

Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny T.D.,
The Institute for British-Irish Studies Annual Conference 2011
North-South Institutions and Cross-Border Relations: Commemorating
Opportunities and Achievements
on Thursday, 26 May, 2011 at 11am

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address the Annual Conference of the Institute for British-Irish Studies here in University College Dublin this morning.

I address you today after what has been an extraordinary week in the history of Ireland's bilateral relationship with Britain.

Indeed, in recent days we have seen historic events here in our capital city and in our country that reflect so positively on our friendship with two nations with which we are so inextricably linked, historically, culturally and economically.

The first state visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland was hugely successful on every level.

I think the full impact of that visit, the genuine reciprocal warmth which was clearly evident during the four days, and the public and private sense of reconciliation will continue to be appreciated and perhaps continue to surprise us for many, many years to come.

It was history in the making, a sea change.

It is the start of a new era.

The visit of President Obama, coming so soon after the Queen's visit was another momentous occasion and a wonderful celebration of our bonds across the Atlantic.

In his speech, and in our discussions, the President reflected on the enormous achievement – globally recognised – that is the peace process in Ireland.

We can draw huge inspiration from that achievement as we confront our current challenges.

As I looked down from the stage in College Green last Monday, I could see so many young people with hope in their hearts, and determination in their souls, to succeed and to rebuild our country.

I could also see, gathered near the stage, President Robinson and several former Taoisigh who had contributed to the cause of peace in our country.

Beside them stood the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland – honoured guests, of course, but also familiar figures on the streets of our capital city.

That scene, for me, summed up how far we have come on this island.

Of course, sadly, last weekend we also gathered together on a more sombre occasion to pay our respects to Dr. Garret FitzGerald, a man who served this university and our country so well for so many years.

Garret's passing provided a poignant opportunity to reflect on a full life, dedicated to public service and for the betterment of all of us on this island.

It was fitting indeed that he lived to see the truly historic day when all of his work to bring peace to Northern Ireland and to transform relations between Ireland and Britain came to fruition.

The relationship between Britain and Ireland has never been better.

Over the coming years, we will add new strands to the fabric of that relationship.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has been seminal in transforming life on the island of Ireland.

The inclusive, power-sharing Institutions in the North continue to consolidate and evolve.

The transfer of policing and justice powers to the Assembly in April 2010 marked a milestone in the devolution process mapped out in the Agreement.

The risks taken for peace have paid off.

At the ballot box on May 5th, the people of Northern Ireland gave their overwhelming endorsement to the parties committed to making the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement work.

Once more the people repudiated the destructive agenda peddled by a few violent nihilists masquerading as Irish nationalists.

The Good Friday Agreement was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of this island in referenda in both parts of Ireland.

We will never allow their democratic will to be usurped by any group.

I join with First Minister Peter Robinson in his pledge to work to build a shared future of peace for all the people on this island in honour of the memory of Ronan Kerr - a young man callously murdered simply because he chose to pursue a career in the service of the people of Ireland.

The overwhelming majority of the people on this island want to live in peace and mutual respect, free from the threat of violence. The misguided few who continue to act in defiance of the democratic will of the people of this island should stop, and stop now.

I want to assure you today that the Government that I lead is committed to protecting all of the gains that have flowed from the Good Friday Agreement, and to bringing the relationship between the traditions on this island to a new and higher level.

The main forum for advancing North South economic cooperation remains the North South Ministerial Council, which was established under Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Council has met regularly since the restoration of the devolved institutions in the North in May 2007, with every one of these meetings including Ministers

from unionist and nationalist backgrounds, as well as their Government counterparts.

Cross-border relations have never been better.

The new Government's Programme affirms our commitment to strengthening North South cooperation even further, and to working with our Northern colleagues to develop greater economic collaboration to accelerate the process of economic recovery and job creation on this island.

I have a deep personal commitment to this process.

I held my first meeting with the First and deputy First Minister on my first full week in office and we have met or spoken to each other on a number of occasions since then. I have also spoken with other party leaders in Northern Ireland.

I have discussed Northern Ireland and British-Irish relations with the Prime Minister in both Dublin and London, while many of my colleagues in Government have had engagements with their counterparts in Northern Ireland and, in the case of the Tánaiste, with the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary.

I very much look forward to chairing the next Plenary Meeting of the North South Ministerial Council on June 10th.

This will be the first meeting between my government and the new Executive in Northern Ireland.

We will be working with our colleagues from Northern Ireland to develop our transformed relationship and in particular to chart the way forward in tackling head on the economic challenges that confront the people of this island.

In the new era of relationships on this island and between Ireland and Britain, I believe there is now no obstacle to the implementation of the remaining outstanding commitments from the Good Friday and St Andrews Agreement.

In particular, I hope to see early progress on the North South Parliamentary Forum, the North South Consultative Forum and on the St Andrews Agreement review of North-South co-operation.

I also want to work together with the Executive to ensure that the North South Ministerial Council can become more flexible and more responsive to the full range of challenges and opportunities that we now face.

We need to remove unnecessary constraints on the effective operation of the Council.

In doing so, we can and we must protect the essential architecture that underpins it and that was so carefully designed to reflect both the fears and aspirations of people from all traditions.

I am certain that progress is possible, in a manner where everyone on the island can be comfortable and everyone on the island can benefit.

Of course, while the institutions of the Agreement are vital in their own right, we also want to ensure that they operate to their maximum potential and are directly relevant to the lives of our people.

Our key priorities are to strengthen the island economy, as an essential component of economic recovery, to help create jobs for our people and to improve cross border public services such as health and education.

On an island of 6 million people at the periphery of Europe, it has to be possible to achieve economies of scale by working together in some areas rather than simply duplicating expenditure on infrastructural facilities and services. Regardless of our political perspectives, everyone on this island understands that we share a small space and they should work together to improve the lives of everyone who lives here.

It therefore makes good practical sense for the two jurisdictions on the island, North and South, to look more closely and with a new commitment to determine the ways we can cooperate in the interest of providing the best possible services and quality of life for the people of this island. By working closely together, we can provide better public services throughout Ireland and achieve best value for money for taxpayers, north and south of the border.

There is a legitimate public expectation that value for money takes precedence. We need to show we're hearing that message and responding in ways that reduce the financial burden on taxpayers in both jurisdictions.

A good example of this is the comprehensive study on health sector cooperation which identified numerous areas where closer cooperation between the two jurisdictions makes sense.

Significant progress is already being made across a range of initiatives, including the arrangements for the cross border paediatric congenital cardiac surgery, health promotion, cancer research, all island action on suicide prevention and child protection.

I believe we can go further.

The Government strongly supports the proposed radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin in Derry, which will be accessible to cancer patients from both sides of the border.

I welcome the confirmation by the new Northern Ireland Minister for Health, Edwin Poots, that this important project will proceed.

It is an excellent example of practical cooperation that will benefit our people north and south, providing them with the best services possible through our cooperating and working together.

Other success stories of note are the establishment of a Single Electricity Market for the island and the delivery of faster and cheaper broadband through the North South flagship initiative, Project Kelvin, which provides high speed direct international connectivity at significantly lower costs.

That was part of the North West Gateway Initiative, which has seen a flowering of the potential of the North West. We are now seeing serious co-operation on cancer services, on tourism, on higher education, on spatial planning and of course on infrastructure.

In that context, this Government remains committed to the upgrade of the A5 road, which will significantly improve access for the people of the North West of the island, a region which has often been overlooked when infrastructure investment decisions have been made in the past.

Next month will see the very significant opening of the Peace Bridge across the River Foyle, a key project made possible with support from the EU and through cross-border co-operation. That will be another step in the

transformation of Derry and the North West that will culminate in 2013 with the celebrations for the City of Culture.

All these things would have seemed impossible a few short years ago.

That is cause for satisfaction, and justifiably so.

But I believe it also shows that we are now in a new era, where the possibilities open to us are greater than we have previously dared to hope.

There are genuine opportunities for Government Departments and agencies, North and South, to cooperate even more actively in all our interests.

North South bodies such as Tourism Ireland and InterTradeIreland are already making critical contributions every day to economic recovery by promoting the island internationally and by boosting levels of trade, innovation and collaborative research at home.

It should also be possible for our economic development agencies to work more closely together – for example, in marketing the “Innovation Island”. There is no point in being shy about selling the message of research excellence on the international stage.

This could also involve closer cooperation and building on joint work on investment promotion and overseas trade missions which is already underway.

In the emerging economies, there is great scope to build on the all-island brand to our mutual benefit.

More broadly in the European context, the new Government will continue to pursue and engage in initiatives with the Northern Ireland Executive on EU issues where it makes sense to do so.

We have clear shared interests in areas such as research funding, regional development policy and the future of the common agricultural policy.

And at a local level, we should try to emulate in other border areas the recent groundbreaking initiatives between Newry and Mourne District Council and the Louth local authorities.

I would like to acknowledge today the important role played by the International Centre for Local and Regional Development and the Centre for Cross-Border Studies in that process, as well as their pivotal roles in engaging with other councils to promote practical cooperation along the border.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I said at the outset, we are now in a new era.

That new era is the result of painstaking work by many, many people – often out of the spotlight, and often in very difficult circumstances.

Thankfully, circumstances have changed unrecognisably for the better.

We have seen that expressed so brilliantly in the historic and symbolic gestures of reconciliation in recent days.

The challenge now before us is to define that new era.

To define it for ourselves and for our children.

A new era that is respectful of, but not shackled by, our shared history.

A new era that is part of a bright future, and not just the end of a troubled past.

It is an unprecedented and wonderful opportunity for our island.

We will not let that opportunity pass.

Thank you.

ENDS