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Address by the Taoiseach Mr Enda Kenny T.D. at the British-Irish Association, Oxford, 9 September 2016

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Chairman Hugo MacNeill and members of the Committee, Members of the Association, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was honoured to address the British Irish Association for the first time last year.

This year, I am delighted to speak to you once again and to join in your reflections on the future of Britain, of Ireland, and of our relationships with each other and with the wider world.

You have a very full agenda, addressing the full range of our current challenges and opportunities – the future of the Union, the implications of Brexit, the possibilities held out by the Fresh Start Agreement in Northern Ireland, and the importance of a high quality of public debate in modern democracies.

All of these issues are matters of keen and indeed vital interest to the Irish Government.

I hope that my remarks will help to frame your deliberations and also - hopefully – add to the quality of the debate.

We are meeting in historic Oxford at a time of great change and uncertainty, at home and abroad.

And we are meeting in a historic year of commemoration on these islands.

In remembering, and in reflecting on, the transformative events of 100 years ago – whether on the streets of Dublin or in the fields of France – I believe we have also helped to build even stronger foundations for the next 100 years.

The commemorations respected all traditions and in doing so demonstrated the strength and maturity of our modern relationship.

In that respect, they are as much about the future as they were about the past.

But, despite the unprecedented closeness of our modern relationships, that future is deeply uncertain.

Change and uncertainty are dominant themes of global politics.

Stability, security and certainty are what citizens crave.

Since I addressed this gathering last year, we have seen new administrations take office in Dublin and Belfast.

As well as significant changes, I am glad to say that this process has also involved some very valuable continuity.

In Stormont, we have also seen the formation of an Opposition. In my view, that can only be a positive development in advancing democratic choice and accountability.

There is now a new Government in London, under the leadership of the new Prime Minister, Theresa May.

I was glad to meet the Prime Minister in Downing Street during her first few weeks in office.

She and I were happy to affirm our Government's joint commitment to working together to build on the continuing strength and closeness of the UK/Ireland relationship.

We agreed to continue to progress our Joint Work Programme of bilateral engagement across a range of areas of mutual benefit such as jobs, trade, tourism and energy.

And of course we will continue our strong partnership in the Northern Ireland peace process, through the Good Friday and successor agreements.

This includes a firm joint commitment to preserving all of the achievements of the peace process in the forthcoming Brexit



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negotiations.

In that regard, I welcome the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland here today, and I look forward to hearing his remarks later this evening.

I am delighted that since we last met here, we have also seen the conclusion of the Fresh Start Agreement in Northern Ireland.

It is a very important agreement.

It tackles key issues such as budgetary and economic policy, contentious problems such as flags and parades, important institutional reforms.

I particularly welcome the measures to tackle the continuing scourge of paramilitary activity, which was a central theme of my address last year.

By contrast, I am disappointed that more has not been achieved on dealing with the past. That work must continue until we can reach an agreed resolution.

So, I look forward to the successful implementation of Fresh Start.

Earlier this week, the Irish Government discussed our contribution to that effort and I know that the Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade will address those issues more fully in his remarks tomorrow.

While it has been an extremely busy year in political life on these islands, the most profound event is undoubtedly the result of the Brexit referendum.

The result of the UK's referendum on EU membership means that 2016 may well come to be seen as a defining moment for the future shape of the British Irish relationship and for the UK's place within the wider world.

Of course, while we in Ireland were disappointed with the referendum outcome, the democratic decision of the UK to leave the European Union is one that we accept.

But we cannot deny the range and extent of the challenges it presents to everyone on these islands, in Europe, and beyond.

The process of negotiation that will soon be embarked upon will involve a recalibration of all of the mosaic of relationships that make us what we are today.

When it is complete, we will have a new set of relationships within the UK, between Britain and Ireland, between North and South on the island of Ireland, and between Britain and a 27-member EU which includes Ireland.

It will mean that Ireland must look to new global opportunities for trade and investment, building on our considerable success to date.

And we will, of course, work tirelessly to maintain and develop our existing trading relationship with the UK.

The challenges involved are as complicated as they are unprecedented.

The Irish Government has clearly set out its priorities in the context of the upcoming negotiations.

First and foremost, Ireland remains completely committed to our membership of the European Union and the eurozone.

Our priorities for the negotiations relate to the economy and trade, to Northern Ireland and the peace process, to the common travel area and to the future of the EU itself.

The Government put a comprehensive contingency framework in place to map the key issues of most importance to us.

All of our Government Departments are deepening their analysis of the likely impacts of the UK's decision and continue to develop risk analysis and contingency plans.

We are making adjustments to our administrative structures to ensure that we can address them fully, under the oversight of a new Cabinet Committee which I am chairing.

We have also embarked on an intensive diplomatic campaign.

I have held bilateral meetings with Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, Prime Minister May, and the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade has spoken to every one of his 27 EU counterparts, while other Ministers and officials have been stating Ireland's case in all of our contacts at EU level and further afield. For example, we had several Ministers visiting Asia in recent weeks.

I am satisfied from all of my engagements with international leaders that Ireland's priorities, including those arising from the unique nature of the relationship between Ireland and Britain, are understood.

In particular the importance of protecting the peace process, and of Europe's contribution to peace in Ireland, resonates strongly with every leader I have met.

I will be in Bratislava next week for the first ever Summit of 27 EU leaders.

What I pointed out as a possibility in Belfast in the run-up to the referendum has now come to pass – I will be the only leader

from these islands at the table.

In Bratislava and in future discussions, I will be setting out Ireland's contribution to the vision for the future of the European Union.

That vision of must be based on the enduring principles of the European Union – of partnership, of peace and of prosperity.

It must be grounded in the needs and aspirations of the citizens of the European Union – for jobs and prosperity, for a decent society, for safety and security, for a better future for all of our children.

It must also address the new challenges, which of course includes Brexit but also includes the enormous and historic challenge of migration.

As we grapple with our own challenges on these islands, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture for Europe – the terrible catastrophe of mass migration in the Mediterranean, the bloody misery in Syria and the wider Middle East, the fear of further conflict in Ukraine and the trauma that terrorism has recently visited on many of our European neighbours.

That is the wider context in which Brexit will be considered at European level.

That is why no one should underestimate the commitment of the 27 EU member states to maintaining the European Union.

The EU is the answer to so many historic questions for Europe.

Questions that led to bloodshed 100 years ago, and questions that go to the very heart of peace and prosperity in Europe today.

That is why nobody in Britain should think that the negotiations ahead will be easy, or that they can be viewed through a purely economic lens
For the remaining EU members, there are matters of historic and fundamental importance at stake.

It will be a hard bargain to strike.

As we move forward together with our European partners, of course also we wish to retain and develop further our close relationship with the UK – a relationship that has, quite literally, never been better.

Our respective Governments have worked assiduously in recent decades to help heal the divisions of the past and to maintain Northern Ireland on the path of peace and prosperity.

Undoubtedly, our work together as equal members of – and with the support of - the European Union was an important enabler of the progress that we made.

Both Governments are as determined and united as we ever have been to ensure continued political stability and economic progress in Northern Ireland.

And amidst the many uncertainties that Brexit brings, I take heart from the core strength of the British Irish relationship.

The peace settlement in the North is by now well established, but we are still far from a time when we can take it for granted. It is a process that requires ongoing attention and investment from all parties.

Only last year, Northern Ireland faced threats to the trust, the confidence, the peace that had developed and the institutions that govern it.

I spoke then, at the BIA conference, of an axis of stability between London and Dublin that could be relied upon in times of setback or crisis.

Our unity of purpose and the close co-operation between our two Governments were vital in restoring stability, including during the successful negotiation of the Fresh Start agreement.

In the wake of the referendum result, with 56% of the Northern Ireland vote in favour of remaining in the EU, there are further serious challenges to be managed.

Northern Ireland's unique circumstances within the UK has always given its people a different perspective on the EU membership debate - not least because they are the only region to share a land-border with another EU member state.

I fully understand the deep concern arising for many in the North at the prospect of being outside of the EU project that has delivered so much for political stability, reconciliation and economic prosperity.

It is vital that the benefits of the peace process are safeguarded and built upon for future generations, in whatever arrangements are negotiated.

So I welcome Prime Minister May's assurances that Northern Ireland, along with all of the devolved administrations, will be involved in developing the UK's position prior to entering into negotiations with the EU.

I believe that is absolutely essential.

I also welcome the joint engagement of the First and deputy First Minister with the British Government in setting out their objectives for Northern Ireland.

At this time of profound change, there can be no room for old divisions to cloud the vision of the future.

We must work together on all fronts to preserve and build upon what we have achieved.

We must be thoughtful, pragmatic and generous.

We must look forward, and set a new horizon.

Above all else, we must do nothing to undermine the foundation of the peace – the Good Friday Agreement, and subsequent agreements, that have transformed life on these islands.

We need to think about this from a number of perspectives.

The first is the role of the EU in supporting the peace process and in the Agreement itself, for example through the Special EU Programmes Body and EU funding.

That will involve largely technical, though very important, negotiations where we will work closely together.

The second is the protection of the rights of people which, while not directly flowing from the Agreement, were undoubtedly understood to be part of the fabric of the future when the people voted in 1998.

Obviously this includes the right to live, work, trade and travel freely on the island of Ireland.

The third point relates to the question of Irish unity.

The possibility of achieving Irish unity, by purely peaceful means and by consent, is a lynchpin of the Good Friday Agreement and of the peace process.

That was the context for my remarks in Donegal about a border poll after the Brexit result became known.

The possibility of unity by consent must be maintained as a valid democratic option into the future.

That means that, if there were democratic consent to Irish unity at some time in the future, there must be a mechanism to ensure that democratic decision can be implemented within the European Union, as was the case in Germany.

That does not mean that there should be a border poll now.

There is no convincing evidence to suggest that a majority of the people of Northern Ireland would opt for a change in its constitutional status.

There are more urgent issues facing our island than a border poll.

On the issue of the border itself, both I and the Prime Minister are agreed that we do not want to see a return to the borders of the past on the island of Ireland.

We will do our utmost to avoid barriers to cross-border traffic and economic activity.

We are also conscious of the past symbolism of the border and the wider, negative psychological impact which it had, both on the border areas and more generally across both parts of the island.

We value the Common Travel Area and will work to keep this in place to the greatest extent possible as part of future arrangements.

There is no desire to limit the freedom of people on both sides of the Irish sea to live, work and travel freely across these islands.

We must now make optimum use of all of the new institutional structures and political relationships that are available to us, North and South, East and West to achieve our common objectives.

At the North South Ministerial Council in July we agreed on those objectives.

We put in place arrangements to optimise North South joint planning and engagement on key issues arising following the UK referendum result. This will include a full audit of work programmes in key North-South work programmes to establish risks and likely impacts arising from the UK's planned withdrawal from the EU.

We will also work with the EU institutions to ensure that there is no uncertainty about the availability of EU funding arising from the future withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

We also had a good discussion on the implications of Brexit across these islands at the extraordinary meeting of the British Irish Council in Cardiff in July.

I must say I was very struck at that meeting of the wide variety of views being expressed from Belfast, Edinburgh, Cardiff and London.

In many ways, the British-Irish Council has come to encapsulate the flux in the relationships within the UK, while also coperfastening the centuries-old friendships between the different parts of these islands.

Similar dynamics are also visible in forums such as the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly which, along with the British Irish Association, will have an increasingly important role to play as we work through so many complex issues in the coming years.

In that vein, my Government strongly believes that there is a need for the widest possible conversation on the implications of the referendum result in Ireland, both North and South.

It is an all-island issue.

There are many organisations and individuals across the island of Ireland who are outside the political establishment but who wish to be heard on this issue

We must give them a real opportunity to participate.

This need threaten no one. In fact, it is in the interest of everyone.

The Government will put forward its ideas on how we can best do that in the coming weeks.

The debate in Northern Ireland will of course primarily take place in the wider context of the implications of Brexit for the UK

as a whole.

The UK's process of withdrawal from the EU will have significant effects upon the devolved administrations and relationships within the UK.

Managing the overall exit process with full regard to all of those interests of the devolved administrations will be a major challenge for all involved.

We are also very much alive to the short-term economic implications of the Brexit decision.

It remains to be seen precisely what impact Brexit might have on the UK economy. But, because of our close economic ties, any negative impact on the UK economy could have adverse implications for ours.

Ireland's strong recovery has ensured that our economy is an open, attractive and competitive one.

We are confident that our economy is resilient and that appropriate fiscal policies are now in place that will help us to adjust to the economic effects of Brexit.

We don't expect that our Budget for 2017 will be significantly affected, but it will take account of likely impacts to the extent possible at this early stage.

Now is a time for careful economic management and political stability.

We are also continuing to promote the attractiveness of Ireland as a location of choice for mobile international investment and for talented people.

There will be opportunities for Ireland, arising from Britain's decision to leave the EU, and we will of course seek to take those opportunities.

From Ireland's perspective, the closer that the future relationship is between the UK and EU then the better it will be for all of us across these islands.

The economic interests of both our countries are most certainly best served by having the UK in a close trading relationship with the EU.

So we are in no doubt as to the importance of the economic relationship to both our countries.

But we must also remember that when it comes to the Brexit negotiations – whether it be on trade, on access to the Single Market, on free movement of people, or on the many other issues that we face - Ireland will be one of 27 Member States who are negotiating with the UK.

There will be a common EU negotiating mandate, which will be decided upon by the European Council.

That mandate will reflect the broad interests and concerns of Europe as a whole.

I will be firm at the European Council, and in all of the negotiations to come, in representing Ireland's national interests, as a full and committed member of the European Union.

In conclusion, let me emphasise that Ireland's hope for the future is that the United Kingdom will be stable, prosperous and outward focused and will retain a close relationship with Ireland both bilaterally and as an EU member.

Ireland will be an integral part of a reformed, renewed and re-energised European Union.

We will work harder than ever to ensure that stability and progress in Northern Ireland is maintained.

There is a long and difficult road ahead.

But I am confident that we can continue to manage relationships across these islands in a positive and constructive way, in the interests of all our people.

It is a once in a generation political and diplomatic challenge.

Our greatest efforts must and will be dedicated to making this work.

Thank you.

Ends.

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