

Ambassador to Ireland discusses differences in the UK and Irish approach to tackling coronavirus

We are living in extraordinary times. I celebrated 40 years as a diplomat on St Patrick's Day and have never known anything like the COVID-19 (coronavirus) crisis. Its impact is global and nobody is immune from it.

I want to begin by paying tribute to all our remarkable health workers, those keeping supermarkets stocked, those keeping law and order on the streets and the millions of other people across our across these islands who are keeping the essential fabric of society going so effectively.

I was inspired by the scenes last Thursday night across our cities – so many people clapping in the darkness, whilst key monuments were illuminated in the colours of our respective health services. They were a reminder of what unites us, and of the solidarity that will help us all through these challenging times.

The British Embassy continues to operate and provide services, including consular assistance. But in largely virtual form. Like so many of your readers, we are now mostly working from home.

It has been quite a learning curve and a top priority has been looking out for each other. We have been helped by lots of the great advice that's out there about looking after our mental health and by creative use of virtual alternatives to social interaction.

I know there has been a lot of interest in any differences in the UK and Irish approach to tackling COVID-19. My message is simple. Both governments are doing everything they can to delay and to flatten the curve. To do so, we are following the advice of our expert scientists, especially our Chief Medical Officers.

Those who say we are not following the science are wrong. The advice we are following reflects the specific patterns of development of the virus in both countries and informs any new measures to counter the disease. So we will sometimes take different steps but our shared objectives are protecting our health services and saving lives.

As we do so, our two governments are in close contact recognising the unique circumstances of our across these islands, including of course the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but also the Common Travel Area.

As well as the call between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, there have been recent conversations around common challenges between our Secretaries of State for Health, Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland and Transport with the Tánaiste and other Irish counterparts. Our Chief Medical Officers are in

contact too.

After speaking with Tánaiste Simon Coveney, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab underlined the importance of our countries working together more closely than ever as we pull through this crisis. And that is why the whole Embassy team is hard at work facilitating bilateral engagement.

A good practical example is the shared challenge of repatriating those of our citizens who have been stranded abroad. There has been strong collaboration in a number of countries, including the repatriation of a number of Irish citizens from Wuhan, the cruise ships Princess Diamond and Silver Shadow, and most recently from Peru. We are grateful for Irish Government assistance on repatriation of British citizens too.

Understandably, we are all focused on the situation where we are. But we cannot defeat this pandemic without international co-operation. To defeat COVID-19 once and for all we need to make this kind of cooperation truly global.

The UK sees several key strands to this. We believe we need to cooperate to build the resilience of vulnerable countries, develop a vaccine, and support the global economy.

The UK has so far pledged £544 million in aid to support the global efforts to combat COVID-19, including contributions to the WHO, Red Cross and UNICEF to help vulnerable countries. But much more is needed and we are encouraging other countries to consider what they can give.

Developing a vaccine and distributing this equitably to those who need it is going to be essential to tackling the disease and preventing it from returning. British researchers are working hard on this, just like their Irish counterparts. We have put £250 million towards the wider global effort to find a vaccine and some promising signs are emerging.

And finally, once the crisis eases, the international community will need to work together to help our economies to recover as quickly as possible and get all of those who have sadly lost their jobs through this crisis back into employment. These are the priorities we are supporting through the G7 and G20.

We do not know when the pandemic will end. It may take some time. But the remarkable spirit that I see right here in Dublin and across these islands convinces me that we will get through this and that the deep ties that bind us will be even stronger.

Robin Barnett, British Ambassador to Ireland