

**Address by the Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny T.D.  
to the 50<sup>th</sup> British Irish Parliamentary Association Plenary  
Monday, 23 February 2015 at 9.30am**

The Work of BIPA

I am delighted to join you here this morning on the special occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> British Irish Parliamentary Assembly Plenary. I'm also particularly pleased that this 50<sup>th</sup> Plenary is taking place here in Dublin.

As a previous member of British Irish Parliamentary Association, I know the impact that this Assembly has had in bringing parliamentarians from all backgrounds and parties together on issues of common interest. I know from my direct experience that we found more to agree, than disagree on, and that we found many great new friends in the process.

Given the occasion, I would like to thank you all, the Assembly, for your hard work and dedication not just over the last year, but over the sometimes many years some of you have been involved in making this Assembly into the vibrant body that it is today.

The co-chairs, as ever, are important leaders in your work. On the Irish side, I want to congratulate my colleague Frank Feighan T.D. on taking up the Co-Chairmanship from Joe McHugh T.D. who has gone on to a Ministerial position. I wish Frank all the best as he and Laurence take this Association into what I am sure will be another outstanding 25 years.

I know you lost a longstanding member of the Assembly last year, Jim Dobbin MP and I would like to extend my sympathies to his friends and colleagues here.

I've been told of Northern Ireland Health Minister Jim Wells' farewell remarks at the October Plenary in Kent and I think his sentiments captured the value of BIPA perfectly; building friendships, forging collaboration and lifting the British Irish relationship to the heights we see today.

So your plenary here is about both commemorating 25 years and about current business. You are also considering the role of sport in promoting cultural and community development. You will also hear from the various committees on issues as diverse as cross border police cooperation, the Irish Diaspora in Scotland and the work of the European Investment Bank.

## British Irish Relations

When the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was concluded, it was described as a historic template for the mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands. Looking back over the intervening period, I think it is fair to say that it has contributed enormously to a transformation in relationships between the two great traditions of this island.

That agreement opened up opportunities for us North and South, East and West, to get to know one another in new ways. Our commitment to that Agreement, and to partnership, equality and mutual respect, today stands more firm than ever. So, today we have an opportunity to take stock of the transformation of British Irish relations over the past 25 years.

The successful visit of President Higgins to the UK last year together with Queen Elizabeth's historic visit to Ireland in 2011 are hugely positive landmarks in the intertwined journey of our two nations. Those sitting in this chamber can be proud of their role in ensuring that today British Irish relations remain close and cordial, extending right across government, business and cultural activity.

In March, 2012 Prime Minister Cameron and I signed a Joint Statement which sought to take our relationship further by setting out a vision of what closer cooperation might look like over the next ten years. It also mapped out a unique, structured process of engagement, activity and outcomes between our two Governments, including annual review summits by both of us and underpinned by a programme of engagement by our most senior civil servants.

All this work and ongoing close relations matter deeply.

Beyond producing practical outcomes that can benefit both jurisdictions it also helps to build trust and understanding.

Members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association, are also helping to rebuild trust by continuing to promote and nurture co-operation in British-Irish and North-South relations for the benefit of all the people on these islands.

Business and trading relationships between the UK and Ireland amount to €1 billion a week. That's great, but we can do even better in both our interests!

It goes without saying that much of this business is done within the positive framework of common membership of the European Union single market, the underlying principles for which Britain and Ireland are champions. It is in that context and others, including the importance of the EU's role in Northern Ireland, that Ireland's view – well known to this audience already – is that the United Kingdom should stay within the European Union.

### Scottish referendum

The time since we met last March has certainly been interesting and I know some of you here face elections in the coming months.

Certainly, Scotland's September 2014 referendum provided an inspiring example of democracy in practice. Scots young and old actively participated in the debate and turned out for the vote, demonstrating a level of positive political activism that politicians of all persuasions must welcome. The Scottish people have moved forward with confidence and vision.

## Commemorations

So, we are now in the fourth year of this Decade of Centenaries, during which we are commemorating the events of one hundred years ago that had such a significant impact on the history of Ireland. And while history can be a divisive subject, I have been struck by how commemorations can be acts that unify and reconcile – particularly in the context of Ireland’s relations with Britain. Commemorations provide us with opportunities to remember, reflect and, sadly, to mourn together. This was particularly apparent during remembrance events last year that marked the centenary of the start of the First World War. Together with Prime Minister Cameron and other EU leaders, I participated in a profoundly moving ceremony at Menin Gate in Ypres in June; I understand members of this Assembly travelled to visit that sombre place later in the year during the last Plenary.

This year, we will remember those who lost their lives in Gallipoli. In 2016 we mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, an event which has in the past had a particular significance for those from a unionist tradition but which saw the tragic loss of life from all parts and all traditions on the island of Ireland.

2016 is also, of course, the centenary of the Easter Rising– one of the formative moments of Ireland’s path to independence and, as such, the centrepiece for the Irish Government of this decade of commemorations. My Government’s plans for the ‘Ireland 2016’ commemoration envisage an occasion which will allow us to remember that pivotal moment of our history, to reflect on the last 100 years, to welcome the peace and prosperity that has been achieved on this island and to re-imagine our future, building a new legacy of hope, possibility and confidence.

### Stormont House Agreement

The last time this Association met in plenary format last October, political talks in Belfast had just commenced. The British and Irish Governments had come to the joint conclusion that the political impasse in Northern Ireland was such that our immediate involvement was required to break the logjam. Whilst respecting the devolved power-sharing institutions in Belfast, both Governments were determined to fulfil our roles as co-guarantors of the Agreements and to assist Northern Ireland’s leaders with the difficult issues before them.

Eleven weeks of intense engagement followed. Discussions on issues that cut to the heart of how to deliver a truly reconciled and prosperous society were sometimes challenging, but were always conducted in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. I saw this firsthand when I participated in the talks last December, alongside Prime Minister Cameron.

On 23 December, the two Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive Parties achieved what we had set out to do with the Stormont House Agreement. The Agreement provides for a more responsive, accountable and better resourced framework for dealing with the legacy of the past. And it also charts a way forward on other challenging issues, including flags, identity, culture and tradition; parades; as well as advancing practical North South cooperation on the island of Ireland and outstanding commitments from previous Agreements. As part of the Agreement, the British Government and Northern Ireland parties also agreed a plan for financial and budgetary reform and a programme of institutional reform at Stormont.

Surrounded as I am by individuals who collectively represent many years of experience as public representatives, I do not need to explain the importance of the public having faith in the political system. The people of Northern Ireland demanded a way forward on a set of extremely complex and sensitive issues, and the Stormont House Agreement goes some way towards answering that call.

Of course, there is work yet to be done. The legacy of the Stormont House Agreement will be measured by its implementation. I have every confidence that in the period ahead the two Governments and the Northern Ireland parties, working together, will achieve the goals that we have set ourselves to make the potential of the Stormont House Agreement a reality.

### North South Cooperation

My Government's commitment to North-South and all-island economic co-operation also remains a priority. Economic and budgetary issues in both jurisdictions are a key area of discussion when I meet with First Minister Robinson and deputy First Minister McGuinness.

When we last met in December, our discussions included the need to attract external investment while also encouraging indigenous companies. So I want to welcome the recent announcement on Corporation Tax powers for Northern Ireland which will, I believe, be very helpful in allowing Northern Ireland to develop its economy which will in turn help the prospects for everyone on this island.

Last year, I informed you that we had agreed with our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to spend 2014 looking at priorities that will help economic recovery, job creation, the best use of public funds and the most effective delivery of services on this island. I think it is particularly important in this context to note that the Stormont House Agreement includes the decision that these new sectoral priorities for North/South cooperation, will be reported on at the North South Ministerial Council before the end of this month. Examples of new cooperation already being taken forward and which make good business sense include the holding of joint trade missions involving UK, Irish and Northern Irish Trade Ministers.

The first one of these took place last year at the Singapore Air Show with the latest having taken place last month at the Arab Health Conference in Dubai. These joint missions arose out of my agreement with Prime Minister Cameron in 2012 to strengthen further the bilateral relationship both North to South and East to West. They are good examples of where co-operation between Dublin, London and Belfast makes good business sense.

A new priority that offers great potential is the joint bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. When I was in Northern Ireland in December, I was particularly pleased, together with the Tánaiste, First Minister Robinson and deputy First Minister McGuinness, to launch and to pledge our full, joint support for the IRFU's tournament bid. We have cooperated before with the Northern Ireland Executive to hold cross-border sporting events such as last year's highly successful start of the Giro d'Italia but I firmly believe that working together to bring the Rugby World Cup to Ireland will bring North South cooperation to a whole new level. Ministers in both jurisdictions will be working closely together to ensure the strongest possible bid is submitted.

Another key part of the Stormont House Agreement from a North/South point of view is the decision to hold a meeting of relevant Ministers from North and South in the North West to consider strategic approaches to the development of that region. A renewed and strengthened strategic focus endorsed by both Governments will, I believe, be a welcome development in the North West.

Under the Agreement, the Government also committed to a number of measures which will contribute to economic renewal in Northern Ireland as well as being beneficial to the all-island economy. These include £50 million sterling in financial support towards the A5 road project in the North-West. The Government also remains committed to the concept of the Narrow Water Bridge Project and to developing the Ulster Canal.

We will continue our close engagement with the British Government, both to promote and develop our wider bilateral interests but also to pursue our common custodianship of the Agreements in support of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, and above all in the interests of a peaceful, prosperous and harmonious future for all of the peoples of these islands.

I hope you have a sense there of how my government is approaching the great potential of our political, historical, cultural and business links. It has been a year of progress and of results.

It has indeed been a very productive year for the Assembly since I met you here in Dublin last March and I wish you the best for the coming year and the next 25 years.

**ENDS**