

HISTORY OF COBIS FROM ITS CREATION IN 1981 TO 2011

In post-World War II Europe, British, American and other English medium international schools were established in increasing numbers in capitals and major cities. During the 1970's an association called the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) began to hold conferences for these schools. During the 1970's also Dick Pantlin (later Sir Dick Pantlin), founder and Chairman of the British School of Brussels had conversations with Colin Sharman (later Lord Sharman) Chair of the British School in the Netherlands about the desirability of an association specifically for British schools in Europe.

ECIS was predominantly American in style and outlook but in 1980 the Head of the British School of Brussels, Alan Humphries, was elected to the committee and together with Harry Deelman, Head of St George's Rome who was also elected to the committee, made an attempt to broaden the outlook and include British schools in the association, with some limited success.

Soon after this, in 1981, when David Cope became Head of the British School of Paris there was a move to found a British association in Europe led by Dick Pantlin. There was a meeting in Paris at the luxurious Club Interalliéé attended by a number of British Schools including those of Brussels, The Netherlands, St George's Rome, Sir James Henderson School Milan, King's College Madrid and St Julian's School Lisbon. The association was formalised as the "Council of British Independent Schools in the European Communities" (COBISEC) as a charitable legal entity in the Netherlands. Dick Pantlin was its Chairman and Colin Sharman its Vice Chair. The policy was to include both governors and heads on the executive committee.

Harry Deelman, then Head of St George's Rome writes: "The early-80's COBISEC committee were all very keen on that early set of schools being accepted by the HMI (inspectorate of UK schools at that time) as worthy of inspection. Communication/lobbying in 1982 and 1983 led to a reluctant agreement by HMI to do a trial full inspection of one school, and I volunteered St George's Rome faster than any of the representatives of the other schools could manage! The week of inspection was in the 1984-85 school year. Professionally, it was the most

interesting and stimulating week in my life. A team of seven HMI's, a number which they admitted was slightly fewer than a school of similar size and age-range would have been allocated in the UK, covered all aspects of the school's operations and – while very helpfully pointing out ways to improve – they gave us a very positive report. They apologised for not having realised how strong the British Schools in Europe were!! HMI only did this one full inspection in Europe as they were over stretched, and it was not until 1992 that OFSTED was established, but with no remit to inspect abroad.”

Amongst the earliest member schools, in addition to those already mentioned were the British School of Amsterdam, Sierra Bernia School (Alicante), Kensington School (Barcelona), Baleares International School (Mallorca), British Embassy Prep. School (Bonn), Campion School (Athens), St Catherine's British School (Athens), Aiglon College (Switzerland), The New School (Rome), The British School of Stavanger (Norway), The British Primary School (Stockholm) and Runnymede College (Madrid).

During the 1980's and early 1990's COBISEC provided a forum for British Schools in Europe, often holding meetings at ECIS conferences in order to facilitate attendance of British Schools at both events. From the early days, however, it did hold its own Annual Conference in London on the second weekend of May. The purpose of this date was to enable Heads to combine attendance with the opportunity to conduct last minute interviews for staff in London. Colin Sharman was a senior partner at KPMG and hosted the conference and dinner on the second Monday in May in the firm's offices in 1 Paddle Dock. It is interesting to note that this became the traditional date for the COBIS annual conference and gala dinner.

A principal objective of the Chairman of COBISEC, Dick Pantlin, in those days was to lobby the British Government for assistance for British schools in the European Communities (later the EU). His argument was that since there was free movement of labour, the British Government should provide help for British families working in Europe with the education of their children. He hoped to achieve this via an extension of the “assisted places scheme” that operated then in the U.K. For this he enlisted the support of Baroness (Janet) Young, who amongst other roles had been Minister of State for Education and Science, leader of the House of Lords, and Minister of State

for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the Governments of Margaret Thatcher. She said she needed figures, so the services of a retired British diplomat and Ambassador, Sir Mervyn Brown, were sought to conduct a survey of the British expat families in Europe. He visited all the capitals and Milan and also studied what other European countries (and the USA) did to support their educational systems abroad. His report appeared in 1985. Baroness Young became an enthusiastic supporter of COBISEC, attending the Annual Conference regularly, and assisting with the lobbying from her privileged position in the House of Lords. Nevertheless Dick Pantlin's objective to obtain financial support for British Families in Europe was never achieved and the "assisted places scheme" was subsequently abolished in England by the socialist Government of Tony Blair in 1997.

In 1993 Dick Pantlin decided to hand over the leadership of COBISEC and in the same year he was knighted. He was succeeded in 1994 as Chair by David Sargisson the Chair of the Management Committee of St Julian's School Lisbon. During the following two years under his chairmanship COBISEC had a thorough review of its objectives and there was a move to focus more on educational aspects and less on lobbying activities. In the Spring of 1996 David Sargisson resigned as Chairman and was replaced by Roger Fry (later Sir Roger Fry), the Founder and Chairman of King's Group of Schools. For the first time COBISEC had a chair with an educational background, a qualified teacher, who focussed on providing the members with educational support of the highest quality. At that time the objective of achieving the assisted places scheme had not been abandoned, but it seemed unlikely to be acceptable to the Government if the quality of the British schools in Europe was not known. There was no way of measuring them against U.K. standards as OFSTED had no remit to inspect schools abroad, and the Independent Schools Inspectorate that inspected independent schools in the U.K. was not able to operate abroad.

The new committee under the chairmanship of Roger Fry agreed on a number of objectives aimed at enhancing the status and quality of British Schools in Europe. This involved a number of initiatives. The Annual Conference in May that had been a one day event on the second Monday was expanded to become a residential conference from Saturday to Monday with an enhanced programme to include speakers, seminars, workshops etc. Discussions were initiated with the Independent Schools

Council (ISC) to enable COBISEC to join so that its members could both have a relationship with UK independent schools and also be eligible for inspections by the Independent Schools Inspectorate. Additionally conversations were initiated with the Department for Education to obtain validation of inspections carried out abroad.

None of these objectives proved to be easy. The residential conference needed finance, and so a campaign was started to recruit educational suppliers to become exhibitors and so subsidise the cost. At that time COBISEC was a very small association of only twenty four schools in Europe, so the incentive for suppliers was not that attractive. At the first residential conference only six supported the event. The Association needed to expand and so the Committee agreed to admit schools beyond Europe as Affiliate Members. It was believed that the attraction of a London Conference would encourage some to join.

The approach to ISC also proved difficult. ISC is an association of the UK associations of independent schools, including, in those days, the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference (HMC), Girls Schools Association (GSA), Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS), Society of Heads, Independent Schools Association (ISA) and Governing Bodies Association (GBA). Almost unanimously the constituent members of ISC decided that if schools abroad wanted to link up with ISC and be inspected by ISI they should do so via one of their associations. They could not see a place for COBISEC. Several years of patient persuasion eventually convinced them that schools abroad needed their own association to address their needs, which differ somewhat from schools in the U.K. COBISEC was eventually admitted to ISC as an associate member, and its members became entitled to ISI inspections. Soon after this, with the promise that COBISEC would only allow inspected schools into full membership its status was upgraded to a full constituent membership of ISC, a status it subsequently lost after 2011 as the promise for member schools to be inspected was not maintained.

The relationship with the Government proved to be no easier. The Education Department's area of responsibility and jurisdiction was limited to England and Wales, and it could not envisage overseeing and recognising an inspection scheme abroad. Furthermore it had no budget for that. Ministers felt that their duty was to families in

the UK (who elected them), not to expats. Civil servants could only see technical difficulties.

Against these objections COBISEC argued using the findings of Sir Mervyn Brown's report, that governments of other countries not only supported inspections of their schools abroad, but in many cases also provided subsidies for their schools. If the growing numbers of British Schools abroad had no official quality checks available, they could well bring British education into disrepute across the world. The chances of success at the Education Department were greatly enhanced by Dr Penny Jones, who was the civil servant responsible for independent schools there, and who saw the need for the Government to support a scheme. A turning point was reached in 2008 when Lord (Andrew) Adonis was Minister of State for Education. With the help of Dr Jones, Lord Adonis was convinced of the need for the Government to create an inspection scheme for British Schools overseas, and he set in motion a process that culminated in its introduction in 2010.

COBIS member schools were well prepared for the official BSO inspection scheme. From the date that COBIS had joined ISC, the ISI inspections were made available to its members and an inspection and accreditation committee was expertly chaired by Jennifer Bray. By 2010 many members had already been inspected to the standards required in the U.K. Jennifer's work in liaising with the ISI inspectorate and member schools to introduce the scheme was masterfully executed. She also arranged with ISI for COBIS head teachers and other senior staff to be trained as inspectors.

During the period 1996-2011 another policy of COBISEC was to form close relationships with other regional associations of British schools overseas. In 2002 the Federation for British International Schools in South and East Asia (FOBISSEA) signed a cooperation agreement with COBISEC. An agreement was also made with schools in the Latin American Heads Conference (LAHC), and with British Schools in the Middle East (BSME) and these associations contributed to produce a joint directory of members with COBISEC for several years.

Discussions were held to form an association of associations called "British International Schools Worldwide" (BISW), and the Chairs of BSME, FOBISSEA and

LAHC participated actively in this. In 2005 and 2006 BISW directories were published. However, at that time there was a lack of agreement amongst the four associations about the nature of the project, and it was discontinued. At the COBISEC AGM the following year the Treasurer, Mike Roberts, proposed to members that COBISEC change its name to COBIS (Council of British International Schools) to become a worldwide association. It already had a number of Affiliate Members beyond Europe, and there was no reason why they should not become Full Members if the association changed its rules. The proposal was carried unanimously and so COBISEC became COBIS from 1st September 2007. The policy was clearly successful as the association grew from 24 members to over 100 members during Roger Fry's chairmanship.

From very humble beginnings in 1981 COBIS had grown to a medium sized association by 2011. It had had three people as Chairs during that time who had done much of the work themselves in developing the organisation, but who had been enthusiastically supported for much of the time by an Honorary Secretary, Sybil Melchers. Sybil had known Dick Pantlin in Brussels and took on the administration of the association from there using the British School as its headquarters. When she and her husband returned to England in 1988 her home in Hythe, Kent became the Headquarters and Secretariat, and a converted garage was the office. An assistant part time secretary was taken on, and was the first person to be paid by COBISEC. In 2004, after more than 20 years honorary service, Sybil retired and the Secretariat moved to Oxford to the house of Albert Hudspeth, who was the first paid Secretary, albeit part time. By 2007 the association needed a full time Secretary and its own office. Dr Fiona Shand (later Dr Fiona Rogers) became the first full time General Secretary with a small office in Oxford Brookes University. Finally in 2010, Fiona handed over to Colin Bell as General Secretary (later CEO of COBIS) and the Secretariat moved to St Mary's University in Twickenham, and later to Central London.

By 2011 the association had grown fourfold, had evolved to a worldwide entity capable of serving British schools across the globe. In addition to its Annual Conference in London it had established regional conferences for teachers, senior school leaders and students on different themes based in its member schools. Its services to schools were growing, and the annual directories of previous years had been replaced by a website listing members, events, etc. Above all, the objective defined by Roger Fry

and fully supported by the Executive Committee, to provide British schools abroad with a means of quality assurance via the BSO inspection scheme, with British Government backing, had been achieved. After fifteen years' service as Chairman, Roger Fry handed in his resignation in 2011 and was succeeded by the Vice-Chair, Trevor Rowell. The Committee appointed him as Honorary President and the following year in 2012 he was knighted by HM The Queen for services to British Education internationally.

The following people contributed to this history.

Mr Peter Bayliff OBE

Sir Mervyn Brown KCMG OBE

Mr David Cope

Mr Harry Deelman

Sir Roger Fry CBE

Mr Mike Roberts OBE

Lord (Colin) Sharman OBE