

# Ireland Today: A New Beginning

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on 20 May 2008, by His Excellency Michael Collins, Ambassador of Ireland to the  
United States, recipient of the 2008 Diplomat of the Year Award

Thank you for honouring me with the Los Angeles World Affairs Council "Diplomat of the Year" Award for 2008 and, in doing so, thank you also for honouring Ireland.

Addressing a joint meeting of Congress last month, the Taoiseach (Ireland's Prime Minister) said that America and Ireland have something that goes beyond a friendship between countries. He said that to be an Irishman among Americans is to feel at home. Tonight, I am delighted to be in Los Angeles and to feel so very much at home.

Ireland and America are connected by our history and our values, but beyond all else by the millions and millions of lives of hope and fear and resolve that crossed an ocean. Lives that changed forever the story of America. The Irish have been here from the beginning. Some 40 million people in this country claim Irish ancestry. A diaspora really like few others.

The Irish have contributed in every field of American life. And it wasn't just in politics where the Irish excelled. In literature, in industry, in film, in the police departments and the fire houses; in the schools, in the board rooms, and on construction sites; in the churches, the research institutes, the trade unions and on the sports fields. In every corner of America there is Irish-America. Contributing in so many different ways. Proud of America. And proud of their Irish ancestry.

It is, therefore, a unique privilege to be Ireland's Ambassador to the United States. Before arriving in the United States last summer I had the honour to work over a six year period with Bertie Ahern who served as Taoiseach from 1997 until recently. This was the most challenging, but rewarding, experience of my diplomatic career. My particular responsibility was the peace process in Northern Ireland and advancing Ireland's relations with the European Union and the wider international community.

There are certain days that define an era, that embody the turn of the tide. I have been there on so many such days. Days such as May 8, 2007 when former adversaries finally sat down with one another in government in Northern Ireland. Days when, for the first time in history, the Taoiseach addressed the Parliament at Westminster, marking a new chapter in relations between Ireland and Britain. Days when Irish leaders from North and South met for the first time on the historic site of the 1619 Battle of the Boyne—so long a reminder of division and disharmony but now full of the symbolism of a new relationship of hope and reconciliation on the island of Ireland. Days such as May 1, 2004 when, in Dublin, and under an Irish EU Presidency, an enlarged European Union, from the west coast of Ireland to Poland's eastern border with Russia, became a reality.

Most diplomatic careers never experience or can be part of real historic achievements—moments that define an era, when the tide actually turns. But I was privileged to have been on the edge of history on all of these important occasions which mean so much to Ireland.

Today, I am very proud, as Ireland's Ambassador to the United States, to represent a country renewed in peace and partnership and enjoying unprecedented success. This is the Ireland of 2008, an Ireland of new beginnings, an Ireland transformed. Making peace in Ireland has been the work of many, and the work of a generation. The difficult and sad story of division and conflict in Northern Ireland is familiar to everyone. But after terrible pain and loss, we have now built a remarkable peace. We moved from conflict to dialogue and from dialogue to agreement.

This year we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, an agreement that opened the door for the peace that Ireland enjoys today. It was a pivotal moment in our history. In the intervening period we experienced many frustrations and disappointments. Indeed, many thought that the Agreement would never become an operational reality. But it has.

The Agreement ultimately flourished because of one simple unalterable fact: it represents the will, democratically expressed, of all the people of Ireland to live together in peace. Since this time last year all sides in Northern Ireland are participating in partnership government; leadership and power are shared. The widespread violence that so afflicted more than a generation, and which left over 3,700 dead and thousands more seriously injured, is over for good. It was a very proud moment for me to stand with our prime minister in the Houses of Congress when he was able to say that he was the first Irish leader to stand before the Congress and say that Ireland was at peace.

Weapons have been put beyond use under international supervision. Relations between Belfast and Dublin have reached new heights of friendship and cooperation. And relations with our closest neighbours in Britain, for so long affected by the ongoing tragedy in Northern Ireland, have changed fundamentally for the better and become increasingly normalised.

Of course there are still challenges. Healing the wounds of a divided society takes time. But we are enormously proud of what has already been achieved. The situation today in Northern Ireland is unrecognisable from what it once was. And for that we are very grateful. And we face a future in a climate of peace and from a foundation of partnership.

People frequently ask about the lessons of the Irish peace process. What ultimately made the difference? There are no short-cuts from conflict to peaceful, agreed societies. Each situation is different, each hugely complex. There are no easy or immediate answers. Dialogue, persistence and patience were clearly important. But ultimately no situation can be led out of conflict without political leadership. And we were fortunate at the critical moment to have leaders in Dublin, Belfast and London who were prepared to build a bridge to a new and better future.

Today, we are committed to sharing our experience of the peace process in Northern Ireland in other situations emerging from conflict where it could be of use. We have recently set up a conflict resolution unit in Dublin. Our intent is to share what experiences we have garnered through the peace process in Ireland and make it of use to other countries.

In all this progress and on the path to peace, we have also been privileged to receive the sustained and crucial support of the United States. Successive Administrations, the Congress and our community here have stood with us and given us their support at vital times. Enormous good was done with their help. And it is a good that multiplies every day. Over the past decade and more we have translated the potential of our people into a modern, vibrant society.

Our economy has grown beyond every expectation. And our country has diversified in so many new and exciting ways. No longer a country of emigration, Ireland in more recent years, and as our economy has grown, has attracted hundreds of thousands of newcomers—mainly from the new member States of the European Union—to our shores. Fifteen percent of the work force in Ireland is now called the new Irish. They are all contributing to our success and are all part of the Ireland of today.

It was unthinkable 20 years ago that I could say, as I can today, that Ireland has one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world. But this is the new reality of Ireland. We are a small open economy, fully exposed to the global market place. We export 90 percent of everything we produce. We continue to have one of the best growth rates and the lowest unemployment rates of any country in Europe. Indeed we have doubled, from one million to two million, the number of people in our workforce in the space of 15 years.

These are difficult times for the world economies, perhaps the most difficult times in more than a decade. We know that we cannot rest on our past successes no matter how impressive they may have been. We know the importance of remaining competitive. And we know we have to be agile and to play smart to preserve and build on our gains and success.

In recent times we have learned that the greatest limits we had holding us back were those we had put on ourselves. Today, Ireland has a new and precious resource forged from our recent experience of success. And that resource is self-confidence. We are confident in our ability in these challenging times to further develop our economy in new and dynamic ways.

America has played a part of honour in this welcome economic transformation. Americans have an instinct for business, and an instinct for Ireland. That is why Ireland has enjoyed and continues to enjoy US investment like few other destinations in the world. Ireland is now a European home for so many of the leading US corporations, many of whom had their origins not far from here.

They have found that being in Ireland makes business sense. Ireland has the right people with the right skills. In biopharma, digital media, ICT, financial services, medical technologies and other high tech sectors, global players have seen Ireland as a place of opportunity—a progressive business environment, stable politics, well educated and English speaking and low taxes right in the heart of Europe. We are glad they have chosen Ireland and we are glad that Ireland works so well for them. And, of course, we have plenty of room for newcomers! And with the new confidence that Ireland enjoys, Irish businessmen and women are playing an increasing role in the global marketplace.

It may surprise many of you to know that Ireland is now the 10th largest investor in the US and that Irish companies in the US now employ almost as many people here as US companies do in Ireland. With that new confidence Irish businessmen and women are stepping out into the global marketplace. Irish companies are now represented in all 50 states.

Twenty years ago when I was a young diplomat working in New York, Ireland's economic situation was grave and the daily tragedy in Northern Ireland looked beyond resolution. Ireland was frequently in the news but the news, invariably, was of our difficult circumstances. Today, I am able to tell a better story about Ireland. Not in any boastful way, I hope, but simply to convey a sense of what can be achieved, sometimes against the odds, and perhaps also to give hope to others who are caught up in conflict and feel despair. Ireland has overcome conflict and economic

hardship and we are now finding our place in a future that is no longer limited by either. Our experience of conflict informs, every day, our determination to succeed in peace.

Now, after the achievements of the last years, Ireland is more committed than ever to our potential in the world. We share a commitment to democracy, to human rights and to international development. We do not believe being a small country means opting out of the bigger issues. Ireland has always sought to play a full part on the international stage. We believe in multilateral institutions and we believe in multilateral action. For over 50 years Irish men and women have served the cause of peace under the United Nations flag. They have served in the Congo and the Lebanon, on the borders between Israel and Syria and between Iran and Iraq, in Cyprus, in Eritrea, in East Timor and in Bosnia and in Kosovo. And today, Ireland leads a European Union force in Chad protecting hundreds of thousands of refugees desperately fleeing from the conflict in Darfur.

Since 1973 Ireland has been a member of the European Union. We are deeply committed to the opportunities and vision of that Union. Europe has been enormously important to Ireland's success. As an Irishman and a European, I am proud that the European Union is emerging so strongly as a force for development, for stability, for peace in the world.

The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 during Ireland's presidency, marked a new phase in the history of the Union. It is now truly an expression of political and economic imagination on a continental scale. Ireland passionately believes in Europe and the European Union as a force for good in the world. Soon the Irish people will vote on a new reform treaty—the Lisbon Treaty—that aims to make the European Union work even more effectively both internally and in the wider world.

It has been said that between America and Europe there is contrast, but not contradiction. A strong and united Europe is good for Europe, but it is also good for the United States. Acting in partnership, there are few limits to the good we can do together—ending conflict, supporting democracy, promoting human rights, confronting climate change, stopping nuclear proliferation, and defeating terrorism.

The strength of our efforts to tackle poverty and disease in the developing world is a litmus test of our common humanity. It is also a fundamental support to conflict prevention and economic stability worldwide. That is why, side by side with growing prosperity at home, Ireland will not neglect its responsibilities to the poorest of the poor in our world. For us there is nothing remote about famine and oppression. They happened to us.

For that, more than any other reason, we recognise our obligation to share what we have with the poor of the world. We are, therefore, committed to meeting the UN target of spending 0.7 percent of our GDP on development aid in some of the poorest countries in the world, predominantly in Africa.

Today, as we come closer to achieving this target, Ireland, in proportion to our population, has become the world's sixth largest donor to the world's poor.

In conclusion, this last ten years and more has been an extraordinary chapter in Ireland's story. We have replaced a maze of what could not be done, with a view of roads ahead lined with possibility. And there is something in that vision, in that practicality, that ambition, that excitement for the future, that is of America and its people.



America and Ireland enjoy an extraordinary relationship and this is one of Ireland's greatest strengths. We have been with one another from the very beginning. As Ireland's Ambassador to this great country, I intend to do all in my power to build on this relationship so that the people of Ireland and America remain forever linked by a unique bond of affinity and friendship.

Again, I am deeply grateful to you for honouring me with this Award.

Thank you.

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