

CHAIRMAN, COOPERATION IRELAND

GALA DINNER 2015

Ministers, Your Excellency, distinguished guests, My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I offer you a very warm welcome to Cooperation Ireland's 2015 Chairman's Dinner.

Today may seem like an inauspicious day, but across the Atlantic it's when our American colleagues celebrate their holiday of Thanksgiving.

But on another 26th of November in 1998, Tony Blair became the first Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to address The Dail Eireann, marking a new level of confidence and maturity in the relationships between Britain and Ireland.

For that, and for my own organisation - I need to give a bit of thanks tonight too.

Firstly to Invest NI, one of our sponsors tonight. Thank you, because peace does not work without prosperity, and prosperity does not work without jobs, and I know of the sterling work that Arlene - and now her successor - have done in bringing record numbers of jobs to Northern Ireland, even against the backdrop of a recession.

And it would be remiss not to give thanks to our great sponsor here in London - John Griffin – John, through our Youth Leadership Project which you sponsor children and young people the length and breadth of Ireland give thanks for your generosity.

I would like to thank Niall Gibbons and Tourism Ireland for working so closely with Co-Operation Ireland and I would also like to thank the Dorchester Hotel and specifically Roland Fasel and John Scanlon for their support.

Tonight as we are joined with representatives from Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland, it's clear that even where there has been turmoil, angst and, indeed, bloody histories, that these can be overcome by mutual understanding, time and an aspiration to move beyond our comfort zones.

And nowhere is that truer or more applicable than between peoples of these islands. And no better example of this than that set by the two men sitting each side of me here tonight – Peter and Martin.

As you know, I'm very fond of the saying that if you think you know the answer to the Irish Question, then you obviously don't understand the question.

I am sure that over the past three months some people may think that every time you think you have solved an Irish problem – someone changes the question!

For those who believed that almost two decades after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, and thirty years after the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that the politics of Northern Ireland would have untangled themselves into something more akin to normal practice in the rest of western Europe, then the events of this – what can only be called a difficult year – has brought a dose of reality.

No one ever said the path to peace would be easy. Some people said all the heavy lifting was done in 1994 and 1998, but the truth is that the heavy lifting needed to sustain a peace process has to take place each and every day.

Northern Ireland's peace process is still that – a process. We have yet to arrive at a final destination, and I doubt if there ever will be consensus as to what that destination might look like. Maybe it's a continual journey and not a destination, with each generation shaping and sculpting it to suit what is an evolving process.

But, while the political process has the appearance of something delicate, it has robustness at its core, which in the last few weeks has eventually shone forth and we have a new agreement to tackle many of the outstanding issues, which have beset the body politic in recent months of the peace process.

So I commend both the First and the deputy First Minister for their approach to the recent difficult negotiations, the Irish government, the Secretary of State and indeed the Prime Minister for helping encourage the parties to find a means to achieve what many considered impossible.

I would like to put on record my thanks and appreciation for the encouragement which Northern Ireland's outgoing First Minister has provided Co-Operation Ireland over the years, and his support for what we have been doing to improve relationships across these islands.

Making peace is a difficult – and at times – discouraging enterprise, but the First Minister has put his shoulder to the wheel.

I believe history will judge Peter's contribution as First Minister over the past seven years to be one which copper-fastened the political settlement, and provided a solid foundation for the next chapter in the emergence of the new Northern Ireland. I also know that without wishing to pre-empt the decision of your party that the future is secure in the knowledge that your leadership team of Nigel, Arlene, Jeffrey and others are ready and able to step up to the mark.

For my own part I feel that Peter and Martin are like my two best friends, always there when you need them, always encouraging and always willing to go that extra mile for peace. Two men who are comfortable enough in their own skins to go outside their own comfort zones whether that be at Windsor Castle or GAA dinners.

Of course, from the outcome of the recent talks, it is clear that it was not possible to square the circle of every problem – the tricky matter of welfare reform has returned temporarily to Westminster and the outstanding problem of dealing with the legacy of the Troubles remains intractable.

Unlike some I would not be disheartened by the apparent gulf, which exists between the main parties on this particular issue. A solution would require the Wisdom of Solomon and few post-conflict societies, where community interests are so finely balanced, have successfully dealt with such raw and painful issues to the satisfaction of all.

The truth is that time will be the greatest healer in Northern Ireland; time that will give new generations - unscarred by the conflict – the space to increasingly shape society.

That is not to say that the sands of time cannot be spurred on in their passage - by no means at all.

The building blocks, which will underpin modern Northern Ireland - at ease with itself and its diversity – will come from the people.

And let's be fair the new agreement does contain some radical and innovative proposals for dealing with the remnants of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. Cooperation Ireland, I believe can contribute to this process based on our grassroots experience of working directly with communities at the coalface of sectarian tensions.

Despite the critics and hurlers in the ditch, the people of Northern Ireland have as the new agreement suggests a 'Fresh Start' and that has to be welcomed. Generosity of spirit- so often the missing component of peace

making- has meant that it will be a fresh start for those keen to move Northern Ireland into an era of prosperity and opportunity for the youth of Northern Ireland. And there is no doubt that securing a final date for the reduction of the rate of corporation tax will have an immediate impact in transforming the entrepreneurial culture of Northern Ireland once implemented in 2018.

Working with politicians and civic society Co-operation Ireland can provide encouragement with both a top-down and bottom-up approach.

At a strategic level, Co-operation Ireland has been working hard to normalise Anglo-Irish relations, as we believe that behaviours, attitudes and actions are influenced by the tone of the relationships between states.

It is now ten years since The Queen and the then Irish President Mary McAleese first met at Crosby Hall in London under the auspices of Co-operation Ireland.

The warmth of that meeting - and much behind the scenes work - paved the way for two hugely historic, symbolic and important State visits, first by The Queen to Ireland in 2011 and, more recently, President D Higgins' visit to the United Kingdom last year.

There have been many historic firsts on this journey to normality. In 2012 under the auspices of Co-operation Ireland The Queen met and shook hands with Martin as Deputy First Minister at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. In 2013 Peter made a landmark speech at Co-Operation Ireland's GAA dinner in Belfast – though unlike The Queen he has yet to express an interest in hurling!

Another first came in May of this year during a four-day visit to Ireland when the Prince of Wales met the Sinn Fein President, Gerry Adams, for a private meeting.

His Royal Highness has a long-standing passion to cement relationships between the peoples of these two islands, and again, Co-Operation Ireland had the privilege of being involved in supporting the meeting.

At the other end of the spectrum Co-operation Ireland continues to work hard on the ground, helping communities develop a better understanding both of what differentiates them, and what unites them.

And it is in this regard that I believe that Cooperation Ireland has a significant role to play going forward over the next few years of commemorations and celebrations on the island of Ireland- 2016, 2018, 2020.

To some these commemorations are like raking over the embers of once raging fires and they run the risk of stoking up old enmities.

However, if handled properly - as I believe they can be – it could be a cathartic moment in Irish history - a moment not so much where Heaney says hope and history rhyme, but a time when hurt ends and healing finally begins.

The whole concept of shared history may be debatable as peoples' memories are like most politics - often shaped more by the heart than the head.

The terrible beauty born, as described by Yeats, from the rubble of O'Connell Street in 1916 will soon be recalled in full Technicolor.

The events of 1916 sowed the foundations of the Irish State and today that State stands proudly amongst the nations of Europe and the world, and, indeed, plays a huge role in fostering peace through its peace keeping roles for the UN.

The Proclamation declared some high ideals, not least of all to cherish all the children of the nation equally. Is it too much to ask today that those children - North and South - are not asked to look at this period of history through rose-tinted glasses hazed by nostalgic romanticism or historical visceral disdain?

To those today who would seek to hi-jack the Easter Rising to justify the continuation of violence in Northern Ireland, I would remind them strongly that from the General Post Office Pearse himself ordered a cessation of violence to spare innocent lives.

Is it too much to ask if we can take these hugely significant events from Irish history and ensure that in marking them that we don't end up polarising opinion or reigniting the flames of sectarian mistrust?

So too, next year many within the unionist community will remember the 100th anniversary of the sacrifice made at the Somme and in particular the heroic efforts of the 36th Ulster Division at Theipeval. During this seminal moment in the Great War huge casualties were inflicted.

For many years the ownership of this narrative belonged solely to the unionist community. but mostly thanks to the work of Glen Barr and Paddy Harte and the patronage of The Queen and former President McAleese, a

much greater understanding of that sacrifice is now understood across the divide and, indeed, across the island of Ireland.

Today there now stands a joint memorial at Messines, testimony to the bravery of the 10th and 16th Irish Divisions and the 36th Ulster - something that President McAleese said only a few years ago would have been unthinkable. But our job- everyone here in this room - is to imagine the unthinkable and make it thinkable.

It would be more than a great pity that - if in some way - either community used either the Easter Rising or the commemoration of the Somme as a cultural battering ram against the other in a sham re-run of old enmities.

Great sensitivity will be required by all the political players in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and here in Great Britain to provide positive leadership throughout each of these commemorations.

It will also require huge bravery for people to reach out beyond those comfort zones in which they so often hide to ensure that, where possible, events are made as inclusive as is possible and historically sensible.

If this can be achieved then as a people with so much more in common than that which divides – and whether in Ireland, North or South, or between communities in Northern Ireland or between the peoples of Britain and Ireland - we can finally make the same kind of discovery that South African peacemaker -Archbishop Tutu talked about when he said: *“My humanity is caught up in yours, it is inextricably bound in yours. We belong in a bundle of life.”*

Our mission in Cooperation Ireland is to work for a peaceful and stable island, and we strive towards this by sustaining peace through helping the creation of a shared and cohesive society.

Just this month, Co-operation Ireland led the way and had the privilege of working with Tourism Ireland, Dublin City Corporation and the City of London, as Ireland was officially represented for the first time in the 800th Lord Mayor of London's annual parade.

The 1765 Mace from the former House of Commons was brought over for associated Mayoral Events and Co-Operation Ireland arranged for all the Mayors from the Island of Ireland to visit No.10.

As part of the spectacle Co-operation helped secure the participation in the parade of the spectacular 226 year-old ceremonial coach of Dublin's Lord Mayor, a moving work of art, which is normally stored in humidity and temperature controlled premises.

Sadly, however, the pageantry and fun of the day was overshadowed by the appalling events, which unfolded in Paris the night before – a gruesome, nightmarish orgy of terror whose pallor hung heavily over the capital the morning of the parade.

For many in these islands, the terror of Paris re-energised memories of hurts and violence inflicted upon them during the Troubles.

While the modus operandi of Islamic State terrorists differs from that spawned by the Irish Question, the end effect is the same. Lives of promise cut short; physical and mental scars for victims, families and friends devastated by grief; fear and suspicion.

But the spirit of Paris reminds me of what I have witnessed in Northern Ireland. I don't know if you heard the open letter recorded by the husband of one of the Parisian victims, but it was a powerful testimony. Antoine Leiris wrote:

“Friday night - you took an exceptional life – the love of my life, the mother of my son – but you will not have my hatred. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know, you are dead souls.

“I will not grant you the gift of my hatred. You're asking for it, but responding to hatred with anger is falling victim to the same ignorance that has made you what you are. You want me to be scared, to view my countrymen with mistrust, to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You lost.”

I have heard such sentiments echoed by people in Northern Ireland who have suffered similar, unimaginable loss and searing grief.

They – and future generations – are the inspiration for Co-operation Ireland's work, and a reminder that community and political relationships in Northern Ireland are still a work in progress.

The people of Northern Ireland do not want to go back. They do not want the hatred, which motivated the savagery in Paris to poison their communities.

As Gladstone once said:

“You cannot fight against the future. Time is on our side.”

We in Co-operation Ireland will work with all of those looking to the future - and time is most definitely on our side.

Thank- you.