

# Minister Pincher speech at the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly, 21 October 2019

## **Introduction**

All politicians love to hear applause ahead of a speech, let alone at the end of one, so thank you for the warm welcome.

It is a pleasure to be with you, and very good of you to arrange an event on a Monday morning so close to my constituency in Tamworth. Though this Saturday happened to be a weekend I was in the Commons.

It is fitting to host BIPA here. As you may know, this region actually has a large Irish community of its own. Warwickshire has the most Gaelic Games Clubs in England, outside of London, though I am sorry to say we haven't beaten a club from Ireland at hurling since 2017. Having read up on that matter I am surprised we have beaten a club from Ireland at all.

May I first of all thank Co-Chairs Andrew Rosindell and Sean Crowe. Coming from quite different political traditions, I know they share a genuine commitment to strengthen links and mutual understanding, to explore solutions to shared challenges and to promote friendly relations, among the BIPA membership and beyond. They both deserve our appreciation for their tireless efforts. Thank you very much gentlemen.

## **BIPA and bilateral relations**

It is my first time at this Assembly, but I already know how incredibly valuable it is to maintaining and enhancing relationships across our islands. I know that it is a body based on respect, dialogue, trust, friendship and a little patience. Patience especially if you are a government MP working with the Whips Office, a three line whip for Conservative MPs and a one line whip for Labour.

We have valued BIPA's huge contribution to those bonds of friendship for the 30 years since its foundation, and I am confident that, together, we will continue to deepen and strengthen them after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

Bilateral diplomacy is about strong personal relationships in service of two countries' mutual interests. The Assembly is the embodiment of that. If I can quote W B Yeats, "There are no strangers here; Only friends you haven't met." We may sometimes be rivals in sport, but our nations are bonded by history and family, culture and commerce. We are diverse, but our bonds run deep. Very deep.

## **EU Exit**

All friendships go through testing times, and Brexit has certainly been one such test for the United Kingdom and Ireland. It has dominated the political landscape over the last three years. It has occupied several miles of column inches and sent the Twittersphere into the stratosphere.

You will have already seen the events at the weekend. All I will say now therefore is the United Kingdom is committed to the Belfast Agreement, the Common Travel Area, an open border, and the institutions of North-South Cooperation. Above all, we are committed to a close bilateral relationship with Ireland in the future, well beyond Brexit.

My great-grandmother was a Marney from Ireland. I am not sure that qualifies me to play for Ireland, or that Ireland would want me. But it is important for me to continue this family connection with Ireland.

We want a vibrant relationship that champions our mutual interests, grapples with shared challenges and seizes economic opportunities. Much of that collaboration is of course already happening.

## **Links and opportunities**

Our people-to-people links are strong. Recent visits to Ireland by members of the Royal Family have been overwhelmingly well received. The British Council is promoting cultural and educational links – including British music at the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork- and our Embassy in Dublin is making connections between young people on either side of the Irish Sea. These links between the next generation which will help to safeguard the future of our relationship, and that's why we would like to do even more to engage diaspora groups.

Climate, energy and the environment is another area where we must work together. I understand that this was the focus of the last BIPA plenary and I note the motion that has been tabled for discussion tomorrow. The Foreign Secretary's Special Envoy for Climate Change visited Ireland in July and I know that our Embassy is keen to step up work on this, not least as we prepare to host COP26 in Glasgow next year, in partnership with Italy. There is some question about where the weather is better in Glasgow or Italy. I am sure we will find out in due course.

Our collaboration in bioscience, engineering and physical sciences is also strong. We have a Science Foundation Ireland and Wellcome Trust partnership, joint university appointments and Centres for Doctoral Training. There is plenty of scope for collaboration in artificial intelligence too, as well as fintech, medtech and proptech.

## **Civic development**

Our Embassy in Dublin is also working hard to link up the south west of Ireland with similar areas in the United Kingdom – such as the Northern Powerhouse, and the Midland Engine region that we are standing in today. And it was nice to see Brian and David speak earlier. Their 'Joining the Dots

Campaign' is making valuable connections and promoting inclusive growth. There are strong relationships with cities such as Birmingham and mayors such as Andy Street will be important too.

Our cooperation in other areas is also moving forward. There are excellent operational links between the Police Service Northern Ireland and the Garda. And earlier this year, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office hosted the first ever joint diplomatic training programme for British and Irish diplomats. The plan is for the programme to be reciprocated in Dublin next year. We also plan a joint visit by our Permanent Secretaries to Africa.

## **Conclusion**

These are just a few examples where our cooperation is benefitting both our countries. They show that the British-Irish relationship and the work of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly really matter. I am confident that, with your continued help and support, that relationship will continue to flourish in the future.

You will note that William Shakespeare is one of the West Midlands' most famous sons, who wrote: "Words are easy, like the wind; faithful friends are hard to find." I know as that great Ambassador for British-Irish relations, Feargal Sharkey once sang something very similar. But not in this room today. I don't think friends will be hard to find, as Yeats said you just have to find them. I am very grateful to be here amongst friends. Thank you.