

Delegation Report
Australia to United Kingdom
22 February to 4 March 1999

Senator Sue West

What a time to be visiting the UK - there was so much happening on the political front, it was like being in politicians' heaven. The visit took place during the lead up to the Local Government Elections and the Election for the Scottish and Welsh assemblies. It was also during a pressure time in the negotiations relating to decommissioning of the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. There is still considerable debate there as to whether this was to be commenced or completed before the Executive would commence. The Prime Minister also made a key statement about the timetable for the introduction of the Euro.

The hospitality we received during the visit was first class. We were met at the airport by our escort from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Felicity Hoare, and were transported to our London hotel in a Daimler with our wonderful driver, Jimmy. As the President of the Senate was also on the Sydney flight, the Australian High Commissioner and staff also greeted us at the airport. Despite the early hour and miserable weather our reception was very warm.

We had a full agenda and got to learn the backstreets of London as we travelled from appointment to appointment. The range of meetings was wide and varied. We met with a number of Officials from a range of Departments, the London School of Economics, the Bank of England, the Deutches Bank, the Australia New Zealand Trade Advisory Committee, as well as the political parties. There was also the opportunity for three visits with junior ministers in London, Edinburgh and Belfast.

We spent time in the Parliament of Westminster and observed Prime Minister's Question Time. Following Question Time we had a meeting with the CPA members of the ANZAC Friendship group. We were greatly honoured by the large number who attended. This included a Minister and several old friends of Australia. We were delighted to see Alf Morris, who has made a transformation from the Commons to the Lords. The time spent with them passed quickly as a robust and frank discussion flowed.

There was a half-day opportunity for members of the various political parties to spend time with their fraternal party and then in the afternoon we spent time with MPs from our respective political parties. Given the close contact between the Parties it was a valuable opportunity to expand the relationships and increase the networks.

We also undertook visits to Edinburgh and Belfast. Edinburgh turned on what we thought of as classical Scottish winter weather but the welcome and the hospitality made up for it. We were able to have discussions about the coming elections and proposed workings of some of the institutions associated with the Assembly. There was also a stimulating dinner with candidates from the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationals, as well as an official from the Conservatives. This was a great opportunity to talk campaigning and electoral systems and what it meant for candidates on the ground. The Labour Party candidate ended up having a good win in her constituency.

Our timetable was nearly thrown out with a meeting with Henry McLeish, Minister of State. He was enthusiastic about what was happening in Scotland and conveyed a great love and pride in Scotland and was generous with his time.

What does a group do on a wet cold Saturday in Scotland? Watch football, of course. Well, here we call it soccer. We had the honour of attending a match between Glasgow Celtic and Dundee United at Celtic Park. The stadium was all seating (no terraces) and had excellent facilities. It held 60,000 people and there were only a few empty seats. The noise was amazing when Celtic won.

We also had the opportunity to inspect the vaults of medieval Edinburgh on the wet Sunday morning. The guided tour of the castle was another highlight. That day gave a good understanding of Scotch mist.

While in Edinburgh, there were meetings with the Scottish Whisky Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Allied Distillers and the Consultative Group on the Scottish Parliament.

The program in Belfast was very full. The groups we met were varied and gave an excellent overview of the issues that confront the people of Northern Ireland. We spoke to the four major political parties involved. We drove up the Falls Road and down the Shankhill. To see the aggression expressed in the murals by both sides was something that cannot be described but has to be seen to gain some understanding of the depth of feeling that runs between the opposing groups.

On the Monday night, we were guests at a dinner with people representing a range of interests. They were able to bring us first hand accounts of their experiences living in a community where conflict can be close by, and of the measures they were undertaking to improve relations.

There were also meetings with a project funded under the International Fund for Ireland, the Parades Commission, the Northern Ireland Prison Services and Royal Ulster Constabulary. Lunch on Monday was with a group of journalists and on the Tuesday with the Chairman and Senior Executive of the Northern Bank which is owned by the National Australia Bank.

Our last meeting in Belfast was with Adam Ingram, the Minister of State, who graciously met with us at short notice when Marjorie Mowlam's itinerary had to be rearranged. We appreciated his time and effort, as this was a particularly important time in the negotiations to try and resolve the decommissioning issue.

On our return to London we finished with some more visits, including one to Number 10 Downing Street for briefings with two of the Prime Minister's advisers. We also had a meeting with Baroness Symons, Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was very interested to know more about the exchange and delegation.

The Foreign Office had taken note of our specific interests and then organised a number of individual visits for delegates on the Thursday and Friday. This specialised treatment was greatly appreciated.

The hospitality was very cordial and the level to which we had access was appreciated. We enjoyed our time spent in the UK and certainly hope this is the first of many as the exchange becomes permanently established.

This trip confirmed to all how strong relations are with the UK and how valuable those relations are. It helped us to understand the similarities and differences between our systems and to build networks.

The whole delegation benefited greatly. We welcomed the experience and honour to represent our respective political parties and all expressed a willingness to assist in returning the hospitality to visiting groups.