

Australia to UK
12th to 21st February 2001

Mr Kevin Andrews MP

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Programme

The delegation visited the United Kingdom for 11 days. During this time the delegation visited London, England; Belfast, Northern Ireland; and Edinburgh and Glasgow in Scotland. Prior to our visit, we had a one-day briefing in Canberra. The briefings were given by:

- Mr Andrew Pocock, Deputy High Commissioner, UK
- Ms Zena Armstrong, Director, North and West Europe Section, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- Senator Sue West, Leader, Third Australian Delegation to the UK
- Debbie Lewis, APEC.

Day 1 – London

The delegation arrived in London on Sunday 11 February, following an overnight flight from Australia.

Day 2 - London

Labour Party – Home Office – Westminster Foundation for Democracy – Conservative and Unionist Central Party – Australian High Commission.

Our visit to the UK coincided with the beginnings of the campaign for the General Election, widely believed to be likely to be held on May 3. [The subsequent outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the UK delayed the election.] Both the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, and the Leader of the Opposition, Rt Hon William Hague MP, had made major speeches in the previous weeks. It was an opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of the issues facing the nation in the coming years from the perspective of the major political parties and other interested persons and organisations.

Our visit commenced with a meeting with Mr Nick Sigler, International Secretary of the Labour Party. Mr Sigler was formerly an advisor to the Foreign Secretary, Rt Hon Robin Cook MP.

During the course of our discussions, we discussed a range of issues, including:

- Labour's vision for the next 5 – 10 years for Britain;
- Election campaigning issues and techniques in the UK, including the use of pledge cards;
- The background to and creation of "New Labour";
- Policy development within the Labour Party;
- Election funding laws; and
- Issues pertinent to the forthcoming campaign.

Our second meeting was with Mr Mark de Pulford, Head of the Human Rights Unit at the Home Office.

Our discussion centred on the UK Human Rights Act 1998 and the European Convention on Human Rights. Mr de Pulford outlined the background to the legislation, its operation and impact to date in the UK.

Lively discussion followed about the desirability or otherwise of Bill of Rights style legislation, constitutional differences between Australia and the UK, and the respective roles of Parliament and the Judiciary. Some of the discussion involved mandatory sentencing laws, an issue of note in both countries.

Our third meeting was with Ms Clare Morris of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Founded in 1992 by the major political parties, the Foundation is an independent, grant-making body that supports the creation and development of democratic institutions in central and eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Anglophone Africa and other parts of the world, including Asia. The Foundation provides 50% of its grant monies to the UK political parties to encourage democratic parties. The remaining 50% is provided by way of grants to civil society organisations which foster civil and political rights. Examples of the use of grants were discussed, including activities in East Timor, Hong Kong, China, Tibet and Cambodia.

Our fourth meeting was with Mr Richard Normington, Head of the International Office for the Conservative and Unionist Party. Our discussion ranged over issues related to the General Election from a Conservative perspective, including:

- The *Listening to Britain* exercise;
- Election issues
- The Party's 'Common Sense Revolution'.

We also discussed the new constitution of the Party, including membership, structure and pre-selection.

Our final meeting for the day was with HE Mr Michael L'Estrange, Australian High Commissioner to the UK. Mr L'Estrange and senior officials of the High Commission provided us with a detailed briefing at Australia House on bilateral issues. These issues included trade, defence, immigration, tourism, investment, Northern Ireland, UK relations with Europe, the Euro, future opportunities for Australia in Britain. We also had the opportunity of further discussion of these matters over informal drinks with the High Commissioner and his senior staff.

Day 3 – London

European Commission – Foreign and Commonwealth Office – HM Treasury – Australia and New Zealand Chamber of Commerce – Trades Union Congress – Social Exclusion Unit.

European Commission

The second day commenced with a visit to the European Commission. The delegation met with Mr William Sleath, Head of Political Affairs for the European Commission in the UK. He discussed the relationship between the UK and Europe, pointing to a different culture on the continent. Mr Sleath identified a number of reasons for this, including geography, the history of the UK and its ties to the Commonwealth, the adversarial

political culture in the UK compared to one of compromise in Europe, and different legal systems.

Mr Sleath also discussed with the delegation the operation of EU law as it applies to a single market. Tensions between UK and Europe were discussed.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The delegation had a wide-ranging discussion with the Hon John Battle MP, Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Topics included Europe and Britain, Australia's relations with our neighbours such as Indonesia, water management and sustainable energy, and national relationships in the 21st century.

HM Treasury

Vanessa Morgan, policy analyst, and Catherine Connolly, economist, at the Treasury provided the delegation with a briefing on the prospects of the UK adopting the Euro. They indicated that it was Government policy that Britain would only join the monetary union if the economic case could be established. Five criteria had been set out in this regard:

1. A sustainable convergence between the economies of the UK and Europe;
2. Sufficient flexibility to deal with national economic shocks;
3. The impact on investment in the UK;
4. The impact on UK financial services which contribute 8 per cent of the UK's GDP; and
5. The overall impact on jobs, growth and stability.

[Source: *UK Membership of a Single Currency: An assessment of the five economic tests.*]

Prime Minister Blair had indicated recently that a further assessment of the situation would be made within two years of a new Parliament.

Discussion included:

- The process of decision-making including government, Parliament, and the people;
- The role of the European Central Bank;
- The main objective of price stability; and
- The reasons for rejection of the European system by Denmark.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office – Devolution section

Mark Hutton, Head of Parliamentary Relations Devolved Department, briefed the delegation on the process of devolution in the UK, highlighting developments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Australian and New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, London

Peter Box, chairman of the Australian and New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, and a partner in Pricewaterhouse Coopers, and Sue Cockel,

Acting Head, North East Asia and Pacific Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, hosted the delegation to a business lunch.

Guests included Australian and New Zealand business people in London and Sir Roger Carrick, the former UK High Commissioner to Australia.

There was a lively discussion about UK-Australian trade relations.

Trades Union Congress

The role of unions in the UK and Australia was the main topic of discussion with Brendan Barber, Deputy General Secretary, Tom Jenkins, Head of European Union and International Relations, and Bandula Kothalawala, International Officer, at the Trades Union Congress.

Topics included:

- The fall in union membership from 12 million in 1979 to 7 million in 2001;
- The relationship between the TUC and the Labour Party;
- Labour's commitments to a minimum wage, the right to belong to a union, and the social chapter of the Maastricht Treaty;
- Membership activities of the TUC; and
- Networking by the TUC.

Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office

The Social Exclusion Unit of the Cabinet Office was established by Prime Minister Tony Blair after Labour came to office. Hilary Paxman from the Unit described the role of the unit, including its role in directly reporting to the Prime Minister. The Unit seeks to address specific aspects of social exclusion in a manner which crosses departments and different levels of government. The Unit works on a project basis and has produced six reports to government to date. The 50 person unit was undertaking a stocktake of social exclusion at the time of our discussions. It has been focussing on the causes of social exclusion in Britain. Possible future issues include rural exclusion, teenage runaways, and children in care.

Day 4 - London

Tradepartners UK – House of Lords – Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – Prime Minister's Question Time – Hon John Spellar MP

Tradepartners UK

Lyndon Edwards, Head of the Australia Desk at Tradepartners UK briefed the delegation on the work of the agency. Based loosely on Austrade, the agency was established in 2000. Its tasks are the provision of information about trade; the development and assistance to new inexperienced UK exporters; helping firms to exploit trade opportunities; identifying and focussing on market and sector opportunities; co-operation with and between government departments; and professionalism in the delivery of

services. Mr Edwards identified 15 priority sectors for British trade with Australia, including creative media, mining and the oil and gas industry.

House of Lords

The delegation had an interesting visit to the House of Lords. We had discussions with Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish, the Chairman of Committee about the reforms to the Lords and possible future developments. [The delegation notes with sadness the death of Lord Mackey subsequent to our visit.] Other discussions were held with Lord Davies of Oldha, Lord in Waiting and Opposition spokesman on Education and Employment and the Home Office, and Mr David Beamish, Clerk of Committees and Clerk of the Overseas Office, and a number of other peers.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

The delegation met over lunch at the Palace of Westminster (The Houses of Parliament) with members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, including David Marshall MP, Rt Hon Lord Ashley of Stoke, and Sir Richard Brody MP. A wide-ranging discussion included relations between Australia and the UK, the role of modern Parliaments, devolution in the UK, and the relationship between Britain and Europe.

At the end of the day, the delegation flew to Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Day 5 – Belfast

Tour of Belfast – Sinn Fein – Democratic Unionist Party – Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister – Social Democrat and Labour Party – Ulster Unionist Party – Human Rights organisations

Tour of Belfast

Our visit to Northern Ireland commenced with a tour of West Belfast, the focal point of much of the conflict over the past two decades. Originally the site of Belfast's extensive linen mills, the area comprises rows of double story attached cottages facing each other across narrow streets and lanes. We visited both Shankill Road and Falls Road during our tour of West Belfast.

Following the tour, the delegation was taken to the Northern Ireland Assembly, Parliament Buildings, Stormont, for meetings with each of the four major political parties. The discussions with each party naturally traversed many of the same topics.

Sinn Fein

Our first meeting was with Dominic Doherty, media spokesperson for Sinn Fein, and Barry McElduff MLA, a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The discussion included:

- The devolution process in Northern Ireland and Sinn Fein's attitude to the Good Friday agreement;
- The performance of the Executive;
- Challenges to the peace process;
- The economy of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- Population trends in Northern Ireland;
- The Westminster elections; and
- Sinn Fein's political strategy.

Democratic Unionist Party

Oliver Gibson MLA, an Assembly member of the Democratic Unionist Party, discussed his party's political outlook with the delegation. Topics discussed included:

- The DUP's belief that the peace process is flawed;
- Continued terrorism in Northern Ireland;
- Arms dumps;
- Decommissioning of weapons; and
- The devolution process.

Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister

The delegation had a working lunch with Linda Devlin, Head of the Machinery of Government section of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The meeting was also attended by representatives of the Political Affairs Division, and the Security Policy and Operations Division.

Discussions included:

- The historical background to the division of Ireland;
- Devolution and the role of Westminster;
- The Good Friday peace process;

- Continuing problems, including the decommissioning of weapons, the role of the Royal Ulster Constabulary [RUC], and continuing terrorism;
- Security; and
- Criminal activities.

Social Democratic and Labour Party

Pat Lewsley MLA, a member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, also met with the delegation to discuss the situation in Northern Ireland. Established in 1970 by John Hume, the SDLP was born of the human rights movement in the northern counties.

Our discussion included:

- The SDLP's approach to devolution, north-south relations, and relations with Westminster;
- The reform of the RUC and the role of the policing board following the Patten report; and
- The prospects for the Good Friday agreement.

Ulster Unionist Party

Rev Robert Cotton MLA and Jack Allen of the Ulster Unionist Party also held discussions with the delegation. Amongst the topics discussed were:

- Decommissioning of weapons;
- The future of the Executive;
- Forthcoming elections;
- A continued place in the United Kingdom;
- Future demographic changes; and
- The impact of the European Union on Northern Ireland.

Human rights groups

The delegation had dinner with a number of representatives of human rights groups in Northern Ireland. The dinner was also attended by Brian Burdekin, formerly Human Rights Commissioner in Australia, and now Special Advisor on National Institutions to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva. The function gave members of the delegation a unique opportunity to discuss the progress of human rights in Northern Ireland in light of our meetings with representatives of the four major political parties. We also examined current policies and programs, and barriers to peace in the region.

Day 6 – Belfast

Royal Ulster Constabulary – Castlereagh Enterprise Centre and the International Fund for Ireland Project – Northern Bank – Price Waterhouse

Royal Ulster Constabulary

Chief Inspector Crockard briefed the delegation on the history, role and changes to Northern Ireland policing at the RUC's headquarters.

Chief Inspector Crockard discussed the Patten Review, the size and composition of the future police force, the role of the para-military groups, and the rise in organised crime.

Castlereagh Enterprise Centre and the International Fund for Ireland project

The chairperson and board of Castlereagh Enterprise Centre, Dundonald, outlined the role of this business development centre. The centre is one of 55 local enterprise centres in Northern Ireland that have fostered business development. Some 38,000 jobs have been created through the activities of these centres and sponsorship of some 4,800 projects. The Castlereagh Centre seeks to assist 30 businesses start operation each year. The Centre provides workshop and factory space for new businesses, together with a range of services for new firms. In seven years, 120 businesses have been created at the Centre, employing 400 people.

The Castlereagh Centre is partially supported by the International Fund for Ireland, a project initiated by the UK and Irish Governments in 1986. The president of the fund, Mr Willie McCarter, came from Amagh for the meeting. We were also joined by HE Hon Bob Halverson, Australian Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, who came up from Dublin for the meeting. The Australian government has contributed to the fund since 1995.

The purpose of the Fund is to stimulate economic and social regeneration, especially through local job creation, and to encourage contact, dialogue and reconciliation throughout Ireland.

Northern Bank

The Northern Bank, one of the largest in Northern Ireland, is a wholly owned subsidiary of the National Bank of Australia. The delegation was hosted to a business lunch by the chairman of the bank, Sir David Fell. Senior officers of the bank, Owen Vanzuyden, the Chief Operating Officer and General Manager, and Nick Garbutt, Head of Corporate Relations, also attended. During the lunch, the members discussed a range of subjects with the bank, including the economic outlook for Ireland and the United Kingdom, trade prospects, and Australian-Ireland relations.

Price Waterhouse

Steven Kingdom, a partner with Price Waterhouse in Belfast briefed the delegation on the economic outlook for Northern Ireland. He pointed to considerable growth and development in recent years, the attraction of international capital, the presence of significant global business, including international call centres, and the positive prospects for the region.

At the conclusion of the day, the delegation departed Belfast for Edinburgh, Scotland.

Days 7 and 8 – Edinburgh

During the weekend between meetings, the delegation had the opportunity to tour Edinburgh, attend the rugby union international between Wales and Scotland at Murray Field, and visit a number of cultural and tourist attractions, including the New Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh Castle and Holyrood Palace.

Day 9 – Edinburgh

Scottish Executive – Scottish Parliament – Roslin Institute

Scottish Executive

The formal meetings in Edinburgh commenced with a visit to the Scottish Executive at St Andrew's House. Mairi Macpherson outlined the history of devolution and the current governmental arrangements in Scotland before the delegation met with Hon Jack McConnell MSP, Minister for Education. Discussions included the relationship between Edinburgh and London, the possibility of regional government in England, and the role of the Scottish Nationalists.

A working lunch was also held with a number of Scottish MPs, including Linda Fabriani MSP, Alex Johnston MSP and Keith Raffan MSP. Mr Roy Devon, Secretary of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Scotland Branch) showed the delegation over the Parliamentary complex.

The delegation also visited the temporary location of the Scottish Parliament, and was shown over the new Scottish Parliament buildings currently under construction.

Roslin Institute

Four years ago, the world awakened to the news that scientists at the Roslin Institute outside Edinburgh had successfully cloned a sheep known as 'Dolly'.

Given the interest in human and animal cloning by the general public and Parliaments, the delegation was fortunate to be able to visit the Roslin Institute and discuss the issue with its Deputy Director, Dr Harry Griffin.

Dr Griffin gave the delegation an overview of the work of the Institute, and developments in cloning before participating in a detailed discussion about the scientific, ethical, legal and regulatory aspects of the subject. He outlined the legal and other developments in the UK, the commercial aspects of cloning, the prospects and natural limitations on the techniques, as well as the latest research findings.

Day 10 – Glasgow

Glasgow City Council – Scottish University for Industry – Learndirect Scotland – Constituency visit

Glasgow City Council

After driving from Edinburgh to Glasgow, the delegation visited the Glasgow City Council, where the Labour Party chief whip, Bailie Malcolm Green, led discussions. The meeting covered a broad range of topics including:

- The influx of asylum seekers to the UK;
- The history and role of regional and city councils in England and Scotland;
- The relationship between the Scottish Parliament and the Glasgow Council;
- The proposed UK cabinet system for local government;
- Trade, tourism and international business developments in Glasgow; and
- The Scottish education system and apprenticeships.

Scottish University for Industry – Learndirect Scotland

The delegation met with Donald Pow and Kirk Ramsay to discuss the Scottish University for Industry and the Learndirect Scheme. Following the meeting, members visited the Greater Pollock Community Learning Centre in suburban Glasgow where we were shown around by the Manager, Ms Sheila White.

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar MP

Our final meeting in Scotland was a visit to the constituency office of Mohammad Sarwar MP. Mr Sarwar is a Labour member of the House of Commons, representing a working class constituency in suburban Glasgow. He is also the first Muslim member of the House of Commons. Delegation members discussed a range of matters with Mr Sarwar, including campaigning, representing his constituency, and the responsibilities of the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments.

Following the visit, the delegation departed Glasgow for London.

Day 11 – London

Foreign and Commonwealth Office – Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food – Food Standards Agency – Greater London Authority - Bank of England

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The delegation met with Richard Jones, Matthew Lownds and Neil Wigan at the FCO.

The discussions included world agricultural negotiations, during which the delegation pressed Australia's case for greater access to European markets. The FCO officials indicated some of the stumbling blocks that they perceived in Britain and Europe to more open agricultural trade. They also pointed to the shift towards supporting smaller holdings in Britain and Europe, support for rural communities and the impact of environmental degradation.

Discussion also touched on the entry of Britain into the European monetary union and the role of the European Parliament.

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and the Food Standards Agency

The delegation was given a detailed briefing on genetically modified crops and the BSE disease by officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and the Food Standards Agency. Discussions about genetically modified crops included:

- The trials taking place;
- The impact of EU rules;
- Current regulations;
- The role of advisory committees;
- The EU directive [90/220]; and public responses.

Peter Soul gave delegation members a detailed report about the history and incidence of BSE in the UK and Europe. He also related the probable trends in both the BSE and CJC diseases.

Greater London Assembly and Greater London Authority

Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Greater London Assembly, outlined the history and work of the Greater London Assembly. With 7.5 million people (and 9 million estimated in 15 years). London is the fastest growing metropolis in Europe. He discussed the problems facing London, including transport, the division of affluent and poorer people in the city, and the budget of the Authority and operation of the Assembly.

The delegation was subsequently briefed on the operation of the Mayor's office and the authority and its relationship with the Assembly.

Bank of England

The members of the delegation also visited the Bank of England where they were hosted by Sir Peter Petrie, Advisor to the Governor. The group discussed the UK debate about Europe and the Euro. The delegation also held discussion with Mr Simon Gray from the Euro Financial Infrastructure Co-ordination Unit the prospects for the UK economy, in or out of the European system.

Thanks

The members would like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for the opportunity of participating in this delegation to the United Kingdom. Coming at a time when the major political parties were gearing-up for a General Election, it enabled us to observe and discuss at first-hand the current political situation. We were also privileged to gain a better understanding of a range of issues of considerable importance to Australia, including trade with the UK, the relationship between the UK and Europe, the devolution of power to regional Parliaments and Assemblies, and the impact of this on our relations with Britain, the troubled issue of Northern Ireland, and the serious consequences of agricultural disease.

We would like to thank our hosts in the UK, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and in particular the officers who assisted us during our visit: Jason Lonsdale in London, Irene Orr in Belfast, and Karen Crawford in Scotland. Their professionalism and warmth greatly aided our visit.

Finally, this report should not conclude without expressing the value of such visits. No amount of reading of the press or serious journals and books can substitute for the opportunity of discussing matters of interest and importance to Australian policy makers with key people overseas. The opportunity to make these contacts, and to learn more about our relations with the rest of the world is invaluable. Moreover, the opportunity of Australians of different political persuasions and commitments co-operating together and learning more about each other's idea can only assist the building of a better Australia for all the people.