

Address by Tánaiste to Irish Association, Belfast

Address by Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Eamonn Gilmore T.D. to the Irish Association for cultural, economic and social relations (www.irish-association.org) on the occasion of its 75th Anniversary, Belfast

Introductory comments

President, Brian Kennaway, Secretary of State Villiers, distinguished guests, it is an honour to join you this evening as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Irish Association.

I am particularly pleased that I could be here jointly with the Secretary of State Theresa Villiers with whom I have worked so closely since she assumed her challenging post just over one year ago.

At the outset, President, let me acknowledge the leadership and commitment to public service that you have shown, not alone as President of this Association over the past four years but also as a member of the Parades Commission. The Parades Commission has in recent years been required to take on a difficult and thankless task in challenging political circumstances.

You and your colleagues discharged your responsibilities with courage and integrity. For that, we are in your debt.

A time to remember

The Irish Association was founded in 1938 at a time of great pessimism. The shadow of war was darkening again across Europe.

There was pessimism in Ireland too, where the gulf between north and south, unionist and nationalist was widening. Small wonder that WB Yeats, in a poem published that same year wrote: *"I sing what was lost and dread what was won"*.

The Association was established to contest that pessimism; to fight passion and prejudice with goodwill and with reason; to combat misunderstanding between Catholic and Protestant, north and south, Britain and Ireland.

Though we remember too easily the missed opportunities in the years that followed, though we can readily recall what pulled us apart and polarised us, there were times when the vision of this Association was expressed, not through politics but through individual acts of compassion.

We remember the ready response of fire crews in Dundalk and Drogheda, Dublin and Dun Laoghaire to the bombing raids on Belfast in April 1941 which destroyed this city, slaughtering over nine hundred men, women and children.

We remember also the 50,000 men and women from the south who were fighting fascism and serving in British uniform by 1945.

What we choose to remember - and what we neglect - is important. These choices are a foundation stone of the societies we build for better or for worse.

Each generation bears responsibility for these choices.

In 1966 we commemorated the Easter Rising in a manner that many considered divisive and triumphalist and which ignored much of what we held in common here and placed, in Yeats' words, "*more substance in our enmities*".

And so, on the eve of Remembrance Sunday, approaching the centenary of a war that killed almost 50,000 Irishmen, destroyed a continent and a way of life, we are faced with choices that will shape us once again. What do we commemorate and how?

First, I believe we can do far more together, Irish Government and Executive.

In 1966 we had no discussion on these matters. Politics between North and South was frozen. Today we have no excuse for not preparing together.

Yesterday the Taoiseach and I, First and deputy First Minister and twenty of our ministerial colleagues met in Armagh and took decisions on an agenda that ranged from Europe's recovery to trade with Japan and from youth employment to cancer care.

As we work closely and constructively on these issues, so we can also do far more together to acknowledge our divided past and set about healing the scars it has left us.

That is why the Taoiseach and I will lay wreaths in Enniskillen and Belfast tomorrow.

That is why I will be discussing these issues with First Minister Peter Robinson and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness over the coming months.

Second, I believe we should ensure that the experience and achievement of individual men, women and children is placed at the heart of our approach. I have been struck in my visit to the Titanic Museum that this is less a celebration of a ship than a celebration of the lives of working women and men in Belfast.

Plans are well advanced in Dublin for a Tenement Museum that will recall the lives of working people at the time of the Lockout and the Rising, the homes that thousands of volunteers left behind them whether they went to Gallipoli with the Royal Dublin Fusiliers or trained in the Dublin Mountains with the Citizen Army.

We should remember too that where they survived to come home, these were the conditions they returned to.

Third, I believe we should remember the currents that changed our lives profoundly and for the better in that decade of division. The labour movement and the suffragette movement, its heroes and its true patriots: Jim Larkin, James Connolly, Margaret Robinson, Elizabeth Bell, Hannah Sheehy Skeffington and many more.

A time to celebrate

In 1938 the Irish Association was far ahead of its time. Its scope and ambition – for improved relations within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and between Britain and Ireland – anticipated by sixty years the three strands of the Good Friday Agreement.

Now, seventy five years later, is a time, paraphrasing Yeats, "*to sing what has been won*" and to celebrate the progress painstakingly built on foot of the Agreements.

The G8 this year in Fermanagh proved to be one of the most peaceful and productive of recent years – for which the Secretary of State deserves enormous credit.

The Executive is battling for – and winning – highly coveted investments.

Tourism has enormous potential. This year Derry / Londonderry was named one of the top ten places to visit this year by Lonely Planet. This is a stark contrast with its reputation, even before the troubles, when the novelist Barbara Pym commented dryly to Philip Larkin that she thought Northern Ireland was “*a very original place for a holiday*”.

North South relations have never been stronger.

Relations between Britain and Ireland operate across a range that is unprecedented in the history of our two states. That should not be remarkable. Our two economies are integrated and interdependent to a remarkable degree. We each have over 65 billion euro directly invested in each other’s economy while our exports to each other support around 200,000 jobs in both Britain and Ireland.

And yet the cooperation is remarkable in the perspective of our recent past. How has this come about? In large part it is because of an instinct towards cooperation that developed and was nurtured through our joint responsibility for the peace process. That work for peace remains at the heart of our relations and that instinct for partnership must be maintained.

Next month we mark the 20th anniversary of one of the most important landmarks in cooperation between London and Dublin. The Downing Street Declaration, signed on 15th December 1993 by John Major and Albert Reynolds, Dick Spring and Patrick Mayhew, began the process that resolved the constitutional disagreement between our governments and helped unlock the potential we are realising today.

I am pleased to say that John Major has accepted my invitation to come to Dublin next month to speak on that agreement which prompted a chain of events that fundamentally changed our relations for the better. I have also asked him to set out his thoughts on how far British Irish relations have come – and how they may yet develop.

If the visit to Ireland by Queen Elizabeth and the return visit in due course by President Higgins will set the seal of normality on our relations, then the challenge for our two governments is to imagine what “normal” means between two neighbours whose economies and people are so closely integrated.

A time to look forward

As you embark on your next 75 years under the very able leadership of our former Ambassador in London, Daithí O Ceallaigh, my hope is that you keep that vision, dedication and purpose that has sustained you for so long and so successfully.

I believe that the peace process is as vital and challenging today as it was 20 years ago, but the challenges have shifted - from the creation of a peaceful society supported by stable institutions - to the creation a reconciled society supported by flexible, responsive and forward looking institutions.

If we have new challenges to address, we should be frank in setting out what they are: the pervasive and undiminished influence of entrenched division, of sectarianism, of the unresolved legacy of the past and of unemployment on civic life.

The British and Irish governments have a critical role to play in supporting the Executive in addressing these issues. It cannot be expected to shoulder the burden on its own.

Since the return of devolution in 2007, the British and Irish governments gave the Executive and Assembly the time and space to identify local solutions to local problems. That is the very logic of devolved government.

Over the past 12 months however, disputes over flags and parades and the ongoing issue of finding mechanisms to deal with the past have required the British and Irish Governments to reassert our roles as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.

But the churches, sporting organizations, unions, business and community groups also have a responsibility to step up as Richard Haass intensifies his consultations over the coming weeks.

I believe that the conference organized yesterday by the main sporting organizations was a watershed moment, a statement of collective concern and of collective determination to address sectarianism in sport.

I see other very positive signs. The decision by Richard Haass to consult widely on parades, flags and the past is having an impact, encouraging a broad range of groups and individuals to consider their roles.

Richard Haass can point the way to progress but the journey will be made by all of us.

The Irish Association, practising what John Hewitt called "*the stubborn habit of unfettered thought*", may not make that journey any easier.

You may not make it any shorter. But you can certainly point the direction clearly.

That is what you have done since your foundation. Long may you continue to do so.

Thank you.