

Speech: Secretary of State Speech in Washington DC

It's a great honour to be back in Washington DC and to have the opportunity to update you on the current situation in Northern Ireland.

And I'd like to thank the Northern Ireland Bureau and in particular Norman Houston for hosting me this evening.

Norman is quite simply the consummate professional, rising from a clerical assistant to his current role promoting Northern Ireland as Director of the Bureau.

And, earlier this summer, his contribution was rightly recognised with the award of an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen.

So thank you Norman for all the fantastic work that you do. Northern Ireland is very lucky to have you.

Before referring specifically to Northern Ireland, I can't help but reflect during my two days here and in Boston how much I've been struck by the bonds that unite the United Kingdom and the United States.

You remain our closest and most important ally. No two countries do as much and share as much as we do, as well as being our largest single trading partner.

And as the UK leaves the European Union next year we want to continue building on that to ensure that the relationship between our two great countries goes from strength to strength.

We might be leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe and we are certainly not departing the world stage.

Our departure provides challenges of course, but also opportunities with old allies and new friends alike.

We fully intend to be a global UK, and in that adventure, there is no greater partner than the United States.

US friendship and backing has, of course, been clearly evident over recent decades in Northern Ireland in support of the great progress that has been made there.

It is invaluable and deeply appreciated by both the UK and Irish Governments, but most importantly by the people of Northern Ireland themselves.

This year all of us have been marking the twentieth anniversary of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement.

It's far too easy to attach superlatives to individual historical events or documents and to exaggerate their importance.

But I don't think any of us should underestimate the scale and significance of what was achieved by the participants in those talks twenty years ago.

The Belfast Agreement is quite simply one of the most important documents in the complex, intertwined and not always happy history of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

It represented the triumph of politics over the division and destruction of the previous thirty years that had seen over 3,500 killed and countless more lives shattered by violence.

And along with its successor agreements it has been the foundation stone of all that has been achieved.

So all of us who care deeply about Northern Ireland have an overriding responsibility to do all that we can to protect, preserve and promote that Agreement.

That has to be at the core of everything we do including as the UK leaves the EU.

And for our part the United Kingdom Government remains absolutely steadfast in our support for it, and for upholding our commitments under it.

To the constitutional principles it set out, to the institutions it establishes and the rights that it guarantees.

As a result of the relative peace and stability that the Agreement ushered in for so many people, Northern Ireland is a place transformed from where it was 20 years ago.

Unemployment is at near record lows while employment is at near record highs.

Tourism is booming as anyone who's seen the cruise ships at Belfast Harbour and the crowds at Titanic Quarter, many of them American I'm pleased to say, will testify.

The USA is Northern Ireland's second largest destination for exports.

While the USA is the top country for foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland.

Names like Citigroup, Caterpillar, Seagate and Allstate whose expanded new offices I opened in July.

For our part, the UK Government continues to demonstrate its strong commitment to Northern Ireland through public spending that per head remains over 20 per cent higher than the UK average.

Indeed Northern Ireland probably has amongst the best quality of life of anywhere in the UK.

So there is a great deal of good news coming out of Northern Ireland today.

But I firmly believe that Northern Ireland could be doing even better. There is huge potential.

But for that to be fully untapped and realised, Northern Ireland needs to see all the institutions of the 1998 Agreement fully up and running and working for the good of the community.

For all the events this year to mark the 20th anniversary of the Agreement, things do look a little hollow when the institutions that are central to that Agreement have not now been working for over 20 months.

The UK Government believes wholeheartedly in devolution for Northern Ireland.

We want to see local politicians taking local decisions fully accountable to a local Assembly.

And while we will continue to make the necessary interventions to ensure good governance and the delivery of public services, such as the Budget passed in Westminster in July, this can never be a substitute for local decision making.

So Northern Ireland needs devolved government at Stormont along with all the other institutions of the Agreement working as they were intended.

And earlier this month I set out to Parliament a plan to try and bring that about.

We intend to introduce legislation in the coming weeks that will set out a limited and prescribed period in which I am no longer under an obligation to set a date for an Assembly election.

The legislation will also include provisions to give greater clarity and certainty to enable NI departments to continue to take decisions in the public interest and to ensure the continued delivery of public services.

I'm also engaged in discussions with the parties and the Irish Government, in accordance with the three stranded approach, to try and find a basis for moving into more formal political dialogue leading to a restoration of the institutions.

And the legislation will enable me to make some key public appointments, like the Policing Board.

All of this is a package which needs to be taken together; a pathway to talks and the restoration of fully functioning devolved government.

Of course there is no guarantee of success.

Neither the UK nor the Irish Government can force an agreement on Northern Ireland.

That has to come principally from the main political parties in the Assembly.

But I do believe that the barriers to devolved government are not insurmountable. Certainly when one looks at the issues Northern Ireland's politicians have grappled with and resolved in the past.

So this is achievable ... and as a UK Government we will do all we can to restore devolution in Northern Ireland.

I know that many people here are also concerned about legacy issues.

And the UK Government is committed to doing what we can to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the Troubles.

It is clear that the hurt and suffering caused by decades-old events have a profound and lasting impact on individuals, families and communities.

Some victims and survivors may seek investigations and justice through the courts; others are looking for information about incidents that affected them or their loved ones; others want to leave the past behind.

So earlier this year, after engaging with all the main NI parties, we launched a consultation on the proposed four new legacy institutions set out in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement: Historical Investigations Unit; Independent Commission on Information Retrieval; Oral History Archive; and Implementation and Reconciliation Group.

We continue to believe that these potentially provide the best way forward, and will work in ways that are fair, balanced, equitable and proportionate.

One thing is clear, the current mechanisms for addressing the past are not delivering enough for victims, survivors and for wider society, and change is needed.

But I want this to be an open consultation in which everyone has their say.

There are no easy answers for addressing such a traumatic and difficult period in the history of Northern Ireland – this is an opportunity for everyone with an interest in addressing our troubled past to have their say.

Finally, a word about the UK's departure from the EU, which will happen next March.

Let me be clear.

We want a deep and special partnership with the EU.

But as the Prime Minister said last Friday, there are still two fundamental issues on which we remain far apart.

The first is the economic relationship after we have left, and we now need to hear from the EU what the real issues are and what their alternative is so that we can discuss them.

The second is the so called Irish 'backstop'.

As the Joint Report between the UK and the EU last December made very clear, we are committed to no hard border on the island of Ireland.

We cannot, however, countenance any proposal that threatens the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

But that is what the Commission's current proposals for a so-called 'backstop' on Ireland do, by creating two customs territories within the UK.

And as the PM has said, this would effectively mean us breaking up the United Kingdom which is simply not acceptable and this Government will never agree to it.

The EU referendum was the largest single exercise in democracy the UK has ever undertaken.

We will not overturn the result of that referendum.

So we will continue to engage seriously and intensively with a strong commitment to resolving these two outstanding issues.

Throughout this process, we will make sure that we protect the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in all its parts under all circumstances.

At this late stage in the negotiations, it is not acceptable for the EU simply to reject our proposals without a detailed explanation and counter proposals.

Throughout this process we have treated the EU with nothing but respect.

The UK expects the same from the EU.

Twenty years on from the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has achieved so much and come such a long way.

It is therefore with more than a tinge of sadness and frustration that we currently have no Executive and no Assembly.

Yet for all that, I remain confident and optimistic for the future.

Not least because of my confidence in the people of Northern Ireland.

We can and, I think, we will get those institutions back up and running.

It's what the people of Northern Ireland clearly want, and it's the right thing for Northern Ireland.

We need to get back to the spirit that inspired those who made that historic agreement twenty years ago.

To reach an accommodation that enables us to restore stable devolved government that delivers for the whole community in Northern Ireland on a

sustainable basis.

I've set out a clear plan to help us get there and it's our absolute priority.

So that we can build a stronger, brighter and more prosperous Northern Ireland that works for everyone.

And in that venture I'm confident that we can rely on the continuing support and goodwill from friends in the United States.