

The Secretary of State talks about north-south co-operation, political progress in Northern Ireland and the decade of centenaries



I am delighted to be with you to mark the 75th anniversary of the Irish Association and I'd like to thank your President, Rev Brian Kennaway for inviting me to speak at this special event.

I'd also like to mention 2 other people who are with us this evening. The first of those is Daithi O'Ceallaigh, your Vice-President, was a very distinguished Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom and he has made a great contribution to the strengthening of relations between our 2 countries over many years.

And secondly, I would of course like to warmly welcome the presence of An Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore with whom it has been a pleasure to work since I was appointed Northern Ireland Secretary just over a year ago. Eamon of course combines a number of roles, Foreign Minister, Trade Minister and leader of the Labour party within the coalition government.

As experience at Westminster shows, leading 1 of 2 parties in a coalition comes with its tribulations. So I should say how grateful I am that Eamon will always find time for engagement on Northern Ireland matters, which he approaches in such a constructive way and with such enthusiasm for further progress on key challenges we face here.

Work of the Irish Association

And I am in no doubt that some of those challenges can be ably assisted by the work of our hosts the Irish Association. A key objective of the Irish Association is the promotion of communication, understanding and co-operation between all the people of Ireland and, I quote:

To make reason and goodwill take the place of passion and prejudice in Ireland, North and South.

And this has echoes of spoken statement made in 1926, just 5 years after the Treaty and twelve years before this body was founded:

...the North and South have got to live together as neighbours and the prosperity of Northern Ireland does undoubtedly affect the prosperity of the South of Ireland.

So it is for the government of the South and the Government of the North, to turn their hands rather from the matters which may have divided them in the past, to concentrate on the

matters which really affect the welfare of the people in their own area with a view that the whole of Ireland, and not one part of it, may be prosperous.

These words come from someone who is inextricably linked with Parliament Buildings where we meet today and who might be regarded as a rather unlikely champion of North-South co-operation.

They were actually spoken by Sir James Craig, Viscount Craigavon of Stormont and Prime Minister here from 1921 to 1940.

Of course for a variety of reasons the aspirations set out by Craig back in 1926 did not immediately come to fruition and for many years the relationship between North and South was an uneasy one. At least one historian has referred to it as a cold war.

So I pay tribute to the work of the Irish Association, which since 1938 has tried to provide a bridge to facilitate debate and discussion of cultural, economic and social issues across this island. Over the past 7 decades you have played a valuable role in the furthering the growth of tolerance, understanding, trust and reconciliation. And today in large part due to the efforts of organisations like yours the cold war between North and South has been consigned to the past and relationships across this island have never been closer.

Political Progress

Just consider this.

20 years ago it was considered 'historic' when a unionist leader led a delegation to Dublin for face-to-face talks with the Irish government for the first time since partition. Today, it's commonplace for the unionist ministers to be in Dublin discussing issues of mutual interest with their Irish counterparts or indeed for Irish ministers to be here in Northern Ireland.

Only a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable for a unionist leader to attend an event to mark the contribution of the GAA to society here. Yet last month I had the privilege to attend a Co-Operation Ireland dinner at Queen's University where the DUP First Minister delivered a speech that did precisely that.

And until recently, nobody would have believed it if anyone here had suggested that a Sinn Fein leader would be shaking the hand of Her Majesty the Queen. Yet that's precisely what happened at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast last year.

North-South Co-Operation

So for all the difficulties we might still have, and whatever the imperfections of the current settlement don't let anybody suggest that Northern Ireland hasn't come a very long way.

I frequently choose to refer to establishment of devolved government here at Stormont now mid-way through its second term without suspension as an example of progress. But I'm also conscious that the Belfast Agreement covered 3 strands not only the internal arrangements for the governance of Northern Ireland but also the relationships between North and South and those between East and West.

Let me be clear the UK government, while continuing to fully support the Union and Northern Ireland's place within it, also regards the North-South institutions as an integral part of the political settlement here. There is no contradiction here as Sir James Craig recognised all those years ago in the speech I quoted and as you in the Irish Association have also understood for decades. In fact the Agreement states clearly that:

The North-South Ministerial Council and the Northern Ireland Assembly are mutually interdependent and one cannot successfully function without the other.

In the government's view, North-South Co-Operation on issues of common concern is a matter of simple, practical common sense that threatens nobody's political identity or aspirations. And I know that's the position of the Irish government too.

So the UK government sees no reason why democratically accountable North-South Co-Operation cannot continue to prosper, just as the relationship covered by the third strand of the Agreement, between the UK and Ireland also goes from strength to strength. We are seeing a visible manifestation of that this very weekend.

Decade of Centenaries

Tomorrow, the Tánaiste will be joining the First Minister at the Cenotaph in Belfast for the Remembrance Sunday service while I shall be in Enniskillen standing shoulder to shoulder with the Taoiseach. All of us will be united in remembering people from all sections of the community - Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist - who made the supreme sacrifice in war. And participation in these events forms part of a wider programme of co-operation as the UK and Irish governments work together to find a common approach to the decade of centenaries.

This began last year with an exhibition to mark the Third Home Rule Bill in Westminster Hall, which was attended by the Taoiseach and which subsequently was shown in Dublin and Belfast. And it will include other often tumultuous episodes in our shared history the outbreak of the Great War next year the Somme and the Easter Rising in 1916 and culminating in the events of 1921 to 1922.

I'm conscious that all of these have the potential to be very divisive an opportunity for some to re-live the battles of the past or pursue a particular political agenda. So our task, working alongside colleagues in the Executive and in Dublin is to be faithful to history while encouraging greater respect and understanding in a way helps us to move forward.

And in this we can have no better example of how to handle sensitive historical events than the example set in 2011 by Her Majesty and the then President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. They demonstrated that in looking at centenaries one can be generous to another tradition without in any way abandoning ones own cherished beliefs. That's the spirit that I hope will guide us through this decade of centenaries just as it has the work of this Irish Association over the decades.

In his speech to the British-Irish Association in September, Eamon issued a very generous invitation to the Royal Family, the UK government and unionists to participate in events to commemorate the Easter Rising in 2016. We greatly appreciate that offer and I look forward to discussing with him how we might take it forward.

UK-Irish Joint Statement

But it's not just on the decade of commemorations that the UK and Irish governments are working closely. In March 2012 the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach issued a joint statement, setting out a framework for how our 2 countries can work together in a range of areas over the next decade. And of overriding importance is economic growth and job creation. That's essential when you consider the interdependence of our 2 economies.

Something like £1 billion of trade takes place between the UK and Ireland each week and that trade supports over 400,000 jobs. But there's a whole range of other areas too such as energy, transport, travel and the EU where there's scope for us to do more. We are, for example, working to establish a visa waiver pilot, which would mean that tourists from certain countries with an Irish visa can include both north and south in their trip without the need for a UK visa.

There's an intensive programme of work underway on a range of economic matters, which the Prime Minister and Taoiseach will review at the next of their annual summits in March.

Shared Future

Another key priority is to work with the Northern Ireland Executive here to rebalance the economy and help to build a more cohesive and united society. For our part the government launched an ambitious new economic pact with the Executive in June.

The G8 summit showed the world the very best of Northern Ireland and last month the Prime Minister attended an international investment conference where he made an unashamed sales pitch to business to come and invest here. That conference built on the immensely successful work done over the years to attract foreign investors to Northern Ireland.

Many of those investors may come here initially because they are attracted by a low cost base but I think a key reason why they stay here and expand here is because of the abilities and skills of the people of Northern Ireland and the warmth of the welcome they offer. But it's clear to me that the Northern Ireland economy will never reach its full potential unless we address the community divisions that still too often spill over into disgraceful acts of rioting and violence.

So both of our governments have welcomed the community relations strategy launched by the First and deputy First Ministers in June: *Together: Building a United Community*. And we strongly support the establishment of the All-Party Group under Richard Haass to look at flags, emblems, parading and the past.

Now we all know that tackling these issues is very difficult. But Northern Ireland's political leadership has solved many seemingly intractable problems over the past 2 decades. And with the same determination and leadership I believe that progress can be made once again. But politicians also need encouragement and support in taking difficult decisions.

For any elected representative, reaching out beyond your power base, beyond your traditional supporters, and beyond that part of the community from which you come, can be a hard road to take. So the UK and Irish governments stand ready to provide some of the support and

encouragement needed to help Northern Ireland's leadership take that path forward as can our great friends and allies in the United States.

But that support also needs to come loud and clear from people throughout this island who want to move Northern Ireland forward the kind of people who want to see an end to the tension, division and rioting that can too often disfigure the streets of this great city where we meet this evening. Ordinary hard working people who, as the Prime Minister put it in his recent speech, want Northern Ireland to be defined by its shared future, not its divided past.

And that's where organisations like the Irish Association can continue to perform a hugely positive role. For 75 years you have played your part and I wish you well in your continued work to build respect, mutual understanding and reconciliation throughout the island of Ireland.