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# **Symposium to Celebrate 60 Years of Ireland at the United Nations**

*“Learning from the Past, Preparing for the Future”*

Remarks by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charles Flanagan TD

Thursday 17 December 2015

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this very special event here in the headquarters of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

60 years ago this week - in this historic building - Liam Cosgrave, then Minister for External Affairs, who unfortunately could not be with us today, received a telegram announcing that Ireland had been admitted to the UN. It is fitting that we should come together here today - in this same building - to mark the anniversary of the momentous day when Ireland first took its place among the nations, December 14th 1955.

The fact that we will be joined by such distinguished personalities as Mr. Kofi Annan (former United Nations Secretary General), Mrs. Mary Robinson (UN Special Envoy of the Secretary General on Climate Change) and Mr. Peter Sutherland (UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for International Migration) is a measure of the significance and importance of this occasion. I welcome you all and thank you for your participation today.

Today marks the culmination of an eight month-long programme of events and projects to mark this very special anniversary. The programme was launched in May by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during his visit to Ireland, and has involved a series of events which have provided a wonderful opportunity for public diplomacy, reflecting on the contribution that Ireland has historically made, and continues to make, to the United Nations.

One particular highlight has been the wonderful exhibition developed by the Royal Irish Academy. We will shortly hear from Dr Kate O’Malley who will explain how the exhibition tells an interesting story, starting with our long nine-year wait for membership through to the surprise vote on 14th December which admitted Ireland and 15 other countries to the UN, and allowed former Minister for External affairs and later Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, to take Ireland’s seat for the first time at the 11th General Assembly in 1956.

As you will see from the story told through the Exhibition’s photographs and historical documents, many of the heady issues faced during the earliest years of our UN membership, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, forced Ireland to identify clear policy priorities and positions of principle, many of which we have maintained to the present day.

A second highlight of our commemorative programme for me has been our Youth Delegate initiative. I'd like to commend Orla Murphy and Eoin Ó'Liathán, Ireland's two first ever Youth Delegates, who gave me a run for my money at the General Assembly in New York this autumn! Hopefully we will hear a word from Eoin and Orla later.

I think these two elements of the anniversary programme – an historical record of our UN journey and a new modality for engaging Ireland's youngest citizens in the world organisation sum up very well the theme for today's Symposium "Learning from the Past, Preparing for the Future".

60 years is a long time in international affairs. As we look around us and reflect on Ireland's early years from 1955 at a Cold War-divided UN, a number of distinct themes present themselves for reflection on our past engagement.

The exhibition recalls very well the international political landscape Ireland faced at the time, and the difficult political choices we made. Choices which actually shaped the contours of subsequent Irish foreign policy over the subsequent sixty years.

First of all, peacekeeping. Since the first deployment of Irish peacekeepers to Lebanon in 1958, men and women from the Irish Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána have participated with honour and distinction. We are rightly proud of the courage, commitment and professionalism of our personnel.

Secondly, the area of disarmament and non-proliferation is one to which Ireland has had, from the start, a long-standing and deeply-held commitment. In 1968, Ireland became the first country to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty following several years of work as the initiator of the General Assembly Resolutions that led to its adoption. We have maintained this commitment through the years and Ireland is equally committed to disarmament of conventional weapons and to arms control.

And thirdly, support for development and human rights. From the start of our membership of the United Nations, Ireland took an active and principled stand at the UN. This commitment and these values live on in our foreign policy of 2015.

Ireland's appointment this year as one of two co-facilitators for the Sustainable Development Goal negotiations has been an outstanding honour for our country. I want to pay tribute to our Ambassador of Ireland to the United Nations in New York, David Donoghue, and his team for their work this year.

As I said, 60 years is a long time. The challenges that we face now are very different from the challenges of 1955. These new challenges have a particular impact and relevance for small states like Ireland, in an increasingly interdependent and globalised world. As outlined in the review of foreign policy published by the government earlier this year, in today's world "nothing is entirely foreign or wholly domestic".

The sheer breadth of crises and challenges we face can sometimes feel overwhelming. We should remind ourselves of why the world needed the UN in the first instance. At its most fundamental level, the UN was created in order to "save future generations from the

scourge of war". Ten million people died in World War I. 60 million people died in World War II. The UN did a commendable job, throughout the Cold War, in preventing a devastating World War III.

The UN has had a huge impact on improving lives all over the world. It has fed the hungry through the World Food Programme, looked after children through the United Nations Children's Fund, provided shelter for the displaced through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and made playing fields safe through the UN Mine Action Service.

But much as the UN has had successes big and small, it has also had failings, some obvious and some inexcusable.

We cannot avoid the failure of the UN, and of the Security Council in particular, to fulfil its duty to uphold the Charter in Syria. The murder of over 250,000 Syrians, principally by their regime, and the displacement of millions could have been prevented were the P5 states prepared to act more decisively. The costs to Syria, the Middle East region and now to Europe as well, far exceeds what narrow interest drove such paralysis.

This is just one example of where the UN has failed to live up to its promise. In parallel with the appalling actions of some state regimes, transnational terrorist networks including Daesh, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram have rapidly emerged as threats not only to vulnerable groups but to the rules-based international order on which our values are founded. The United Nations is seized of the need to respond to these new threats. But it can and should do more.

It is clear that one of the greatest challenges facing us today is that of migration. Crisis, conflict, poverty and human rights abuses are forcing ever-increasing numbers of people to leave their homes in search of safety or a better life elsewhere. The role of the United Nations in bringing this issue to the fore long predates the current migration crisis in Europe. It was as long ago as 2006 that the Secretary-General of the United Nations presciently appointed Peter Sutherland, who is with us today, as his Special Representative for International Migration. Global challenges require global responses and the UN will be central to our response to this challenge.

But despite some failings, the UN has made strides to adapt. Innovations such as the International Criminal Court, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Human Rights Council show that the UN isn't stuck in the past and is changing to deal with the problems of today.

As a member of the UN Human Rights Council in the past three years, we have been able to make a contribution to enhancing human rights in particular by our initiative on protecting space for civil society.

The climate agreement adopted last weekend in Paris represents a triumph. In spite of many differences and tensions, 195 countries managed to reach common ground and endorse a text that is ambitious, balanced and legally binding through a transparent process that was grounded in scientific evidence. Four years of groundwork by the Secretary General himself, his envoys, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat

and a concerted effort across the UN system paved the way for success. Ireland provided political and financial support to Mary Robinson in her role as Special Envoy over the past year to raise and sustain the ambition needed to reach an agreement, and I commend her for her work.

Together with the sustainable development goals agreed in September, we now have a comprehensive framework for inclusive and sustainable development which recognises the particular needs of the most vulnerable people and nations.

The work is, however, just beginning. To implement these ambitious frameworks, we will require sustained political will and a fundamental shift in our ways of working and our economic models.

Ireland is committed to supporting and working with other UN Member States on implementing existing reforms and innovating new ones. This is something I know is close to the heart of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who I hope will offer us his views later on.

In summary, we are advocates

- for reform of the UN Security Council,
- for changing the way the Secretary General is selected, and
- for really looking properly and thoroughly at implementing the recommendations of this year's three UN reviews (Peace Operations, Peacebuilding and Women, Peace and Security)

We will campaign for election in 2020 to a non-permanent seat on the Council itself for the 2021-22 term, because we believe that, as we did when we served previously, the best way to make a difference is to step up and make a contribution.

The UN is the most ambitious project in human history. The UN is the single best mechanism at our disposal to advance international peace and security, development and human rights. A multilateral system of collective security protects everyone's interests – not just our own.

I look forward very much to the contributions of the participants in today's event. It will be valuable to hear the views of those who are working hard on current challenges such as our esteemed former President, Mary Robinson and her fellow Elder Kofi Annan, and my esteemed former colleague Peter Sutherland, as well as the views of the young people like Orla and Éoin who will carry the UN flag into the future.

I am always honoured to be Irish, but never more so than when I am at the United Nations. We can be so proud of the positive, real and valuable impact we have had on this global organisation over the past 60 years. Ireland will continue in the future uphold the work we have done and to strive to ensure our contribution is never found wanting.

George Bernard Shaw once said that “We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future”. This must be the driving force behind Ireland’s contribution to the next 60 years of the United Nations.

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