would like to take this opportunity to give some background on Irish athletics history. Athletics is one of the oldest sports in Ireland. Over the past 150 years, there have been ten different associations promoting athletics on the island. In June 1922, following Irish independence, the three athletics associations, the Gaelic

Athletic Association, GAA, established in 1884, the Amateur Athletic Association, established in 1885, and the Cross Country Association of Ireland, established in 1886, merged to form a new association called the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland, NACAI. The new association would govern athletics and cycling in the 32 counties of Ireland. The NACAI applied to the International Amateur Athletic Federation, IAAF, for membership and was approved at the Paris Congress in 1924 as the member for the island of Ireland. Therefore, for the first time in Irish sporting history, one association for athletics and cycling represented the island of Ireland in international competition.

In 1925, a dispute arose between the NACAI and a number of its Belfast clubs, with some breaking away and forming a new Northern Ireland association. In 1930, the British Athletic Association claimed jurisdiction over Northern Ireland and affiliated to the IAAF as Great Britain and Northern Ireland. From 1924 to 1934, Irish athletics was recognised internationally as representing the island of Ireland. On 6 October 1934, the NACAI held a special congress in Dublin to vote to accept or reject the Border in Ireland. The result was 31 votes to 23 to reject the political boundary rule in Ireland. The NACAI was suspended by the IAAF on 1 May 1935 for refusing to recognise the Border in Ireland. This left the vast majority of Irish athletes suspended from all international competition. Six clubs from Dublin and one from Clare refused to accept the democratic vote of the NACAI congress and broke away from the NACAI. They formed the Amateur Athletic Union of Éire, AAUE, on 1 April 1937. Even though that body had only seven clubs, the IAAF accepted it as the new member for Éire because it recognised the Border. The AAUE was dissolved in 1967 when a new association was formed called Bord Lúthchleas na hÉireann, BLÉ. The IAAF accepted BLÉ as its member for Éire because it recognised the Border.

Since 1934, the international recognition of Irish athletics has been in dispute, with efforts to resolve it taking place from the 1930s to date. In the late 1990s, the Minister responsible for sport informed the athletics associations that the Government had decided to fund only one athletics body and he encouraged the associations to come together and end their division. Negotiations then took place between the NACAI, BLÉ and Athletics Northern Ireland, ANI. These meetings led to the formation of Athletics Ireland. Special congresses were held in November 1999 where the delegates were informed there was to be a new athletic association for the island of Ireland, to be based on an all-island structure both at home and at international levels. BLÉ voted to dissolve itself, the NACAI voted to join the new association and the Northern Ireland Athletic Federation was to continue as a constituent part of United Kingdom Athletics, UKA. This allowed for the formation of Athletics Ireland. Athletics Ireland then affiliated to the IAAF to represent the island of Ireland.

Today we have two associations, namely, Athletics Northern Ireland, which is affiliated to the United Kingdom, and Athletics Ireland. The agreement was submitted to the IAAF, the world governing body for athletics, and was formally approved at its council meeting in Monaco in November 1999, where Athletics Ireland was accepted as the new member federation for Ireland. The agreement was also approved by the UKA.

At the beginning, Athletics Ireland had no constitution but its new officers consulted members and within two years a new constitution was approved at an EGM. The constitution defined Athletics Ireland as an unambiguous all-Ireland body. On 26 August 1999, Athletics Ireland was incorporated as a limited company, with its memorandum and articles of association closely following the previous constitution. There is no reference in the articles of association stating Athletics Ireland is a Twenty-six Counties association. The articles of association are

very interesting. The main objective for which the company is established throughout the island of Ireland is to foster the development of track and field athletics, road running, walking, cross country running, mountain running and ultra-distance running. Perhaps the most important point is that Ireland means the island of Ireland. Provincial councils may be formed in each of the four provinces. The nine counties of Ulster, Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone, are listed. County boards may be formed in each of the 32 counties of Ireland. A county is defined as being one of the 32 counties of Ireland. An objective is to strive to ensure that no racial, religious, political or other kind of discrimination will be allowed in athletics, and to take all practicable measures to stop such discrimination. Another objective is to strive to secure that there shall be no hindrance to participation of any country or individual in athletics competitions on racial, religious or political grounds and to ensure no such hindrance in athletics meetings over which the association or the IAAF has control. The agreement between the parties recognises the right of the IAAF member with jurisdiction in Ireland to organise athletics throughout the island of Ireland. A member of Athletics Ireland can sit on the board of ANI and a member of ANI can sit on the board of Athletics Ireland.

IAAF rules require all members to submit a copy of their constitution to the federation each year and Athletics Ireland has done this since 2002. It seemed that decades of acrimony had ended. Athletes from all parts of the island of Ireland were entitled to represent Ireland internationally, but at the same time athletes from Northern Ireland who wanted to represent the United Kingdom were free to do this. This arrangement gave parity of esteem to all athletes and created excellent co-operation on the ground. Unfortunately, a shadow has fallen over the agreement. The fundamental founding principles according to which Athletics Ireland was founded as an all-Ireland association are now thrown into doubt because officials of Athletics Ireland assert that the body can only represent the Republic of Ireland at European and world championships because it is obliged to obey IAAF rules, one of which states that only one association can be recognised from each country because of the 1934 political boundary rule.

In September 2009, the then president of Athletics Ireland, Mr. Liam Hennessy, wrote in a reply to a letter from Bohermeen Athletic Club, County Meath, that the Athletic Association of Ireland was the member for Ireland and recognised as such by the IAAF in its constitution. He stated the constitution states the jurisdiction of members shall be limited to the political boundaries of the country they represent and that our area of jurisdiction is the Republic of Ireland. Mr. Hennessy's statement has been endorsed by his successors as presidents of Athletics Ireland – Mr. Ciarán Ó Catháin, from 2012 to 2016, and Mrs. Georgina Drumm, from 2016 to 2020.

On 14 January 2019, in a reply to a letter from Mr. Larry Larkin, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, stated he made inquiries of Sport Ireland and was informed that, since 1924, Athletics Ireland has been affiliated to the IAAF, the world governing body for the sport. Under IAAF statutes, according to the Minister, Athletics Ireland's jurisdiction at international events covers the Twenty-six Counties and, as such, the status of Ireland at European and world athletics championships is on that basis. The Minister is incorrect in stating it was 1924 when Athletics Ireland was affiliated to the IAAF; it was, in fact, 1999. It was the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland, NACAI, which affiliated to the IAAF in 1924. These statements are not in keeping with what is contained in the 1999 inter association agreement and completely undermine the foundations on which Athletics Ireland was built and leave Irish athletics with a dilemma that must be addressed. The vast majority of Irish sports organisations represent the island of Ireland in international competition. They include the Olympic Federation of Ireland, Cycling Ireland and more than 60 other associations, the names of which are set out in the appendix to our presentation.

Irish athletics history and Irish cycling history have much in common. To resolve the cycling dispute, the three cycling associations, the National Cycling Association, NCA, a 32-county association; the Irish Cycling Federation, ICF, a 26-county federation, and the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation, NICEF, a six-county federation, came together to form Cycling Ireland, ending many years of bitter dispute in the sport. Cycling Ireland applied to the Union Cycliste Internationale for a derogation from the political boundary rule for Ireland and was successful in getting full recognition for cycling to represent the island of Ireland in all international competition. We have been greatly impressed by the progress the sport of cycling in Ireland has made since it overcame its history of acrimony and entered an era of wholehearted co-operation and incredible progress and success. We would like to see this mirrored in athletics, with Athletics Ireland and Athletics Northern Ireland standing proudly together for the good of Irish athletics on the island of Ireland and following the example set by Cycling Ireland by seeking all-Ireland recognition at European and world championships.

When we go to the Olympic Games, we go under the authority of the Olympic Federation of Ireland which represents the island of Ireland in all sports, including athletics. It is known as Team Ireland. The Olympic Federation of Ireland has stated athletes from Northern Ireland have the option of participating under its auspices on an all-Ireland team or on the Great Britain Olympics team. Hockey players Mark and Paul Gleghorne from Antrim went to the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro 2016. Paul represented Team Ireland, while his brother, Mark, represented Team Great Britain. Twenty-nine athletes from the North across seven sports, with six in track and field, went to the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, of whom eight competed for Team Great Britain and 21 for Team Ireland. It is important to point out that we believe this is the correct way forward, with athletes being allowed to choose for which country they wish to represent, with no political boundary rule in operation. In the context of building peace and reconciliation on this island, a political boundary rule has no place in sport. It is time to have it removed for the good of Irish athletics and with the assistance of the Good Friday Agreement to give Irish athletes the right to compete for the island of Ireland, Team Ireland, as is the case when Ireland competes in the Olympic Games and the vast majority of other international sporting competitions, thereby making the future bright for all Irish athletes. The interplay between politics and sport is seldom far from the surface in Ireland and athletics exhibits this characteristic more than any other sport.

To move on to the reason we are before the committee - this is the crux of the matter - we would be very grateful if it wrote to the Minister with responsibility for sport, Deputy Shane Ross, to express its support for all-Ireland recognition for Irish athletics at European and world championships and request him to make representations to all relevant organisations to ensure this is achieved. We have a firm proposal to put to the committee. With goodwill from all sides, the international recognition status issue can be resolved to allow Irish athletics to join the family of Irish sports organisations that represent the island of Ireland on the European and world stage. We submit the following proposal to the committee for its consideration and support and to advise the Minister to request the following: that the Athletic Association of Ireland, in consultation with Athletics Northern Ireland, seek the approval of the International Association of Athletic Federations for the Athletic Association of Ireland to become its recognised member for the island of Ireland. It is important to point out that this can be done by seeking a derogation for Ireland from the IAAF political boundary rule. If we are successful, it will mean that the rule will remain in the IAAF constitution but that it will not apply to Ireland.

On behalf of my colleagues beside me and in the Visitors Gallery, I thank the committee for having us. We look forward to its support.

Senator John O'Mahony: I thank Mr. Larkin for his presentation. I know that he has followed the genuine attempt during the years to receive such recognition because I met him many years ago. I am familiar with all of the matters he has outlined because I received some of the same responses from some of the sports bodies. Having heard him articulate the issues very well, Brexit appears to be simple compared to this conundrum. If I am interpreting the issue correctly - Mr. Larkin can indicate if I am wrong - there appears to be a political problem within the IAAF. Am I right in saying that? I very much support what Mr. Larkin is seeking to achieve. What he is asking is that the Minister request the IAAF to do what he is seeking.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Yes.

Senator John O'Mahony: The difficulty in some respects is how it mixes, in other words, how politics can impose a rule on the governing bodies of a sport. That is the conundrum and I wish Mr. Larkin well in seeking to resolve it. I support what he is seeking to achieve and hope it will work.

Mr. Larry Larkin: I thank the Senator.

Senator John O'Mahony: The view I have gleaned in the past and which Mr. Larkin would have got from Athletics Ireland and Sport Ireland is that they do not have an ambition to change it. Is that the view he has got up to now?

Mr. Larry Larkin: I thank the Senator for his favourable comments. The rule is political interference in the sport of athletics going back to 1934. The British drew up the political boundary rule. It affected Ireland initially and did not apply to any other country in the world. I would rule out any fear of involving the political system because this is a political problem that was created all those years ago. We need the assistance of political people to rectify it. Our contacts with the IAAF over many years indicate that if we solve the problem on the island of Ireland, it will endorse it. From my many years of experience, I know that the problem is on this island. There is a reluctance on the part of certain people in certain organisations to even address the issue, not to talk about trying to resolve it. They need a push from the pay master - the Government. Athletics Ireland gets substantial money from the taxpayer, which is great, and I hope it will get more. We are all athletics people. We have been endeavouring to resolve the issue for many years. We have raised it with several politicians. We also raised it with the North-South Ministerial Council, with which we had a number of meetings and we received fantastic co-operation. We brought it to an advanced stage, but for one reason or another Athletics Ireland took a decision that it would not discuss anything that was outside its 26-county remit. It stated it was obliged to do so to protect its membership of the IAAF. From our contacts, it appears that the IAAF is stating that if we sort it out, it will endorse it. The British have already endorsed it. They have a section of Northern Ireland. They are not afraid to have an all-island association. When His Royal Highness Prince Charles was in Armagh a few weeks ago, he met Rory Best, the Irish rugby captain. There was coverage of the meeting on "Six One News". Rory Best was asked by a reporter what he had said to Prince Charles about sport and what was his response. Rory Best said he had indicated to Prince Charles the importance of all-island structures such as the rugby association, the gaelic football association and all other bodies. He told Prince Charles it was very important to us, and he was very taken by it. The British are not the problem. Our problem is on this island. We must get people to say that we will address the issue. We have indicated a clear route to solve this. We are not in the business of attacking people - those days are long gone - or of advocating new associations. Athletics Ireland and Athletics Northern Ireland are there and doing a very good job promoting athletics. We have certain issues around the promotion of athletics but that is not a question for today.

This can be resolved with those two associations, along with the political structure, encouragement from the committee and people across this water.

Our presentation showed 60 organisations which are all-island bodies. I have contacted all these people and they do nothing but express pride that they are all-island bodies. Some weeks ago Rory McIlroy, the golfer, spoke on world television of how he was bursting with pride to play golf for Ireland, the island of Ireland, in Rio. Look at the general set-up of Irish society. The trade union movement, churches, and our tourist board are all all-Ireland. Seven to ten groups are set up under the Good Friday Agreement, an international treaty, to represent the island of Ireland. No one in the political establishment should be afraid to address this issue. They should roll up their sleeves and say this is not right and it can be resolved without causing any insult to anyone. We should be clear that there are people in Northern Ireland who are British and unionist and we wish to respect that right. They want to compete for Team GB, and we respect that, but it is a two-way street. We want them to respect our right to compete for the island of Ireland. We do not want to cause offence to anyone.

Shortly, Mr. Keane will tell members what happened to him because of this international boundary rule. Mr. Darragh Rennicks will talk about what the young generation wants. He is on the verge of making a number of Irish teams and is familiar with all the athletes. I wish to take the opportunity to say publicly that the Senator has met me several times and has always been very kind and supportive so I thank him for that.

Chairman: Two members, Deputy Munster and Senator Feighan, are indicating they wish to speak. I wish to resolve this happily and give everyone an opportunity to speak. Ordinarily the order goes Fine Gael to Fianna Fáil and then Sinn Féin. I will ask Deputy Munster first and then Senator Feighan and will call committee members first.

We meet Sport Ireland often. Has Friends of Irish Athletics met John Treacy? I respect the organisation's position.

Mr. Larry Larkin: We have met him on a number of occasions, but not in the recent past.

Chairman: How recently?

Mr. Larry Larkin: It would be more than ten years ago.

Chairman: Ten years ago is a long time.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Mr. Treacy has shown no interest in the project since then. He gave us an undertaking in a written document I have with me that he would progress it with his northern counterparts. We wait to be contacted. We have constantly sent messages. The meeting was with the Athletics Association of Ireland. Ossie Kilkenny was the chairman then. Mr. Kilkenny complimented our group on the work we had done.

Chairman: I just want to know when Mr. Larkin met him.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Mr. Treacy told that meeting that the time was now right to secure the licence for the island of Ireland. Unfortunately, nothing has happened.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I thank Mr. Larkin for his very comprehensive and detailed presentation. Sports Ireland will be before the committee in the coming weeks. I propose we put this on the meeting's agenda so that Sport Ireland can update us on progress.

Chairman: Absolutely. We should circulate the document.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Friends of Irish Athletics could send its document to Sport Ireland in advance so that it knows precisely what the witnesses seek. This is clearly a problem for athletics, but is not the case for more than 60 other organisations, as Mr. Larkin says. Who does not have a sense of pride when thinking of Team Ireland, no matter what sport? It is the island of Ireland with every county represented and everyone can cheer on a true team Ireland. Athletics is being denied this.

Mr. Larkin spoke about the political boundary rule. His opening statement noted that Cycling Ireland had been successful in securing a derogation from the political boundary rule. Will Mr. Larkin outline how it went about doing that? We as a committee can learn from that.

The purpose of this meeting is to progress this issue. We will raise the matter with Sport Ireland but we will also write to the Minister, as we were asked, and ask him to express his support which would be easily done in a sentence. We would also put the group's proposals.

Chairman: To be fair to everyone here and those who are not, we will give the documents we received to the required bodies, namely, John Treacy and Sport Ireland, and the Minister for response. We should be very careful about that and give them the opportunity to comment on the issues.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am proposing that we as a committee write to the Minister, not just asking if he would express his support but also outlining the proposals laid out by this group and asking if he will make a statement on the matter and support it.

Chairman: That is a matter for the Minister.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is what I am saying.

Chairman: I just want to be careful. We will give the proposals to the Minister and Sport Ireland, get the replies and deal with it in public session. I am happy with that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister can clarify whether he supports this and tell us his stance. That seems the only way to progress this from what we have heard.

Chairman: I am shocked that there has been no meeting with John Treacy in ten years. That does not make sense.

Mr. Larry Larkin: That is specifically with our group.

Chairman: They have the most fantastic centre in the country out there.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Sport Ireland's website says it has an all-Ireland section where it advocates creating all-island institutions where possible. It says it meets Sports Northern Ireland regularly to discuss all-Ireland issues.

Chairman: I think that Friends of Irish Athletics should talk to Sport Ireland and we will try to facilitate that meeting.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I imagine Sport Ireland is acutely aware of this situation. Part of why we wish to ask questions relates to how proactive or otherwise Sport Ireland has been in pursuing this. If at least 60 other sporting bodies operate with an all-Ireland team, why has athletics been left to one side? John Treacy has not spoken to the group in ten years but there

is an onus on Sport Ireland to pursue matters like this for the benefit of sport from a national perspective.

Chairman: They will have to meet.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is precisely it.

Chairman: They must do it without any preconditions or prejudices.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is the committee agreed on my two proposals, namely, to put it on the agenda for discussion with Sport Ireland-----

Chairman: We agreed that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----and that we send a letter to the Minister which includes the proposals from the group?

Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Larry Larkin: The Deputy asked about Cycling Ireland. As my document sets out, it was very badly divided in 1946. The dispute in cycling was exceptionally bitter and was very nasty over many years. In the early 1970s, a number of cyclists came together and said this was not good enough because it was destroying their sport. Cycling as a sport was on the ground. They decided over a number of years to get together, initially in private meetings and subsequently in meetings between all the groups. They formed the group that is now known as Cycling Ireland. This is very important. It is an example of what we could achieve. Since Cycling Ireland came into existence in 1988, there has been an unbelievable increase in the number of people participating in cycling and in the standard of cycling on the island of Ireland. It would be of benefit to athletics to get rid of this boundary rule. I am mentioning Cycling Ireland as an example because it has created a pathway for us. It is almost a carbon copy example of the athletics situation. It would be wonderful if we could get people from Cycling Ireland to come in and help us.

Senator Frank Feighan: I apologise for being late. Senator Mark Daly and I were at a meeting of the steering committee that is commemorating the centenary of events that took place from 1919 on. The witnesses will understand the complexity of the issues the steering committee is considering. A meeting like this brings a focus to what has happened on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and the UK.

I am a big fan of the Republic of Ireland soccer team. I ran a double-decker bus to Germany in 1988. I love when people say it would be great to have an all-Ireland soccer team. I agree that it would be great because it would allow us to compete in the Commonwealth Games. I know that soccer is not an event in the Commonwealth Games. When I mention the Commonwealth Games, people say immediately that we could not compete in those games.

Mr. Larkin has rightly said that this is a two-way street. I have been an advocate of Ireland rejoining the Commonwealth or looking to have a closer association with it. Approximately 70% of the people born on the island of Ireland who reside overseas live in Commonwealth countries like Australia and Canada with which we have sporting, cultural and educational links. We need to admit honestly that our deep down resistance to the Commonwealth is Anglophobic. We want nothing to do with the Commonwealth. Since the 1950s, it has been the Commonwealth of Nations, rather than the British Commonwealth. Mr. Larkin and his col-

leagues are coming at this issue from a different angle from the one I am approaching it from.

I have worked closely with Hockey Ireland to try to get an all-Ireland hockey team into the Commonwealth Games. I have never been at a hockey match or a cricket match. We nearly had an all-island hockey team competing in last year's Commonwealth Games in Australia. We were looking at rankings. The witnesses are probably very aware of rankings and things like that. It was all agreed. I believe it was the Northern Ireland hockey association that did not want an all-island hockey team. Everyone in the FAI and every other organisation watches his or her own little space.

I have some questions for the witnesses about what they are trying to do. Where does Athletics Northern Ireland stand? Is it up for this? It is not really a political issue. As a result of the Good Friday Agreement, if Athletics Northern Ireland wants to come in with the IAAF as an athletics association, I do not think there would be any problem from a political perspective. That is being straight up.

While I think the proposal that is being made by the witnesses is worthwhile, I emphasise that they need buy-in. There are all-island teams in rugby and rowing. An athlete from the Republic of Ireland cannot compete in the Commonwealth Games. I know it has happened once or twice. An athlete from Northern Ireland can compete in the Commonwealth Games regardless of whether he or she is from a nationalist or unionist background. That is much more beneficial.

Mr. Larkin has said that this is a two-way street. He has opened up a conversation about these issues. What he is fighting for is wonderful. We need to open an even greater conversation. It has to be a two-way street. As everyone will be aware, we used to have an all-island soccer team until the FAI split from the IFA. I once said jokingly that an all-Ireland soccer team could play its home games in Belfast. I reiterate that there is a deep down Anglophobic issue with us as well. It has to be opened up in a two-way manner.

Mr. Larry Larkin: I thank the Senator for his comments, which I appreciate. As he is well aware, I cannot speak for Athletics Northern Ireland. I have met members of the association on a number of occasions over the years. The indications all the time were that they would be able to accommodate an all-island structure as long as their link with Britain was retained. That is clear enough. There is no problem there. Whether they will say that in public-----

Senator Frank Feighan: The link is through the Commonwealth Games.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Yes. My answer with regard to the Commonwealth Games is a personal one. I have not discussed this with my group. I did not expect this question, but I will deal with it. I would advocate that if we go to the Commonwealth Games, the first thing that must be clarified is that it is now the Commonwealth of Nations rather than the British Commonwealth, as the Senator has pointed out. That is very important. The second thing I should mention is that the standard of competition at the Commonwealth Games would suit our athletes very well. The only proviso I would add is that we would have to go as an all-island team. I would not be able to stand over two teams, one from the North and one from the South, going to the Commonwealth Games. I hope that answers the Senator's question.

Chairman: Mr. Larkin is saying that if somebody from Northern Ireland wishes to take part in an all-island Commonwealth Games team, he would not have a problem with it, but if such a person wants to take part in a British Commonwealth Games team, he would have a problem

with it.

Mr. Larry Larkin: No.

Chairman: Sorry. We need to get this right.

Mr. Larry Larkin: The athletes in the North have full choice when it comes to the Olympic Games, European Athletics Championships or World Athletics Championships.

Chairman: The Senator's point relates to the Commonwealth Games.

Mr. Larry Larkin: At the moment, every 32-county association has a provision in its constitution that allows its athletes, boxers, cyclists, etc., to be selected to compete for Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games. It is the only area of competition in the world in which there is a Northern Ireland team in these sports.

Chairman: I may have misunderstood Mr. Larkin. What is your reservation with regard to Senator Feighan's proposition?

Mr. Larry Larkin: My only reservation is that if Ireland were to decide to participate in the Commonwealth Games, to which I would have no objection, it would have to be an all-island team.

Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Larry Larkin: I believe we should go as an all-island 32-county team.

Chairman: If someone who lives in the North wants his or her Britishness to be recognised, could he or she opt to be part of the British Commonwealth Games team?

Mr. Larry Larkin: There is no such thing as the British Commonwealth. It is the Commonwealth of Nations.

Chairman: I am talking about the UK team as opposed to the proposed all-island team. Is Mr. Larkin saying that people from Northern Ireland would be confined to the all-island team?

Mr. Larry Larkin: In the Commonwealth Games, there is no such thing as a UK team. All of the home countries, as they are called, enter separate teams.

Chairman: If people wanted to identify with their Britishness, how would they do that?

Mr. Larry Larkin: They would have a choice. They could compete for England or the UK if they wish.

Chairman: That was my point. Mr. Larkin would not object to that.

Mr. Larry Larkin: No. That is already built in. There is already an agreement that athletes from Northern Ireland have the right to choose to compete for Great Britain or for Ireland. The problem is that Athletics Ireland will say that an athlete from any part of the island of Ireland can compete for Ireland, but it will fail to say that such an athlete is choosing to compete for the Republic. That is where the problem is.

Chairman: Right.

Mr. Larry Larkin: We want the Ireland team to be a team for the whole island. It is inter-

esting that when Irish teams in various sports go to the Olympic Games, every one of them goes as an all-Ireland team. When our athletes go to the Olympic Games - I am referring specifically to runners and other track and field athletes rather than using "athletes" as a general term - they go as part of an all-island team and there are no problems. The International Olympic Committee, which is the biggest sporting federation in the world, recognises that they are representing the island of Ireland. There is a statement from the president of the Olympic Council of Ireland in the appendix. Given that we can send an all-island team of athletes to the biggest sporting festival in the world, can somebody tell me why the IAAF will not allow us to represent the island of Ireland? It does not make sense that we are instead restricted to representing the Twenty-six Counties. People have tried to address this issue for many years. All we hear all the time is that we should not raise this issue. We are asked whether we want to be responsible for breaking down the excellent co-operation between North and South. This causes everybody to go into a separate corner and ensures this issue is not spoken about for another ten or 15 years. We thank the committee for giving us an opportunity to highlight this matter today. We know that a large percentage of the population wants this to happen. For some reason or another, a very small percentage of the population is opposed to it. I do not know why anyone would oppose this. Our proposal respects all traditions.

Chairman: As Senator Mark Daly is a member of the committee, I have to give him preference over Senator Ó Donnghaile.

Senator Mark Daly: I will be brief.

Chairman: I am not being rude. Senator Daly is the official Fianna Fáil representative on this committee.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Ná bí buartha.

Chairman: I am trying to make sure everybody is happy.

Senator Mark Daly: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee and for their presentation. It is one of the best ones I have seen because normally people do not come in with an ask. It is quite clear what the witnesses are asking and I hope the Chairman will support the proposals made with regard to going to the Minister and going to the IAAF and making the case. As Senator Feighan said, we have come from a committee meeting where we discussed the decade of commemorations and marking the partition of the country. We are dealing with the consequences of that in all sorts of ways but particularly in sport. It is a broader issue and I have raised it in support of the witnesses coming before the committee in the reverse sense. Reference has been made to hockey. The European Hockey Federation insists those coming from Northern Ireland and playing hockey for Ireland get Irish passports.

Mr. Larry Larkin: It is an all-island team.

Senator Mark Daly: Under the Good Friday Agreement people are allowed to have a British identity or an Irish identity and they should not be forced by anybody to turn around and get a passport. Is it the same in athletics?

Mr. Larry Larkin: Yes.

Senator Mark Daly: That is a concern if we are going to be inclusive, and I recognise the point made by Senator Feighan on the Commonwealth Games, because sport is sport. There is a discussion about how we would accommodate people who want to participate in the Com-

monwealth Games on the basis we have discussed. Obviously the witnesses are speaking about athletics in its broadest sense. My concern is that people who want to participate on an all-Ireland team are being asked to do things by a European or world federation that are contrary to the Good Friday Agreement in terms of identity, who they are, the nationality they identify with and where they come from. It is a broader issue but the issue outlined by the witnesses and what they want us to address is something we should support, recognising there are other issues we should also address in other sports, such as people playing hockey being asked to have with passports with which they do not necessarily have an affinity. It is contrary to the Good Friday Agreement.

Chairman: I will now have to take Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am not ready to come in yet.

Chairman: The rule is-----

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Do not let anybody else in and lock the door.

Chairman: We have not done that yet. The rule is that we take members first.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Somebody else can go ahead for now.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Finally. I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute to the debate, which I believe is very important and it certainly is crosscutting. The Chairman, Senator Feighan and I sit on the Good Friday Agreement implementation committee. While it should not have to, this issue goes right to the root of a 21 year old international agreement. The barrier put up against athletes runs contrary to the agreement. For the purposes of the record, I will read part of Article 2 of the Constitution, which states it is the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation. I commend the witnesses on taking this stand on behalf of our athletes and sports stars who feel very passionate about it. They should not have to, at this late stage, 21 years after the Good Friday Agreement, be kicking down the door to have what is a very modest and basic entitlement and right, constitutionally and under the Good Friday Agreement, afforded to them.

So that I am clear, I want to ask several questions. From what I understand, athletes competing at Olympic level represent Ireland in its entirety. They represent the island. When it comes to European and international competitions, while athletes from the North can participate, the entity they represent on that European and international stage is merely the Twenty-six Counties.

Mr. Larry Larkin: That is correct.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: That is the ask. That is what needs to change for the purposes of equality, citizenship and everything else. My neighbour in Belfast might be a gifted athlete who wants to declare for Ireland on the international stage while another neighbour across the road might want to compete for Team GB. That is fine, as has been rightly acknowledged. If we are to be true to the Good Friday Agreement, it is their right and entitlement. No one in the political climate we are in wants to be identified as being anti-agreement or running contrary to it. How Athletics Ireland is operating is running contrary to the agreement, which gives me cause for great concern as an individual and, more importantly, as a Member of the Oireachtas. It is very important that we hear from Athletics Ireland on its rationale and logic for sustaining that very outdated and unequal position.

I am here to ask this question and I am now clear on the issue of representation. Do the witnesses have statistics, or perhaps it is anecdotal, on the broader view of athletes? How wide an issue is this? I know it presents itself in other avenues of life and not just in the sporting world. It does not surprise me it has become an issue. So that the committee is clear, this is obviously something that has mobilised the witnesses and has warranted them coming before the committee.

Mr. Larry Larkin: With the Chairman's permission, Mr. Rennicks has a short statement to read which will answer the Senator's questions.

Chairman: Before he does, I want to say I have a meeting at 1 p.m., which is in half an hour, and I will have to go. The Vice Chairman is not here, so if we are still in session, somebody else will take the Chair.

Mr. Darragh Rennicks: I am a runner with Bohermeen Athletic Club in County Meath. I thank the committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak on the serious issue of the boundary rule that negatively affects all Irish athletes at European and world championships. It is a great honour to represent one's country in any sport. Unfortunately, with athletics it is tinged with the fact one is not representing the island of Ireland. One is only representing the Republic of Ireland. When I bring this up with my athletic friends North and South, they are amazed this is the case. We all feel it would impede our future chances of selection on national squads if we raise this issue with senior officials. In the Ireland of today, political interference in my sport is mind-blowing. The situation has been allowed to go on for decades. It should be rectified as soon as possible so that my generation and future generations will have the honour and opportunity to represent the island of Ireland at IAAF international competitions. Would that not be wonderful?

Mr. Larry Larkin: Until very recently, quite a number of international athletes coming from the North were unaware they were running for the Republic of Ireland. They assumed they were running for the island of Ireland. They were very taken aback by this. As Mr. Rennicks indicated in his submission, they will not raise the issue. They are athletes who are busy preparing for a heavy schedule of running events. They will not get involved in the nitty-gritty of this stuff. There is an issue but they will not raise it because it may affect their future prospects of getting on an Irish team.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What is the attitude of the athletics associations in Northern Ireland and Britain about this rule?

Mr. Larry Larkin: The British endorsed the 1999 agreement, and there are letters to this effect on file, as did Athletics Northern Ireland. The attitude from the British point of view is if the situation in Ireland is resolved, it will endorse it. With regard to Athletics Northern Ireland, the situation at the moment is it has a representative on the board of Athletics Ireland and Athletics Ireland has a representative on the board of Athletics Northern Ireland. Co-operation between the two organisations is very good. That is where the trouble lies. They will not address this issue. It has been in abeyance for quite a number of years. As I said earlier in response to a question raised by the Chairman, from my meetings with it over the years, the attitude of Athletics Northern Ireland to an all-island team is that it could live with it. This situation can be resolved with a bit of goodwill on all sides and a good push from the political world. All this is about the betterment of Irish athletics and Irish athletes. It will remove the stigma from their world and allow them to concentrate on what they should be doing - getting good performances and representing the whole island of Ireland.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Have the delegates had a meeting with the Minister about this issue recently?

Mr. Larry Larkin: No.

Chairman: Have they sought a meeting with him?

Mr. Larry Larkin: Not yet. This meeting is a start. We intend to request a meeting with the Minister, both organisations, North and South, and Mr. John Treacy. We intend, if possible, to re-engage the North-South Ministerial Council, through which the British and Irish Governments have been extremely helpful to us. I must also acknowledge the great help received from Mr. Martin McAleese in Áras an Uachtaráin.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: May I suggest the committee facilitate such a meeting?

Mr. Larry Larkin: We would have no problem with that being done.

Chairman: We have already agreed to send the correspondence to both the Minister and Sport Ireland.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I suggest we correspond with Sport Ireland and request that at its next meeting with us its representatives provide an update on how they have progressed this matter and what they have done about it. We should also write to the Minister to ask him to look at these proposals and consider how they should be pursued.

Senator Frank Feighan: This is sometimes an issue where there are, say, two rural GAA clubs, each of which has a chairman, a secretary and players. Let us suppose the two clubs should come together for the betterment of both and that the GAA would not mind the amalgamation taking place. Often the issue is that there can be only one chairman and a certain number of players. That is what it comes down to. There are big fish in small ponds. The delegates are trying to bring about an all-island structure, which is very welcome, but they will meet resistance from within the existing structure. Am I right in saying this is probably a consideration?

Mr. Larry Larkin: Yes. In 1999 the then Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation made it very clear that the Government would fund one athletic body, namely, Sport Ireland, which had another name at the time. Substantial pressure was applied on the athletics bodies to come together. The Senator is right. Individuals in various organisations have created or are retaining positions of power for themselves to the detriment of the athletes. This should be exposed. I reiterate that this is for the good of Irish athletics on an all-island basis. It will do nothing but good.

Chairman: I think that accounts for all of the questions asked.

Mr. Larry Larkin: I ask the Chairman to allow Mr. Willie Keane to say a few words to allow the committee to get the gist of what this is about. Mr. Colm Rennick also has a very short statement to make.

Chairman: That is no problem.

Mr. Larry Larkin: It is Mr. Willie Keane from Kilkee, County Clare.

Mr. Willie Keane: I will be brief because nearly everything has been said. I am from St. John's Athletic Club in west Clare. I thank the joint committee for the invitation to attend. I

am the holder of 56 senior all-Ireland National Athletics and Cultural Association of Ireland, NACAI, titles, incorporating road, cross-country and track events. I am very proud to say these gold medals have been on display in the GAA Museum in Croke Park since July 2015.

I recently celebrated my 70th birthday. Looking back at my athletics career, I remember with great pride the numerous times I was selected as captain of Irish NACAI teams that competed in various events around Europe. I always viewed it as a tremendous honour to represent the island of Ireland in events abroad. This is very close to my heart and I feel passionate about it. However, it is with great sadness that I note that I was not allowed to compete in European and world championships because of my beliefs and principles in wanting to represent the island of Ireland. Mr. Larkin has outlined the reasons for this and there is no need for me to repeat them. The main reason I am here is to ask committee members to support the proposal to obtain a derogation from the political boundary rule to allow all Irish men and women to have the honour of representing the island of Ireland in all international events. I was personally deprived of the opportunity to compete in European and world championships and Olympic Games and sincerely hope this will not happen to any other Irish athlete. I have given the best part of my 70 years to the sport of athletics, both as an athlete and a coach. I believe the time is now right for Ireland to be recognised as the island of Ireland in all international competitions. I appeal once more to the Chairman and the committee to support us in any way they can in ensuring the removal of the political boundary rule on this island in a sport that we love and cherish. With the arrival of Brexit and the problems it could cause, the time is right to conclude it.

I thank Deputy Munster and Senators Ó Donnghaile, Daly, O'Mahony and Feighan, as well as the Chairman, for their contributions. I am quite sure we will get the support for which we are looking. I wish the very talented younger generation of up and coming Irish athletes good health and success in their athletics careers.

Mr. Colm Rennicks: I thank everybody. Mr. Keane did not include Deputy Coppinger. I thank her for attending.

It is a pleasure to address this Oireachtas committee. I hope to enlighten its members on the long-standing issue of the political boundary rule and perhaps put a different slant on it. These are my personal thoughts, but our team has discussed and sanctioned my remarks.

I am from County Meath and have a long family background in the GAA and athletics. I have been competing in athletics since I was 15 years old. After retiring from the GAA at around the age of 20 years and becoming a maniacal runner, I won all-Ireland titles in road, cross-country and track events. I also won international races representing the NACAI which at the time fielded an all-island Irish team. I was very happy to do it and it was the real reason I chose to compete for the NACAI.

I am here to carry the torch for much better men and women than me who have passed away and never experienced the pleasure of seeing an Irish athlete represent the island of Ireland at European and world championships. I am sure the committee finds this very strange. I know many athletes who feel discriminated against because of the current situation. For example, an athlete from County Meath cannot represent his or her friend from County Armagh or any other county in the North of Ireland. Worse again, an athlete from Armagh cannot represent his or her parish, town or county because at International Association of Athletics Federations, IAAF, international championships, competitors must choose to compete for the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. As such, if an athlete born in Armagh chooses to be an Irish citizen, he or she also has the dilemma of choosing whether to represent the United Kingdom of Great Brit-

3 July 2019

ain and Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland at world and European championships. An injustice done to one Irish citizen athlete is an injustice done to all Irish citizens. That is why the IAAF international boundary rule should be addressed urgently in Ireland's case. I hope the committee will consider helping us in dealing with this issue. I thank its members for giving us their attention and hope they can help us in this pursuit which has gone on for many years.

Mr. Larry Larkin: Before we close, I acknowledge Mr. Paul Kelly and Mr. Tony Dodd for their courtesy.

Chairman: I thank the delegates for coming.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.40 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 10 July 2019.