

The Future of the British Irish Relationship

It has been nearly a year since politicians across Northern Ireland formed their new Assembly, entered into a power sharing Executive and a new chapter in our history.

I say 'our' because in every sense this was and remains, an extraordinary collective achievement.

By people and politicians here in Ireland. Some of you here today.

By those in Britain. From the United States.

But above all from those in Northern Ireland.

As Tony Blair put it, 'a good day for optimists around the world.'

And as Bertie Ahern said in his historic joint address to Parliament, 'we are now in an era of agreement of new politics and new realities'.

And a reality which means the British Irish relationship is based no longer on a single issue agenda, but one of dynamic, mutually shared interests and opportunities.

Politics For Good

It is an era which for many had seemed just a decade before unimaginable.

Long before, in 'The Second Coming', Yeats had written:

“The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned”

His poetry was a terrible prophecy.

That drowning had left thousands dead, thousands more
deeply wounded and countless more families bitterly scarred.

Yet from the moment of the signing of The Good Friday
Agreement, the impossible became possible.

A new fork in a long and troubled road had opened up in 1998.

And in 2007, the politicians – building on the consensus
established at St Andrews – took the path that has led us to the
power-sharing democracy we have today.

It could happen because of the enormous acts of leadership
which were taken, not least by the men who would become
First and Deputy First Minister.

And because of the relentless dedication of our then Prime
Minister, Tony Blair. And the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern

Bertie Ahern

And can I say how very grateful I believe we all should be to
Bertie Ahern.

As Hugh Brady suggested earlier, as Taoiseach he ensured Ireland would punch above its weight. It was a role President Kennedy pursued for Ireland when he addressed your Parliament in 1963. And under Bertie, in Europe and elsewhere that destiny has been fulfilled.

But Bertie also brought everything to bear to achieve peace in Northern Ireland.

His enthusiasm, his dedication, his optimism and charm – and of course time.

And no better example of this than during a time of huge personal sadness - when he lost his own mother - during the work of the Good Friday Agreement. He was still there.

Driving the work forward. Bringing people together.

Creating that climate of understanding which so vitally helped forge the breakthrough.

He is a man of the greatest commitment. A statesman.

And he will live in our history as a true architect and ambassador for peace.

The enabling environment

However cynical we may be about politics, there is no question that politics in Northern Ireland has triumphed in its noblest form.

As such there could be no better expression of the power of politics, and of politicians to use that power, to change lives for the better.

We have travelled a long way together.

Of course this was not necessarily our common destiny.

As Garret Fitzgerald observed, one of the many ironies of The Conflict was that violent unionism and violent republicanism had a common aim.

However mutually contradictory their ambitions, their shared goal was to drive Britain and Ireland apart.

It is therefore a remarkable irony, that whatever our disagreements may have been during these difficult years, in that resolution and the road to the resolution of The Troubles, far from being driven apart, we have been brought ever closer.

Far from enduring a disabling environment, the people of these islands demanded politicians create an **enabling** environment.

And it has been in the cauldron of that enabling environment that peace has been found.

So today I am privileged to stand here and celebrate not only those acts of truly great leadership. But also celebrate and mark the legacy we now enjoy.

And it is a legacy not only of peace on our streets, but it is certainly true to say, that the relationship between the Irish and British Governments has never been closer. Never stronger.

Transforming The Past

The real power of our bond today is perhaps only understood by the realisation of just how far we have travelled - together.

For the magnitude of this is only grasped, when we understand that our relationship hasn't just changed but been **transformed**.

And transformed by working together, to unite and help bring peace to the streets of Northern Ireland where once division and sectarianism reigned. And for far too long.

Of course it wasn't easy.

We started from seemingly irreconcilable differences.

A catholic community which felt it had been treated as second class citizens. And as Tony Blair said in his Belfast Harbour speech, 'let us not even assign blame. But let us not deny fact.'

A Unionist community that were then deeply suspicious. Not least that a British Government – whatever the political colour – would sell them out.

And then into this bitter cauldron, came the deadly ingredient of terrorism.

And in turn, as was our duty, the British Government's security response, often perceived as harsh. Its purpose to eliminate the violence.

And so we lived through a time of violence. Of ceasefires. Of more violence.

Hope frustrated. Hope realised.

And then finally The Agreement. And critically an Agreement which is inclusive. As Bertie said, "accommodating everyone and threatening no-one".

Agreement of Principles

At its heart, the, inclusion. All parties to commit exclusively to peace.

A commitment to equality and justice. In politics. In policing.

An acceptance of nationalist identity.

And the enshrined acceptance for the people of Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK for as long as a majority want to.

And all this achieved through our two Governments working not as the extremists had wished. Apart.

But as the majority of our people wanted. Together.

It was a painful, sometimes torturous process.

But underpinning this was the driving force of Irish and British Governments.

Determined there would be no going back.

And after many false dawns, the St Andrews Agreement – a two-stage approach for devolution.

And so May 8th last year.

The first stage realised with a new Assembly and a power sharing Executive.

The extraordinary relationship between the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Two political figures, once seemingly irreconcilable leaders, sharing office. Sharing power. United in their determination to make the new institutions not just work, but flourish.

Politicians in this new Assembly, the new Executive, elected from Northern Ireland, sharing decisions over health, education, local government, transport, culture.

But also more.

An environment in which Sinn Fein joined the Policing Board.

And later in the year joining District Policing partnerships.

The significance of this transformation reverberated around the world.

Indeed it still does.

The Depth of the Relationship

In the depths of this extraordinary narrative beats the heart of a shared enterprise by the British and Irish Governments.

It was embodied in the relationship between Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair. Two men united in their passion – there is no better word to describe it – to find a peaceful solution, based on the principle of consent.

And that relationship has sprung many new channels.

You see it in relationships across the board today.

Between Ministers in the new Executive and those elected here in the Republic.

Between Ministers in Dublin and Ministers in London.

You see it in practice.

And you see it in policy.

And you see it enduring.

Tony Blair may have left the stage as Prime Minister.

But his successor Gordon Brown is as determined and as resolute to continue the work and the relationship.

It's a strong bond. And why Gordon values his regular meetings with the Taoiseach.

The Investment Conference

Next month, the Executive in Northern Ireland will host a Conference in Belfast to encourage a new level of financial investment from the United States.

America has been a critical ally to us all in helping bring peace to Northern Ireland.

In the last decade, from President Clinton and President Bush, we have seen huge focus in ensuring stability and prosperity come to the people of Northern Ireland.

Both Presidents have committed unprecedented amounts of time to ensuring that the historic divisions are relegated to the past.

And I am sure I speak for everyone today in thanking America for its level of continued interest.

So I look forward to working with my colleagues here in Dublin when the Investment Conference takes place in early May.

A huge amount of work has been done by the Executive to make it a success.

It is no surprise to see that once again both the Taoiseach, a new Taoiseach and Gordon Brown will play a vital part in the Conference.

Northern Ireland should expect no less.

But it will be yet again a further expression of how we continue working together for people in Northern Ireland.

The European Union

I hope you can not only see but feel why the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach regard the bonds between our two Governments today as vital and as strong, as at any time in our shared history.

But it is not just in our history that these bonds are strong, but in our future.

For the ambitions we have for our people are mutually shared.

We are central to each other's prosperity.

The UK is Ireland's largest market.

Ireland is our fourth largest market.

Trade last year alone was worth £28 billions.

And we are significant investors in the markets of the other.

That's why working together on the Common Travel Area is so important.

It's why developing the CTA to ensure it benefits legitimate travellers is vital. And why it matters to improve protections and

safeguards against abuses of the Common Travel Area is equally vital.

And perhaps there is no better example of that future than in how together we approach the European Union.

For we are critical partners together, as we work together to develop and reform the European Union.

We both share a vision for an outward looking global Europe.

Our respective ambitions are united in common purpose.

Not for a Single Market which looks in upon itself.

But a global Europe of nation states which competes successfully in a global market place.

Outward looking.

Flexible.

Prosperous because of its skills.

Its innovation. Its creative talents.

Here in Dublin, just as in London we see the defining challenges of the 21st century as international. Not national.

We share a view of a 'next generation' Europe based on four core principles:

A Europe Open to the World

Shared Institutions with Shared Activities

Preventing Conflict

Environmental Union

Does anyone really think these are other than shared perspectives?

And so our shared ambitions are finding tangible expression.

In working together on the Lisbon Agenda.

In developing a more dynamic and modern European economic market without harmonising taxation.

Opening up our labour markets, supportive of Turkish membership.

On security.

Forming an ambitious European energy and climate change policy to “climate proof” development assistance.

Helping the EU play a stabilising role in the Balkans and parts of Africa.

A shared belief in the support of Millennium Development Goals and the battle against global poverty.

The EU is after all the world’s largest development donor.

This year it will spend nearly 370 million Euros on humanitarian assistance across the world.

On these we, Britain and Ireland, are now working together.

But we can build on this to do more. It is in our joint interest to achieve this.

To shift the EU’s historic attention on regulation and towards greater promotion of enterprise and encouraging innovation.

Reducing burdens on business.

Promoting Research and Development investment in the EU closer to 3% of GDP.

Developing the skills of people across Europe to address the need for a workforce that leads on environmental technologies and industries of the future.

These are challenges we all face.

And working together with the Irish Government we can work to effect a better and more efficient European Union.

Completing Devolution

Yet as we reach forward together into the future, we must remain mindful of the shared goal which brought us so closely together in recent years.

For work in Northern Ireland remains to be completed. And it requires us both.

Tasks which require us to deal with the Past. The Consultative Group on the past, established by the Government but independent of it, has vital work to do. How can we move into the future, when the past has the capacity to exert a vice-like grip? And of course I understand that.

So how do we deal with the past but not be held in its grip? How do we create the enabling environment to deal with the past? If we can reach the Good Friday Agreement I am optimistic we can find a way to deal with the past. But it won't be easy.

And tasks which require us to deal with the present?

Critically, the political parties have agreed in principle, indeed the candidates for the Assembly last year stood on a platform for full devolution.

But we still remain to complete the transfer of policing and criminal justice.

We still have a job to do.

The British Government have kept their word.

We have prepared the institutions ready for transfer in May this year.

We stand ready to hand over responsibility for criminal justice and policing to politicians elected in Northern Ireland.

The Chief Constable sees no reason on his part why devolution of policing should not be completed.

Indeed recent opinion polls indicate confidence by a majority of the public to complete devolution.

It is therefore in the hands of the politicians in Northern Ireland to ask for the transfer.

We stand ready.

But it will require leadership from the politicians to complete the task.

And support from Irish and British Governments to nurture and enable this final act of completion. To support the leadership in this crucial next step.

The enterprise we began together now stands primed to reach its inevitable but critical end.

It is an act we should make with confidence. Because there is confidence in the communities to do this.

But it will require the confidence of all to achieve this.

The momentum is there.

We can do it.

Because we have the relationships, the friendships, the friends, to do this.

Indeed, when the final chapter of St Andrews is closed, I believe we will look back and, to borrow Yeats, reflect

“ Our glory was we had such friends.”

Thank you.

