

Speaking Points for Minister Donohoe
British Irish Parliamentary Assembly
50th Plenary Session
Seanad Chamber, Leinster House
Monday, 23rd February 2015

Co-chairs, distinguished members, fellow parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen.

I am honoured to be invited to address the 50th Plenary Session of the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly and I congratulate the Assembly on the hugely significant role it has played, over the past 25 years, in building close relationships between parliamentarians across these islands, as well as on the island of Ireland.

The last time I addressed the Assembly was during its 47th Plenary Session in 2013 in my role as Minister for European Affairs. Today I am here in my new role as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to discuss the importance of sport to our shared culture and the role of sport in promoting cultural and community development.

The significant health, social and economic benefits of sport are widely recognised. As Minister for Sport, I am committed to increasing and developing participation and interest in sport, improving standards of performance and developing sports facilities.

We in Government understand that sport and physical activity have huge potential to contribute to the development of a healthier society and recognise the importance of sport for social and economic development. This year, the sports and recreation services programme accounts for 6% of my Department's budget and is over €90 million. This is a very significant investment in sport and is a strong indication of our commitment and recognition of the value of sport.

We want to ensure that all people are encouraged and given opportunities to participate in sport and to enjoy all the benefits that sport can bring through developing a healthier lifestyle. The growing problem of obesity and inactive lifestyles, particularly among young people, is a cause for real concern. Research shows that overweight and obesity costs the state €1.13 billion annually. The contribution of sport to health and the prevention of illness and disability is very significant. The health benefits that can be gained from participation in sport and physical activity are important, not just for the individual but also for our health system, with the consequent reduction in the demand on health services.

The Irish Sports Council works closely with the governing bodies of sport to encourage greater participation in sport and physical activity. Many of our governing bodies of sport are structured

on an all-island basis, with a close working relationship established between many others and there is excellent North/South cooperation in the area of sport. The Irish Sports Council and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland work closely together and currently engage in a number of joint initiatives such as the Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children's Sport. There is co-operation on such issues as research, development of high performance sport and anti-doping, while Coaching Ireland also operates on an all-island basis. Officials from my Department and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland also meet regularly to discuss sporting issues of mutual interest. I am committed to pursuing continued North/South cooperation in the area of sport. Sport has a unique place in our society and the potential benefits of sport merit such cooperation.

There is also very good all-island cooperation in the area of sports tourism. The hosting last year of the Giro D'Italia cycling event on an all-island basis showed that the island of Ireland can successfully host such events. I am sure that you are all aware that the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive recently announced our support for the preparation of a joint bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup by the Irish Rugby Football Union. The IRFU, with the support of both Governments, has commenced work on compiling the bid.

The social impact of sport should not be underestimated and it is a key element in the formulation of Irish sport policy. Sport and physical activity help develop the personal skills of individuals. Values such as tolerance, self-discipline, team spirit and strength of character are demanded, practiced and promoted. In this way, sport serves as an indispensable educational tool, both in schools and colleges and in the wider community. Sport can also play an important role in tackling some of the social challenges faced by society, including social exclusion, anti-social behaviour and alcohol and substance misuse. As an example, the success of the Football Association of Ireland's midnight soccer leagues in reducing Garda call out rates by 48% during the periods the leagues ran in some of Dublin's disadvantaged communities is evidence of the positive influence of sport.

This highlights the important role that sport and sporting organisations play in community development. I know the President of the GAA will address the Assembly this afternoon and you will get to see the wonderful facilities at Croke Park. The GAA is the largest and one of the oldest sports organisations in this country. The significance of the role it plays in Irish society cannot be undervalued. It is the lifeblood of many different communities throughout the country. Every town and village has a Gaelic club that has provided sport and physical activity for generations of young (and not so young) people over the past 130 years.

The GAA has a very special place in the lives and hearts of Irish people and in Irish culture. The GAA was never solely about sport or recreation. It is about building a sense of community and identity, at both local and national levels.

The successes of our elite sportspeople and teams at national and international level boost morale and nothing unites people quite like sport. These sportspeople are role models for young people and their performances and achievements can inspire the next generation by encouraging sports participation at local level. We have all seen the feel good factor that major sports events can have on a nation. The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was one of the most well-run games in recent years. Events such as the London Games can encourage people to get involved in physical activity and sport and it is important to build on this foundation after the events are finished. Any event that encourages more people to get involved in any type of sport or physical activity can only be a positive thing for the development of sport.

The Olympic Flame is one of the enduring symbols of the Olympic Games and it was a great honour when the London 2012 Olympic Torch relay travelled across the border from Northern Ireland to Dublin. This historic occasion recognised the friendship, peace and cooperation that now exists on the island of Ireland and demonstrates the unifying power of sport. The London Games was like a home games for Ireland and the Irish team enjoyed one of its most successful games.

A key success and legacy of the London Games was the huge contribution made by the volunteer workforce and I know that the British Government is working to ensure that the spirit of volunteering continues to grow and can benefit large events, local communities and the volunteers themselves. We enjoyed a similar experience in Ireland when we hosted the 2003 Special Olympic World Summer Games, the first time the event was held outside the United States. This event generated the greatest voluntary effort ever seen in this country with more than 30,000 volunteers, many of who continued volunteering with Special Olympics after the games was over.

Sport is the most important arena for volunteering in Ireland and volunteers are a vital part of every club and sporting organisation around the country and are doing wonderful work for sport in their communities. It is estimated that in the region of 500,000 people volunteer in sport throughout the country every year. Volunteers play a major role in keeping the high level of sporting activity in Ireland with all the associated health and social benefits, and contribute significantly to the development of elite sport in Ireland, which has done so much to enhance the international reputation of Irish sport. Every athlete in every sport can only reach their potential because of the support, encouragement and inspiration they receive from the volunteers in their clubs. There is also a significant economic value of sport volunteering with recent research estimating this at over €1 billion a year.

Sport can build better community relations and deliver a better understanding and respect for the rights and traditions of everyone, while contributing to the building of a cohesive society. Sport

can teach us honesty and fairness and how important it is to uphold the highest standards of respect. It teaches us that in order for communities to remain positive, peaceful and productive we must act with the upmost integrity at all times. A diverse and inclusive sport environment is most likely to be realised when people who differ from one another are valued and appreciated.

We in Government are fully aware that we must continue to promote sport and physical activity, to support our sporting bodies and to strive to provide the best sporting facilities we can, not just for our elite sportsmen and women but for people of all ages and all abilities. All of us involved in sport need to continue to work together and engage productively on matters that are important to sport. We have a mutual interest in seeing sport develop to its full potential. Sport has the potential to build bridges between people like no other sphere of human activity and the making of friendships and developing new relationships is part of the sporting endeavour.

Friendly sporting rivalry adds to the excitement of sporting occasions and Britain and Ireland has enjoyed such rivalry over the years on many sporting occasions and I look forward to witnessing another great sporting match on 1 March at the Six Nations rugby clash between England and Ireland at the Aviva Stadium here in Dublin.

I would like to congratulate and thank the Assembly for the valuable work it has done during its first twenty five years and I wish you continued success for your efforts into the future.