

Written evidence submitted by the All-Party Parliamentary Groups by Director of the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (BGIPU)

Mr Rick Nimmo, on behalf of its Chair, Harriett Baldwin MP, and its Executive Committee

BGIPU represents the UK Parliament in the global organisation of national parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which was established in 1889 by British and French parliamentarians but now numbers 179 national parliaments. Its membership comprises all members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords who are deemed full members of BGIPU by virtue of their membership of the UK Parliament. BGIPU is primarily a vehicle for parliamentary diplomacy aimed at promoting Britain's interests abroad and engaging Parliamentarians worldwide on international issues, including through arranging bilateral inter-parliamentary exchanges with overseas counterparts. BGIPU works to expand awareness and understanding of foreign relations. It seeks to advance the interests of the UK and the UK Parliament internationally and to foster inter-parliamentary dialogue and promote democratic procedures and principles worldwide.

2. As encouraged in its funding agreement with both Houses, BGIPU works to support the objectives and activities All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) in advancing bilateral relations with non-Commonwealth IPU member countries (with CPA UK covering Commonwealth ones) on the basis that BGIPU and APPGs share a common interest in fostering good relations at the inter-parliamentary level. APPGs play an important role in uniting a core group of members with specific interest in a specific country. APPGs provide BGIPU with a valuable source of known interest and expertise in particular countries in our bilateral work. While BGIPU has a key focus on bilateral country-focused APPGs, it also engages regularly with thematic focused APPGs on arranging foreign policy-related events in Parliament as they often have contacts with external bodies and relevant experts.

3. BGIPU is also one of the few authorised bodies able to provide country focused APPGs with dedicated funding support for bilateral exchanges on a non-registerable basis as it is a wholly parliamentary source of funding for this inter-parliamentary activity. BGIPU routinely allocates £30,000 annually from its programme budget for APPG activity funding and this can be allocated at the discretion of BGIPU Officers who have the overall approval role. Officers assess funding bids based on APPG submissions as processed by the BGIPU Secretariat, with a nominal annual limit of £5000 per APPG usually assisting ten or so separate APPGs in an average year. In recent years (although not 2020 as parliamentary travel is suspended), this has been extended to up to £10,000 in the most deserving of cases and all bids are subject to assessment against cross-party credentials and specific visit criteria contained in established guidelines provided on request to APPG Chairs.

4. BGIPU also facilitates contacts and exchanges for APPG members through its own inter-parliamentary programmes for visits to Westminster by counterpart MPs and by selecting some APPG members for relevant delegation visits overseas. BGIPU routinely consults with country specific APPG Chairs and members in devising programmed visits in order to ensure coordination and cooperation. Nonetheless, APPGs remain informal bodies of like-minded MPs/Peers, rather than representing UK Parliament in any official capacity. This does cause confusion, however, given many parliaments treat bilateral friendship groups as official bodies and they are sometimes officially funded and supported by clerks. On some occasions, BGIPU is told foreign counterparts prefer to deal through the relevant UK APPG rather than our official channels which can create obstacles to our engagement and interrupt plans when the UK body is disbanded after an election or ceases to function for other reasons.

5. BGIPU also has concerns related to mixed mandates and ambiguity around bilateral APPGs, particularly avoiding conflicts of interest or inappropriate lobbying by foreign governments or other entities and the risk of causing diplomatic offence through improper or ill-conceived activities. To avoid this, country APPGs should have focus on recognised counterpart national parliaments, not lesser sub-national governments or legislatures, provincial bodies, internal dissident groups, separatist elements or, at the furthest extreme, non-parliamentary dictatorships. In considering bids for funding, BGIPU's initial test is whether an APPG seeks to engage with legitimate parliamentary counterparts and this should be a key purpose of all bilateral APPGs, i.e. effectively acting as a parliamentary friendship group. The starkest example was in 2013 when a "media sting" compromised a member of parliament on camera by posing as paid lobbyists seeking to establish an All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fiji when there was no legislature in the country at all following its abolition following a 2006 military coup d'état. The subsequent scandal and resignation from Parliament of the MP concerned put a spotlight on APPGs being established on dubious pretexts, rather than by MPs at their own volition, serving opaque lobbying interests and such lessons deserve recalling in any APPG review.

6. Consideration of what constitutes a "fit and proper" country for APPG purposes is therefore worth considering even if the question appears on face value to be self-evident. For example, while the IPU numbers 179 member parliaments, it is yet to achieve universal membership even though it is based on the national parliaments of UN member states (some smaller countries and the United States Congress are not IPU members for varying reasons). Indeed, while there are 193 members states of the United Nations this too is a somewhat imperfect guide as key UK partners like Kosovo and Taiwan are still excluded. Perhaps the FCDO could be consulted to set a relevant criterion based on the UK's own official recognition policies meaning country focused APPGs could be limited to UK recognised countries? Other APPGs might need to be styled as "APPG for Atlantis issues" rather than "APPG for Atlantis" lest this imply official recognition which can be provocative and ultimately counter-productive to the UK foreign policy interests by creating tensions in bilateral relations.

7. At the risk of stating the obvious, there should be a limit of one APPG per country. There have been cases where rival APPGs have been set up for the same country (or regions within the same country) which creates conflicting mandates with some members backing one side of a dispute or linked to rival groups in the one sovereign state. It is also mixing mandates to create APPGs covering more than one country based on either historical/cultural linkages or on a regional basis. Such APPGs risk confusion if other members create an APPG for one of those countries where a regional one already exists, or vice versa, creating clashes between differing APPG mandates and memberships. BGIPU has a long-standing policy of not funding regional focused APPGs for bilateral visits to avoid this clash preferring to support only single country APPGs. Nonetheless, the Executive Committee varied this in August 2018 to allow funding support to the Polar Regions APPG to visit Greenland (an autonomous region of Denmark) given a strong case arguing the high importance for UK interests in the region, so some variances can be warranted but only in exceptional circumstances.

8. APPGs seeking to have Secretariats funded by foreign governments, organisations or entities are also problematic as potential lobbying vehicles for external interests, including the impropriety of having foreign sources of funding for UK parliamentary activity. As APPGs are essentially informal bodies with looser rules and less resources than official bodies, there is always a risk that they will be vulnerable to infiltration by elements working against UK interests, even if registration requirements are followed and the funding is ostensibly made public. The appearance of a potential conflict can be just as damaging as an actual conflict in most circumstances. Original sources of funding can be

hidden beneath layers of transactions or deception, risking members being compromised regardless if the true source of funding becomes public. The current norm that foreign governments are not allowed to run or fund the Secretariats of APPGs is vital in this regard, although there remains a risk that consultancy firms and other bodies might still provide APPG Secretariat support on behalf of foreign entities where the original source of funding or true motivation to access parliamentary circles remains undisclosed even if the Secretariat host appears to be properly declared.

9. There are also potential issues around APPG Secretariats funded from official UK Government sources given this funding places at risk the important separation between parliamentary activity and the policies and actions of the executive of the day. Additionally, official UK funding is technically non-registerable on the Registers of Interests, risking undeclared conflicts of interests for members who may also be on parliamentary scrutiny bodies like Select Committees tasked with holding to account perhaps the same government bodies in other capacities. This might also apply to international organisations and other quasi-official bodies or non-government bodies in receipt of UK ODA funding which might also create potential conflicts if such international organisations (or their UK affiliated branch offices) act as Secretariats for APPGs.

10. There are also reputational risks for Parliament of APPGs convening inquiries to produce reports, sometimes written by external consultants with their own interests of lobbying agenda. In this regard, there is simply not a wider understanding outside Parliament that APPG inquiries have no official status and some hold hearings and seek international media coverage for their findings which gets reported as “decisions of UK MPs” or “the findings of the UK Parliament” which creates credibility and reputational risks for Parliament’s official bodies when such views are reported with the same weight of real parliamentary outcomes. Access to parliamentary passes for APPG staff is another vexed issue where interparliamentary group staff access has been confused with APPG access by some parliamentary officials with negative consequences requiring Executive Committee intervention.

11. BGIPU has also been concerned to see in recent years a growing number of APPGs with “foreign affairs” or “international relations” in their titles seeking to engage with counterparts overseas which is traditionally a core function for the formal inter-parliamentary groups. Additionally, such bodies are too easily confused overseas (and at times even in the UK) with the Foreign Affairs Committee or other official UK bodies, delegations or groups. BGIPU is aware of media coverage of some UK parliamentarians sitting behind “United Kingdom” nameplates at international conferences hosted by hostile states, at times using APPG membership as the basis for their participation without any official knowledge they are doing so until weeks or months later when their activities hit the press. BGIPU is also aware of some APPGs approaching London-based Embassies to arrange bilateral inter-parliamentary exchanges to countries on the BGIPU forward programme, potentially scuppering efforts to engage under IPU auspices, despite having no official standing to do so. BGIPU usually hears about this when Embassies approach us to query if BGIPU is coordinating such visits. There should be a clearer guidance on APPGs using such catch-all subject titles for activities already managed through official parliamentary committees or inter-parliamentary bodies to avoid any risk of confusion.

12. In closing, BGIPU greatly values its cooperation with a wide range of APPGs, both country-based and thematic, and it enjoys significant complementarity in engaging with counterpart parliaments where BGIPU’s work and the work of APPGs directly coincide. Clearer rules and guidance would help address some of the reputational issues highlighted in this evidence. Stronger guidance and governance requirements for APPGs would help in ensuring they remain solely parliamentarian-based groups unifying members across party lines for common cause. APPGs

should never be established on behalf of external interests, particularly in the case of international relations where the UK's international reputation, foreign policy interests and Parliament's credibility are at greatest risk.

13. BGIPU stands ready to fully support and implement the outcomes of any comprehensive APPG review carried out by the Committee on Standards and will give due regard to its findings and make the required adjustments to its support for APPGs in line with any outcomes.

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