

Speech: Secretary of State's speech to British Irish Parliamentary Assembly

Introduction

It's a great pleasure to be with you in these magnificent surroundings this morning for the bi-annual plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and to have the opportunity to update you on the current situation in Northern Ireland.

At the outset I would like to thank the Co-Chairs Andrew Rosindell MP and Seán Crowe for their kind invitation to address you and for their warm words of welcome.

And also huge appreciation for Edward Beale and the rest of the team for all your hard work without which this plenary session simply would not happen.

Today I want to talk to you about the close and special relationship which the people of the UK and Ireland enjoy. I want to talk about how organisations like yours can help to deepen those bonds. And I want to talk about how we are working with our friends and neighbours in all the work we do on Brexit, and work to restore a devolved Government in Northern Ireland.

Work of BIPA

This is, of course, my first BIPA plenary session since the Prime Minister asked me to take on the role of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in January.

And since 1990 this Assembly has played a key role in ensuring a strong link between the Houses of Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

It symbolises the close collaboration and good working relationships with our friends and neighbours in Ireland and the whole island of Ireland.

You've brought people closer together ... which is the basis of all that we want to achieve. Like most friends and neighbours, we don't always agree on everything. But I firmly believe that what unites us is far stronger and enduring than what might from time to time divide us. Politics, ultimately, is all about delivering for people and this organisation has been at the heart of uniting the people of our nations, which can only be a force for good.

Much has been written and discussed about the UK and Irish relationship, not least against the backdrop of Brexit and the work to restore the Executive at Stormont.

And throughout all of this we have continued to work incredibly closely together, while always, of course, in respect of Northern Ireland recognising and observing constitutional proprieties. The Prime Minister and the

Taoiseach speak regularly on a whole range of issues. While I have a very close working relationship with An Tanaiste, Simon Coveney.

And I know officials in my Department, and others across Whitehall, speak to their counterparts and neighbours in Scotland, Ireland and Wales more regularly than they ever have before.

There is little doubt that the bilateral relationship between our two countries is stronger than at any point since Irish independence nearly a century ago.

It is only by that kind of trust and close working that we can make progress – on Brexit, on devolution, and on other important issues. That's what we all want to see continue, and it will.

The work of the BIPA is central to that. Whether through your bi-annual plenary meetings and your Committee work; or your events and debates – you help to build the bonds that lay the foundation of the strong working relationships the UK and Ireland enjoy today.

So thank you for everything you have done and, I am sure will continue to do, in the years to come.

Commitment to Belfast Agreement

This year of course marks the 20th anniversary of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement. It's provides an opportunity for all of us to take a step back and reflect on all that's been achieved.

The Agreement was a historic landmark in the history not just of Northern Ireland but of these islands as a whole. It was, as I said in April, a triumph of politics over the previous decades of violence, division and despair.

Twenty years on it is perhaps easy for some to lose sight of the magnitude 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. As a result of the Belfast Agreement..

The constitutional position of Northern Ireland settled on the principle of consent and the Irish constitution was amended to reflect that fact.

Political institutions were established to accommodate and give expression to both the main traditions in Northern Ireland.

Strong new bodies were implemented to foster greater North-South and East-West Co-operation.

Powerful protections for people's rights, culture and identities were embedded.

And the policing and the criminal justice system was reformed to make it more accountable and widely acceptable across the whole community.

And of course the consequences of all of this is a more peaceful, stable and prosperous Northern Ireland that is in so many ways unrecognisable since the dark days of the troubles. Though we do of course continue to face a severe threat from dissident republicans.

But overall Northern Ireland is a place transformed from where it was 20 years ago. Employment is at near record levels with some 60,000 more people are in work in Northern Ireland today than in 2010, while unemployment at just over 4 per cent is at near record lows.

Northern Ireland remains the most popular location for FDI outside of London and the South East, with the highest number of FDI jobs per head of any part of the UK.

Since 2011, exports are up by 11 per cent, and external sales, including to the rest of the UK, are up 18 per cent. Tourism is booming as anyone who has seen the cruise ships docked in Belfast this year will testify.

And of course next year the eyes of the world will once again be on Northern Ireland as the oldest and most famous golfing championship in the world, the Open, is played at Royal Portrush.

All of these gains were hard fought the result of years of painstaking discussions and negotiations. And we should never forget just how precious they are.

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.

Need for Devolved Government

But – at the heart of that agreement – behind it all, is the principle of shared power, given effect through a devolved power sharing Government. And that, regrettably and to the deep frustration of so many, is what Northern Ireland has now been without for over 20 months.

Let me be very clear about our position.

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 I believe we can get that Executive back up and running.

After all, there is no sustainable alternative, there is no other arrangement which truly honours all that was achieved 20 years ago.

When the most recent round of talks ended in February, I was as disappointed as I'm sure you all were. Since then I've been working tirelessly with all

parties to re-establish a basis for talks, and to try to find common ground.

And both Simon Coveney and I have been working very closely ... in accordance with the three stranded approach to Northern Ireland affairs.

There are some who think it's easy – what's the problem? Call them all into a room and sort it out. If only it were so. The reality, as you all know, is that no one can force the parties together. Agreement cannot be imposed from outside.

It requires trust, time, effort, and it needs to come from within Northern Ireland and the parties. I remain convinced that an agreement can be delivered.

But the parties need time and space to rebuild dialogue and agree a basis for re-entering the Executive. That's why I've introduced legislation to deliver precisely that.

So the Bill I introduced last week will create a temporary period where the duty on me to call an election will be dis-applied. It will enable an Executive to be formed at any time.

The legislation includes 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. The NICS have done, and pardon the pun, sterling work over the last 20 months and they deserve our sincere thanks.

This bill will help them to continue to uphold Northern Ireland's vital public services. In addition, the Bill will enable me to make key public appointments, for example, to the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

But while we will continue to make the necessary interventions to ensure good governance and the delivery of public services, this can never be a substitute for local decision making.

That's why I'll be engaging the parties urgently, along with the Tanaiste in line with the well-established three stranded approach, to work to find a solution that gets the Executive back up and running for the people of NI.
Importance of Devolution to the Union

Devolution is right for Northern Ireland so that local decisions can be made according to local priorities. It brings people together from both main traditions in partnership working for the good of the whole community in Northern Ireland.

And, speaking as a member of the Conservative and Unionist Party, I believe that it strengthens the Union in ways that no alternative arrangements can possibly achieve. So I will continue to strive for the restoration of devolved government with every ounce of energy I can muster. We owe the people of Northern Ireland nothing less.

BREXIT

Update on negotiations

We also owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to get the best possible deal as the United Kingdom as a whole leaves the European Union next March. So let me say a few words about where we are. After we leave, the UK wants a deep and special partnership with the EU. And our negotiations to achieve that have now reached a critical phase.

As the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons last week, now is the time for a “clear-eyed focus on the few remaining but critical issues that are still to be agreed”.

We remain confident of getting a deal: a deal that works for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – as well as Gibraltar and the three Crown Dependencies.

In recent weeks negotiating teams have made real progress on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. This means that the overall shape of the agreement on the terms of our exit is now clear, with agreed legal text on issues such as the implementation period, citizen’s rights and the financial settlement. And, as the Prime Minister set out last week, we also have broad agreement on the structure and scope of the framework for our future relationship, with progress on issues such as security, transport and services.

Respecting the result

I recognise that leaving the EU creates concerns. I know you hear those concerns from businesses and individuals in your constituencies. But respect for the referendum result is vital. The UK Parliament voted overwhelmingly to give the choice to the people of the United Kingdom as a whole as to whether to leave or remain in the European Union.

The result was clear. It falls to us to deliver on that result, both for the 52 and the 48.

Because it is only by delivering on that result that we can uphold faith in democracy and in our politicians. That is why there can be no prospect of another referendum. The decision has already been made by the people and must be respected.

It is of course the UK that chose to leave.

And I understand that many of the positions adopted by EU in that regard reflect that reality. For our part we have made clear all along our determination to uphold the Belfast Agreement in all its parts. We are committed to avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. And we cannot accept any proposal that threatens the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. Both the EU and UK are in agreement that our future partnership is the answer to this and will provide the solutions in the long

term. But to cater for a situation where a future relationship is not in place in time, we accept that an insurance policy is needed for the people of Northern Ireland.

Earlier in the year, we put forward a proposal as to how to this could be done in the context of the backstop.

But as the Prime Minister has set out, two issues still remain. We want to find solutions to these and deliver a deal as soon as possible.

We remain confident for a positive outcome.

Next steps

So we will continue to engage seriously and intensively with a strong commitment to resolving these outstanding issues, with a laser focus on delivering on the referendum result in a way that respects the constitutional integrity of our Union.

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

Working to prepare for the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union has required unprecedented collaboration between the UK Government and the Irish Government, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and the governments of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and Gibraltar.

It is only by continuing that collaboration – both in the run-up to March and after – that we will be able to make a success of Brexit. And I look forward to continuing to working with you all to achieve that.

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