

SPEECH FOR BRUSSELS OPEN DAYS SESSION

## **CROSS-BORDER SERVICES FOR CITIZENS IN THE IRISH BORDER REGION**

***Mesdames, Messieurs, je vais commencer mon discours en français pour montrer que, come citoyen irlandais, je suis fier d'être européen et capable to parler dans une autre langue europeene.***

Comme chacun sait, la région entre la République d'Irlande et l'Irlande du Nord compta pendant près de 30 ans parmi les régions frontalières les plus violemment contestées de toute l'Europe occidentale.

En 1998, après la signature de l'accord de paix du Vendredi saint, certains changements ont commencé à se manifester. Cet accord entre le gouvernement britannique et le gouvernement irlandais et les partis politiques au niveau local, ainsi que l'impact préalable de l'Acte unique européen ont transformé le secteur en une région frontalière européenne presque normale, autrement dit :

il n'y a plus ni postes de contrôle, ni postes de douane à la frontière ;  
des milliers de personnes passent la frontière pour vivre, travailler et étudier et, c'est une surprise,

les habitants de la République d'Irlande affluent en très grand nombre dans les villes frontalières d'Irlande du Nord pour profiter des prix beaucoup moins chers dans les magasins, en raison en grande partie de la faiblesse actuelle de la livre sterling.

Je dis bien « presque », car la violence n'a pas disparu totalement, des groupes dissidents de l'IRA ont, ces derniers mois, monté un poste de contrôle armé illégal et ont posé une bombe massive à South Armagh, qui, pendant le conflit nord-irlandais fut l'une des zones les plus dangereuses pour les forces de sécurité britanniques.

***Maintenant je vais continuer en anglais.***

My Centre for Cross Border Studies is based in the small city of Armagh, just north of that formerly very conflicted area. We research and develop practical cross-border cooperation in areas such as education, training, health, planning, the economy and ICT. I am going to talk today about some of the things we and others are doing in the four areas of health, training, planning and the provision of information to help citizens in our still contested although now largely peaceful border area to work together across that border to improve their lives.

This Irish region, like many border regions in Europe, suffers from a lot of disadvantages: it is remote and distant from the island's two major cities, Dublin and Belfast; it is overwhelmingly rural, with poor transport and communications; it has relatively low educational standards with few higher education institutions; and is largely dependent for employment on farming, public administration and very small 'micro-firms', with few large or high-tech companies.

**Health** in such a region is problematic. The major hospitals are far away and local doctors are often spread thinly. The existence of two states that turned their backs on each other for nearly 80 years up to the late 1990s meant that there was little or no history of cooperation in this, as in so many other areas.

Things started to change in the 1990s through the efforts of a group of health professionals who worked to bring the health authorities of the border regions in the two jurisdictions together into a visionary new network called Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT).

Between 2000 and 2006 CAWT received nearly €12 million in EU funding to carry out a range of cross-border pilot projects in mental health, road safety, sex offenders, foster care, diabetes care, emergency planning and local doctors 'out of hours' services.

One of the most useful examples of cooperation has involved contracting surgery and other services from one jurisdiction where there are long waiting lists to the other where there is spare capacity: thus in the north-west premature babies from Donegal in the Republic are sent over the border into Northern Ireland to hospital in Londonderry; and other contractual exchanges involve hernia surgery, kidney dialysis and eye care. Most of these have been hospital to hospital exchanges, with little or no involvement by central government Departments of Health. One area which has been brought about by inter-governmental agreement is the sending of cancer patients from Donegal, one of the remotest corners of the island, to have radiotherapy in the North's capital, Belfast.

However these were essentially short-term solutions to immediate problems: they did not involve any long-term cross-border cooperation arrangements; nor were they a part of overall health planning within the two jurisdictions of Ireland and Northern Ireland. There is little or no evidence that individual cooperation initiatives have become embedded in the routine business of health service provision in either jurisdiction, and the actual number of hospital patients crossing the border remains low.

Those involved in healthcare stress that the political context continues to be the most significant factor determining the level of cross-border health care. Both health service providers and government officials have told us that if the inter-governmental agreements after the epoch-changing Good Friday Agreement could have been built on, it was likely that, as in other spheres of life such as business, cross-border and all-Ireland working would become an increasingly accepted and natural way things of doing things. However this has generally not happened for a number of reasons: notably the continuing political instability of Northern Ireland up to 2007, when the more extreme parties of Irish republicanism and Ulster unionism finally agreed to share power; the difficulty of defining the parameters for acceptable cross-border health cooperation; and the difficulty of phasing in cross-border cooperation in a period when the health services in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were firstly facing radical structural overhaul and later severe funding cuts.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies, tired of waiting for the politicians and civil servants to move, is currently using EU INTERREG funding to carry out a study to examine the number, size and possible locations of hospitals in the Irish border region if the planning of acute hospital services in the future was on the basis on population needs rather than jurisdictional frontiers. For research purposes, it will assume there is no jurisdictional border and will develop a model of hospital services based *only* on the distribution of patients, available bed numbers, medical specialisms offered, and the availability of transport in the Irish cross-border region.

**Training** is another area where our Centre has taken a lead. For the past five years we have been training officials from both central government departments and local authorities in how the different administrative systems in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland work; how public finance and governance differs in the two jurisdictions; and how cross-border cooperation works between business, local authorities and community and voluntary groups. There are currently 700 officials working in North-South and cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. Apart from the Centre's courses – which have trained nearly 150 of them – there is no training for them in this new, complex and highly sensitive area of public administration. This autumn the Centre is changing its focus to offer specialised training courses (in partnership with its sister organisation, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development) for border region elected representatives and local council officials

on how they might work together on planning issues, shared services and social and economic development.

**Planning** is becoming an increasingly important responsibility for local officials in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the North, 2011 will see planning responsibilities returned to local councils after more than 35 years of being handled by central government following their abuse by unionist-dominated local councils up to the 1970s. In the Republic of Ireland, the Minister for the Environment (who is also the leader of the Green Party) has said new planning legislation will make sure that never again will local councils be able to rezone huge areas of land for unsustainable property development, a factor that played a major part in the spectacular collapse of the housing market in the Republic in the past two years.

In this rapidly changing context, local councillors and officials in both jurisdictions are facing a steep learning curve. The Centre for Cross Border Studies' sister body dealing with spatial planning, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development, has in recent years published widely-praised research projects on cross-border spatial strategies in Ireland; the potential for cross-border collaboration between border towns in areas like sustainable energy and tourism; and economic diversification in rural areas in both parts of the island. The International Centre for Local and Regional Development is also working with the Centre for Cross Border Studies on the training programmes for border region councillors and officials outlined earlier.

A fourth area of services for cross-border citizens in Ireland – in which again my Centre has taken a leading role – is in the **provision of practical information** for people crossing the border to live, work, study or retire. Eight years ago a report commissioned by the two governments called for the setting up of an online citizens information 'one stop shop' to help the many thousands of people crossing the Irish border for such practical purposes. In 2007 the two governments – through their North/South Ministerial Council – commissioned the Centre for Cross Border Studies to create a pilot website to start providing this information. We are now into the second phase of the Border People mobility information website ([www.borderpeople.info](http://www.borderpeople.info)), which provides the public with a wide range of information about such things as taxes, social benefits, pensions, job seeking, educational qualifications, health, housing and banking in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland. This website now receives around 250,000 'hits' per year.

These are four ways – all of them funded by the European Union – in which we in the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh, Northern Ireland (10 miles from the border with the Republic) are helping to bring important services closer to the citizens of that peripheral and often neglected cross-border region. Maybe even more importantly, we are also in the business of practical peacebuilding: trying through work that is clearly of mutual benefit to the people of both Irish jurisdictions, to help break down the barriers of fear, suspicion and misunderstanding that have led to intermittent conflict between Protestants and Catholics, unionists and nationalists, North and South, for most of the past century and for several centuries before that.

*Je vous remercie de m'avoir ecoute.*

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