

Secretary of State speech to 2022 British-Irish Association Conference

It is a great pleasure to be addressing you this evening in these beautiful surroundings for the annual conference of the British-Irish Association.

I would like to start by thanking Dominic for his kind invitation and his words of welcome. I would also like to express my gratitude to Francesca Kay and all of her team for their hard work and dedication in organising this conference.

Since 1972, the BIA has played a key role in bringing people together – politicians, civil servants, academics and faith leaders. Also people from the world of business, journalists, commentators and many more, all of whom have sought to promote dialogue, understanding and good relations throughout these islands as we work to shape a better future together.

So at the outset, I would also like to thank the BIA for everything it has done and will no doubt continue to do in the years ahead.

Over the past two years, we have sadly lost two monumental figures of the peace process in Northern Ireland. In their careers and in their lives, John Hume and David Trimble demonstrated just how much progress could be made on challenges that were deemed insurmountable by coming together and seeking compromise.

They put Northern Ireland's future ahead of party interests, taking enormous personal and political risks to deliver peace. In coming together here this weekend, not only are we reminded of that spirit, but we should look to reignite it as we work together on the challenges in the months ahead.

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

Nearly 25 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, we shouldn't lose sight of the magnitude of what was achieved in 1998.

The Agreement marked an extraordinary achievement for Northern Ireland, laying the foundation for the more peaceful and prosperous society that we see today.

The approaching 25th Anniversary of the Agreement offers an opportunity for all communities to come together and recognise that shared achievement.

As we prepare to mark this historic moment, let us be mindful of our responsibilities, particularly to young people, and to future generations in Northern Ireland, and to do all we can to build upon the remarkable progress that has been made in the last quarter century, and to make sure that it endures into the future.

Northern Ireland has so much to offer and huge potential for an exciting and

prosperous future.

Strategic Challenges ahead

Of course, there are issues that we currently face, including the Northern Ireland Protocol, dealing with the legacy of the past, restoring a stable Executive and tackling the cost of living – these are extraordinary challenges.

But they are not insurmountable. With constructive engagement and proper understanding, these challenges can be solved, especially as we already share a common goal – to secure the very best possible outcomes for people in Northern Ireland and across these islands.

The UK Government remains committed to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and will continue to work with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government to deliver our vision of reconciliation, equality and respect for all.

We are proud of the progress that we have made in this respect since this conference last met.

However, that is not to say there are not serious challenges ahead.

There are difficult issues like the Northern Ireland Protocol and addressing the legacy of the past where I know there are strong differing views. I understand that – these are complex and sensitive issues and if there were easier solutions they would have been found long before now.

What I can say is the spirit and intent of what we are doing is to deliver a better future for Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Protocol

The Northern Ireland Protocol was put in place to deal with the “unique circumstances” of Northern Ireland, recognising that a solution needed to be found that recognised Northern Ireland’s place as a sovereign part of the United Kingdom and its internal market, which of course is important, in particular to those with unionist identity, as well as to the commercial life of so many businesses. And of course, the Protocol serves the equally important purpose, not just for nationalists, of preserving frictionless trade across the land border through providing access for Northern Ireland to the EU Single Market.

We also accept the importance of preserving the integrity of the EU Single Market, as well as our own. And we accept fully that the economic prosperity of Northern Ireland benefits from trade both East-West and North-South.

However, there are real issues with how the Protocol is currently operating. Those issues increase cost and complexity, and reduce choice regardless of someone’s views on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

We are determined to fix those problems, through negotiation and agreement

with the EU if at all possible, and thus to deliver stability for businesses and citizens across Northern Ireland. But with legislation if we cannot.

Our aim with the legislation on the Northern Ireland Protocol is to put in place an insurance policy so that we can ensure we have a way of resolving the issues with the Protocol. Like all insurance policies, they are better if they're not invoked but we must bring about a resolution.

There is also a bigger picture here. We need to get back to finding some common understanding and a relationship of trust between friends and neighbours with a spirit of good intent and a willingness to make things better.

A stronger UK/Ireland and UK/EU relationship is in all our interest, not least given the wider geostrategic challenges we face. Individuals and businesses look to their political leaders, on both sides, to make their lives easier rather than more burdensome.

As politicians, and as legislators, if something isn't working, we make changes to find a solution. That is what we do – day in, day out, we find the possibilities and the room to make things better for the people we are elected to serve.

I accept that the politics around this is difficult. But given the political will, this can be resolved. And of course the Protocol itself foresees the prospect of it being amended and evolving. We should aim to find a new balance through a new negotiation. And then we can all move on.

Move on to so many other issues that deserve our urgent attention – such as continuing to deal with the Russian aggression which is making Europe more dangerous now than it has ever been since the Second World War, issues concerning the rising cost of living, the rise in energy prices and concerns over food security.

I also recognise that the UK leaving the EU was a significant change. But it is time now to reach a place of acceptance, and focus on our future relationship as neighbours, as friends, and as allies.

I believe that if we all hold to a commitment and spirit of good intent and put people and businesses first we can make this work.

Legacy

That same genuine commitment underpins our approach to dealing with the legacy of Northern Ireland's troubled past. It is clear that the system as it stands is not delivering truth or justice to people who are still living with the pain from the years of violence and bloodshed.

We have introduced legislation which we believe will address the concerns of those impacted by the Troubles – including those seeking answers and those who served – and so assist in the process of healing and reconciliation. I want to add that we are in listening mode, and my colleagues and I continue to engage directly with the representatives of victims and survivors as the

Bill proceeds through Parliament.

Identity, language and culture legislation

In like manner, we believe the identity and language legislation which we have introduced, will support greater cultural inclusion, tolerance and openness.

Abortion

And we are determined to ensure that girls and women in Northern Ireland have equal access to healthcare. It cannot be right that in 2022 they do not have the same reproductive healthcare facilities as girls and women in the rest of the UK.

Economic Investment

That ambition for a better future lies behind the unprecedented levels of financial support and investment we have delivered in Northern Ireland, to help strengthen and grow the economy, along with our contribution to ensure a safer Northern Ireland where the security threat level has reduced for the first time in over a decade.

So whilst there are challenges, there is much we can coalesce around and work together on to help make Northern Ireland a great place to live, work and invest.

Executive Formation

Principal to achieving this goal is of course having a functioning devolved government.

I therefore urge all Parties, in the strongest possible terms, to work together to form an Executive and address the issues that matter most to people.

There are people in Northern Ireland right now who are suffering. Some don't know how they are going to put food on the table for their families and themselves. I believe it is the duty of their elected representatives to ensure there is an Executive and Assembly up and running so they can start spending the money that is waiting to be spent.

The New Decade, New Approach agreement provided a lengthy period for politicians in Northern Ireland to restore functioning devolved institutions.

But let me be clear, if the Parties do not make full use of that time to earnestly engage to restore a fully functioning Executive, then I will have to call an election at the end of October.

This is not something that the people of Northern Ireland want or need, especially given the present economic circumstances.

What people want is a fully functioning Executive, taking decisive action to

tackle the cost of living crisis, improve healthcare, improve education and drive the economy to its full potential.

I am in no doubt that Northern Ireland has the best of both worlds when it has a stable Northern Ireland Executive backed by the support and strength of the UK Government.

And this Government believes firmly in the Union and Northern Ireland's place within it.

I believe that all people and all communities benefit from being part of a strong United Kingdom, a place where everyone is welcome and can live, work and thrive together.

I believe that our relationships across these Islands – be they political, business, family or friendships are one of our Union's greatest strengths.

These relationships are what have got us through difficult times in the past – and will get us through the challenging times ahead.

It is the strength and power of these relationships that gave us the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

So as we look to the 25th Anniversary of that agreement next year, let us continue to foster and strengthen our relationships to reach compromises and solutions for the benefit of all our people. And let us take inspiration from the great leaders that have gone before – so we can deliver our shared vision of an inclusive, safe and prosperous Northern Ireland.