

## **Remarks for Launch of 'The Cambridge History of Ireland'**

**10 May 2018**

I am delighted to participate in the London launch of the Cambridge History of Ireland. This ambitious and engaging work, covering 1,500 years of Irish history, is a welcome addition to the corpus of scholarship on the subject. It represents a significant labour of erudition by those who contributed to it, some of whom are here with us today, as well as its four editors - Thomas Bartlett, Brendan Smith, Jane Ohlmeyer and James Kelly.

Tom, I know that you feared that you might well be over 100 by the time the book was released – I am very pleased that you didn't have to wait that long to see its publication! My sincere congratulations to all of the contributors, editors and Cambridge University Press for this magnificent publication.

In considering Ireland's history from 600 AD to 2016, this publication must, by definition, cover the historic links between the islands of Ireland and Great Britain – and in time, between Ireland and the United Kingdom - and I am especially pleased therefore that the book is being launched this evening in London in the presence of Sir John Major, following its launch in Dublin Castle last week in the presence of President Higgins.

Sir John, it is a particular honour for me to welcome you here this evening. As we all know, this year we commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which marked the end of 30 years of conflict and violence in Northern Ireland, and which remains the cornerstone of the Peace Process.

Another consequence of the Good Friday Agreement has been the positive transformation in Ireland-UK relations, best demonstrated by the reciprocal State Visits - in 2011 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and in 2014 by President Higgins. This 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Good Friday Agreement is an important moment to both reflect on its transformational significance and – more importantly - to insist on its continuing indispensability.

But with all of this focus on the Good Friday Agreement, whether in relation to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary or indeed the possible impact of Brexit on its sustainability, we sometimes discount what came before 10 April 1998.

And I don't only mean the violence of the preceding 30 years, which took so many lives, which left so many either injured or bereft, which inflicted so much hurt and division, and which is still all too clearly etched into the memories of all those of us who lived on these islands during the conflict.

I am also referring to all of the ground work which paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement to be secured in 1998.

The Good Friday Agreement did not come into being in a vacuum – it was the distillation of the accumulated experience and learning of its authors, and the authors of previous initiatives such as the Downing Street Declaration – which will be 25 years old this December - and the Joint Framework Document, both of which occurred on the watch of Prime Minister Major.

Sir John, during your time as Prime Minister, you worked tirelessly and bravely towards a solution in Northern Ireland. Aably assisted by Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke and Sir Patrick Mayhew, your personal engagement and leadership in the peace process - resulting in the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document, as well as the commencement of all-party talks in 1996 - was instrumental in keeping open the road to peace in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the early and mid-1990s, during a politically sensitive period of change in Northern Ireland, you continued to advance the prospects for an inclusive peace process open to all parties who were committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic engagement.

And despite political constraints and some setbacks on the ground, you kept open the channels for dialogue - allowing for vital progress to be made and for the fledgling peace process to gain momentum.

And you bravely persisted with these approaches despite sometimes strong pressure at home to break off talks or to change tack in your approach towards Northern Ireland.

In this, as I mentioned previously, you were of course assisted by a strong team in your office and the Northern Ireland Office. And there was a similarly strong engagement from key individuals within the Departments of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs in Ireland.

But sometimes, progress relies just as much on the bonds of trust and confidence that derive from personal relationships among the key political principals.

In this respect, your friendships with Taoisigh John Bruton and especially Albert Reynolds would prove to be of great significance, including in improving wider relationships between London and Dublin. And – as we think about the implications of a post-Brexit European Union - it is interesting to note that your friendship with Albert had its genesis in your interaction as Finance Ministers around the EU table in Brussels.

Your own personal commitment to advancing the cause of peace in Northern Ireland was ever evident, and I think that many of those involved in the peace process in Northern Ireland will recognise the words you used in your autobiography when you said:

*“Working for a Northern Ireland settlement was the most difficult, frustrating and, from 1993, time-consuming problem of government during my premiership.”*

For those involved in the process since then, the words difficult, frustrating and time-consuming may indeed continue to feel accurate and familiar. More importantly, however, they will also strongly endorse your following sentence:

*‘It was also the most rewarding’.*

Sir John, since your premiership, your deep interest in and personal commitment to Northern Ireland and improved British-Irish relations has not abated.

You spoke passionately in the run-up to the 2016 referendum of the potential impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland and on British-Irish relations, memorably participating with Tony Blair at an Ulster University event in Derry.

Your prescient words then may not have become the key narrative of the referendum campaign but they are certainly central to the debate now. And since the referendum, you have continued to highlight the potential risks associated with Brexit, with a particular and

welcome emphasis on the over-riding priority of protecting the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Ladies and Gentlemen, whether you were in favour of Leave or Remain, the objective reality is that the UK decision to leave the EU has the capacity – if not properly managed - to disturb the delicate and complex balance of the Good Friday Agreement. In addressing this challenge, my objective, and that of the whole Irish Government, has been to simply conserve what we have enjoyed for the last 20 years – an evolving peace process, a Good Friday Agreement that has transformed life for the better, and an open and invisible border that is both a cause and manifestation of that transformation.

Knowledgeable people – like Sir John - who refer to the real risks of Brexit for the peace process are sometimes dismissed by others as promoting Project Fear or of pursuing some covert agenda.

So let me use this opportunity to correct any erroneous suggestions that Ireland has prioritised this key issue in the negotiations in an effort to thwart Brexit happening and / or to somehow advance a united Ireland by stealth.

The Irish Government fully respects the outcome of the UK referendum. Our sole objective is to do whatever we can to ensure an orderly Brexit that does not damage Ireland's fundamental national interests – namely, safeguarding the peace process and ensuring the closest possible future relationship between the UK and the EU.

And with regard to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, we continue to fully support the principle of consent, first outlined in the Downing Street Declaration, and then solemnly incorporated into the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. There can and will be no change in the sovereign status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people. Seeking to conflate that long-term issue with the immediate management of Brexit is an unhelpful and potentially destabilising distraction.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Northern Ireland is now a place at peace, which was not the case for a significant portion of Sir John's premiership over 20 years ago. While there is still a lot to be done to achieve a lasting and complete reconciliation, we must also rejoice in the huge

transformation which has been wrought in relationships within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland, and between Ireland and the UK - the long and often troubled history of which is so comprehensively covered in 'The Cambridge History of Ireland' which is being launched today.

Before I welcome Sir John up to the podium, I would like to recall another passage from his autobiography:

*"In good times or bad, visits to Northern Ireland were always emotional. My days there were long and tiring, but I never flew home without feeling uplifted by the bravery and resilience I found".*

Sir John, the years of peace which we have seen since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement owe a great deal to your work in Northern Ireland, and that of Taoisigh Reynolds and Bruton, as well as the negotiators of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements.

You may have found yourself uplifted by the bravery and resilience which you witnessed in Northern Ireland, but I would like to express my personal appreciation for those same qualities which you demonstrated time and again over the course of your premiership.

And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to invite Sir John Major to the podium to address us.