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Speech by the Taoiseach Mr. Leo Varadkar TD, Queen's University, Friday 4 August 2017 - 'The Future of Relationships North and South'

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Acting Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellors, ladies and gentlemen,

Since its foundation in the mid-nineteenth century, Queen's University Belfast has answered the question posed by its Latin motto. There has never been any doubt about what it gives back, through its teaching, through its scholarship, through its contribution to public life. It continues to give, educating and inspiring new generations every year.

Of course, Queen's has a long and illustrious association with Trinity College Dublin of which I am the first graduate to have become Taoiseach.

Mary McAleese received her undergraduate degree here and then went on to Trinity to teach as the Reid Professor of Law.

Your current Attorney General, John Larkin, followed on the exact same path.

A Dubliner, Edward Carson, was educated at Trinity, represented the University in parliament for 26 years, and later became MP for Belfast and forever associated with Ulster Unionism.

Over one century apart, he and I were members of the same debating society - the College Historical Society - where we both studied public speaking, and how to develop arguments and ideas. In later years Carson liked to joke that he had taken a range of positions as a student that would surprise people, including speaking against Cromwell, and against Pitt's Act of Union. I fear the day when some future historian looks at the positions I adopted as a student!

Seamus Heaney received his education here, and is now honoured with a Chair in Irish Writing in Trinity.

And there are more recent connections. The two series creators and executive producers of 'Game of Thrones' met while postgraduate students in Trinity and became best friends. Thanks to the success of that series Belfast has received a massive tourism boost as people visit here to see where so much of the series was shot. The two men came to Ireland to study Irish literature and poetry, and their love of Ireland never left them.

If politics is about the art of the possible, then art is about imagining the impossible. We need both in our lives and in our society in order to achieve real progress.

We need to be able to imagine the impossible, and then try to make it a reality. And we should never fear to hope for ways that may seem impossible today.

Someone who had big ambitions for this university, and big ambitions for Northern Ireland, was your Vice Chancellor, Professor Patrick Johnston, who died so tragically in June.

A Derryman, educated at UCD, he was one of the leading researchers in the fight against cancer, and had embarked on an ambitious programme for this university. Stories of his eloquent speeches at graduation ceremonies and his good humour travelled far. I offer my deepest sympathies to Iseult and their four sons and to all who knew him and worked with him.

His sudden death reminds us of the uncertainty of life.

Our commemorations for the First World War do the same thing. One hundred years ago this month another phase of the First World War opened up with the Battle of Passchendaele. This time last year I visited Belfast to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph, and I spoke of how it was necessary to remember war so we can pay homage to peace. Later I wrote in the Irish Independent that real unity comes from respecting different traditions and values, not by trying to obliterate them. Our differences make us stronger and our diversity is our strength.

That remains my view today as Taoiseach.

In looking to the future, I believe we must look upon this island with fresh eyes and consider what it means to us all.

I was born in 1979, the same year that Lord Mountbatten was brutally murdered by the IRA, and a decade after the Troubles began.

It was the year when a woman was appointed to the Cabinet in the Republic of Ireland, for the first time since the foundation of the State.



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It was when the Pope famously came to Ireland, but couldn't travel north, and had to make his plea for peace from south of the border.

Back then, south of the border was a very different place, a very different country to what it is today - confessional, inward looking and underdeveloped by Western European standards.

The border itself was a very different place, a place of bloodshed and violence, of checkpoints.

A barrier to trade, prosperity and peace.

A brutal physical manifestation of historic divisions and political failure.

The first time I was eligible to vote was in the referendum to ratify the Good Friday Agreement.

The vast majority of people on both parts of the island voted for a new future based on power sharing, equality, mutual respect and co-operation North/South and East/West.

History can often move very slowly, but sometimes, when things change, they can change very quickly indeed.

I have only a limited recollection of the border and the Troubles, but I know that I, like nearly everyone else on this island, do not want to go back to that.

So much has changed in those 20 years since the Good Friday Agreement.

The Republic of Ireland has changed to the point that it now is a country that is built on respect and equality before the law for everyone, no matter what their beliefs or their identity may be.

It is a country that is now home to 800,000 people who were not born in Ireland, who make up over 17% of the population.

It is the first country in the world to vote by national referendum to introduce marriage equality and to enshrine that right in our Constitution.

We have a new self-confidence as an island at the centre of the world, a country at the heart of the common European home we helped to build.

A founder member of the euro and the single market.

We have taken our place among the nations of the world.

Your Pro Chancellor, Professor English, has written that the concept of freedom has been a recurring melody in the nationalist symphony.

In the south we have found - over the past few decades - that the kinds of freedom some people thought were impossible have been achieved through the internationalist symphony of our membership of Europe.

So, I passionately believe that being European is an essential part of the modern Irish identity, an enhancement not a dilution of who we are.

In my opinion, it is a tragedy of the Brexit debate that it appears that this common European identity is not valued by everyone on these islands.

The Ulster poet John Hewitt famously spoke of his multiple identities - as an Ulsterman of planter stock, as Irish, as British and as European.

He believed that we all have multiple identities, it's what makes us what we are.

This is a strength, not a weakness; an opportunity, not a threat.

It is something we should embrace about ourselves and about others, not something we should see as an impurity or a means of exclusion.

It is at the very heart of the Good Friday Agreement - the right of the people of Northern Ireland to be British, or Irish, or both.

And, of course, the right to be European.

And, after Brexit, those rights remain, making this part of Ireland and this part of the UK, truly unique and one that will need unique solutions if we are to preserve and protect all that we've gained.

For too long, we have allowed competing identities, competing cultures, even competing histories, to be used to define ourselves and to define our neighbours.

To this very day, people continue to mark out the narrow ground.

To cling to what Churchill memorably described - a century ago - as the integrity of our quarrel. We should remember that Churchill believed we needed to walk together in mutual comprehension.

In this spirit, a few weeks ago, my forebear as Taoiseach stood side by side at the site of the Battle of Messines with the Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, with the leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster, with a former Sinn Féin Mayor of this city,

Alex Maskey, and with representatives of all strands of opinion on this island.

That moment of solemn commemoration and mutual respect proved how much has changed for the better in these last 20 years.

The challenge in our generation is Brexit. The Brexit negotiations are well underway in Brussels. And, to quote Michel Barnier, the clock is ticking.

Every single aspect of life in Northern Ireland could be affected by the outcome - jobs and the economy, the border, citizens rights, cross border workers, travel, trade, agriculture, energy, fisheries, aviation, EU funding, tourism, public services, the list goes on.

In October, I will sit around the European Council table with 26 other Prime Ministers and we will decide together whether sufficient progress has been made on three key issues to allow the Brexit negotiations to proceed to the next phase.

Those three key issues are citizens' rights, the financial settlement and issues relating to Ireland.

It will be a historic meeting for this island.

It is my fervent hope that progress will have been made, but I do not underestimate the challenges we face.

For our part, the Irish Government will discharge our responsibilities as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.

We will do all we can, in Brussels, in London and in Dublin, to achieve the best outcome for everyone on this island - to protect our peace, our freedom, our rights, and our prosperity.

We will talk, as I have in recent weeks, to the First Ministers in Scotland and in Wales, two people with whom I share a common view which favours the UK remaining in the single market and a customs union.

Today we need an answer to the question, of who we - and others in Europe - talk to in Belfast?

Who will speak for Northern Ireland and her 1.8 million people?

Time is running out, and I fear there will be no extra time allowed.

It will come as no surprise to anyone here that I do not want there to be an economic border on our island nor do I want one between Ireland and Britain.

By economic border, I am not talking about currency or variation in tax rates. I am talking about a barrier to free trade and commerce.

Indeed, last November the North South Ministerial Council - which included the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Government that I now lead - said exactly that, agreeing four principles:

1. Recognition of the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, bearing in mind its geography and history;
2. Ensuring that the treaties and agreements between Ireland and the UK are fully taken into account;
3. Protecting the free movement of people, goods, capital and services, and
4. Maintaining the economic and social benefits of co-operation.

So, I think, on this matter, we should have much common ground and should be working to common objectives - the Irish government and the major parties here in Northern Ireland.

However, there are people who do want a border, a trade border between the United Kingdom and the European Union and therefore a border between Ireland and Britain and a border across this island.

These are advocates of a so-called hard Brexit.

I believe the onus should be on them to come up with proposals for such a border and to convince us and convince you; citizens, students, academics, farmers, business people that it's in your interest to have these new barriers to commerce and trade.

They've already had fourteen months to do so.

If they cannot, and I believe they cannot, we can then talk meaningfully about solutions that might work for all of us.

For example, if the United Kingdom does not want to stay in the Customs Union, perhaps there can be an EU-UK customs union.

After all, we have one with Turkey. Surely we can have one with the United Kingdom?

If the UK does not want to stay in the Single Market, perhaps it could enter into a deep Free Trade Agreement with the EU and rejoin EFTA of which it was a member prior to accession. And if this cannot be agreed now, then perhaps we can have a transition period during which the UK stays in the single market and customs union while these things are worked out.

This is the space in which agreements are made.

These are the practical solutions I am proposing.

These solutions will not be offered, they will have to be asked for. And this can happen only after sufficient progress is made on an agreement on the financial settlement, protecting citizens' rights and key issues relating to Ireland such as the Common Travel Area.

North-South cooperation has also been important in normalising relationships on this island and in bringing real and practical benefits to all of our citizens. It is a key part of the Good Friday Agreement and is embedded in the common framework of EU law and EU policies.

In my former role as Minister for Health I have seen the benefits that working together can bring - patients on the island of Ireland are benefiting from significant developments in cross-border health care activity over the last decade.

Since May 2016 a cross-border cardiology service gives Donegal patients suffering from a STEMI heart attack direct access to services in Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry where previously, they had to be transported to University Hospital Galway.

Similarly, cancer patients from the North West can now attend the new Radiotherapy Unit in Altnagevin which the Irish Government helped to fund.

Children from Northern Ireland with congenital heart disease now have their emergency surgery in Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin in Dublin and will attend the new National Children's Hospital now under construction.

And across this island, sport has shown a great potential to bring us together.

The joint work that we are currently engaged in, North and South, to bid for the the Rugby World Cup in 2023 is hugely symbolic of the new relationship that exists on the island.

I intend to travel to London in September for the next stage in Ireland's bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. With the co-operation I have seen to date between North and South, public and private, rugby and non-rugby sporting organisations, I am very hopeful of us landing the prize. I would like the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to be there with me.

And, I'd also like to wish the Ireland team well in their upcoming games in the Women's Rugby World Cup which starts next week on 9 August in UCD. I'm looking forward to being back in Belfast later this month for the final.

While the UK is leaving the EU, the Government I lead is committed to remaining at the heart of Europe; preserving the hard-won peace on this island and protecting and growing our economy in the face of Brexit.

As part of this, we are working on our ambitious multi-annual 10-year capital plan to be finalised by the end of 2017. This will outline investment in roads, in public transport, in energy, in water, in schools, in higher education and in hospitals and health facilities.

This capital plan will include detailed funded plans to complete the national road network, including links between Dublin and Derry-Londonderry and Donegal. We remain committed to contributing £75 million to the construction of the A5. In this context the Irish Government will also give consideration to other infrastructure commitments including the Ulster Canal, the concept of the Narrow Water Bridge, and improving line speeds on the Dublin to Belfast rail line.

This 10 year capital plan will also accelerate delivery of Ireland's critical public transport infrastructure and will include substantial investment in the ports and airports that Ireland will need as a successful, global trading nation – infrastructure of benefit to the people and businesses of both parts of this island.

It is important that all parts of the body politic across these islands face up to the challenges presented and are clear about what they want to - and can realistically - achieve.

But above all, we must work together to ensure that we protect the benefits of the peace process for all the people on this island.

The House of Commons, whose approval will be needed for any new deal, is due to rise for the party conference season in just over 6 weeks time.

That crucial European Council meeting will take place just 10 weeks from now.

We need to hear the voice of those elected representatives here in the North.

We need the Executive, the Assembly, the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council up and running and acting in the interests of our peoples.

We need that more than ever, and we need it now.

Senator George Mitchell received over fifty honorary degrees over his career, but he said none meant more to him than the one from Queen's in 1997.

He went on to serve as chancellor of this university for ten years with honour and distinction.

Writing about another part of the world, Senator Mitchell suggested that 'compromise is not a weakness, but a virtue necessary to serve the well-being of future generations'. His words should be our guide in the difficult weeks and months ahead.

In July Sir Jeffrey Donaldson joined with the Irish embassy in Britain to pay tribute to Willie Redmond MP, who was killed fighting at Messines. Over the years he has liked to quote a line from one of Willie's letters and it is one that has really resonated with me. It was in a letter to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

Written shortly before he died, Willie Redmond said that:

'It would be a fine memorial to the men who have died if we could over their graves build up a bridge between the north and south.'

I believe we should all honour his words today.

At a time when Brexit threatens to drive a wedge between north and south we need to build more bridges and fewer borders.

I promise I will play my part in helping to do exactly that.

Thank you.

ENDS

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