
Ministerial Keynote Address - RIA Annual Conference

Speech

Minister Charlie Flanagan, T.D. - 31/5/17

Retreat from Globalisation? Brexit, Trump and the New Populism

Keynote address by Mr. Charles Flanagan T.D.,

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President and members of the Royal Irish Academy, delegates, thank you for the warm welcome and for inviting me back to open today's conference. I want to extend a special welcome to those of you who have travelled from abroad to join us.

The Royal Irish Academy is Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences and humanities. It supports scholarship and promotes awareness of how the sciences and humanities enrich our lives and benefit society. I am glad to say that the Academy and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade enjoy a close working relationship. Perhaps the best examples of this cooperation are the Documents in Irish Foreign Policy series and the annual conference of the Academy's International Affairs Standing Committee. The conference has become a very important occasion in your calendar and ours.

Last year the focus was on 'Identity and Values in Irish Foreign Policy' and interventions ranged from reflections on our sovereignty and the creation of the State, on the one hand, to current challenges such as the Sustainable Development Agenda and the implications for Ireland, on the other. The papers which formed the basis for rich and lively debate at last year's conference have been gathered together in the latest edition of 'Irish Studies in International Affairs' and I am pleased that this new publication will be launched this evening at Iveagh House.

I would encourage you all to get your hands on a copy and to read it carefully. If you do, you will see that this time last year I concluded my remarks with a quote from President Barack Obama when the President said he believed "the world is a tough, complicated, messy ... place." I used that quote just three weeks before the referendum in the United Kingdom.

The word Brexit does not appear to have been on many lips this time last year but, of course, that was then and this is now. Today, our world is no less tough, infinitely more complicated and, unless we remain vigilant, it has the potential to become a lot more messy.

The outcome of the referendum was a shock. Stock markets tumbled. The Minister for Finance warned about the potential threat to our finances and the Taoiseach said it was a time for cool heads and clear minds.

But, although it was a shock, we were not unprepared and within hours of the result the Government published a contingency framework, identifying the key policy issues that should immediately command our attention.

The contingency framework gave us a head start. One year and 400 meetings at political and official level later, Ireland's priorities are at the heart of the European Union's own negotiating guidelines. The inclusion in the guidelines of persuasive and detailed language in relation to Ireland's particular concerns and priorities, including on protecting the Good Friday Agreement, avoiding a hard border and maintaining the Common Travel Area, is especially welcome.

Our most fundamental objective will, of course, be to ensure the continued well-being of our citizens. Brexit is a challenge, not just to our peace but to our prosperity and the impact of Brexit will be deep and extensive across the economy and across society as a whole. Earlier this month, therefore, the Government published its own detailed approach to the negotiations and we are clear that our aim is to get the best possible deal for Ireland and for the European Union.

Pending clarity on all of the negotiating points, we face an uncertain future. But we can take some comfort from history.

In September 1948 the then Taoiseach, John A. Costello, announced that Ireland was to leave the Commonwealth and that the External Relations Act, which set out Ireland's external association with the Commonwealth, would be repealed. A meeting of Commonwealth Prime Ministers was scheduled in London for the following month, October 1948, and there was confusion over whether or not Ireland could participate. Ultimately, however, we were not invited and I am indebted to the authors of Documents in Irish Foreign Policy, Dr. Michael Kennedy and Dr. Kate O'Malley, for the following nugget from volume 9 of the series:

"The British explained that a State could not expect to leave the Commonwealth and still enjoy the rights and privileges of a Commonwealth country. There would be consequences for Ireland and the loss of trade preferences and freedom of movement to Britain were hinted at."

In fact, constructive discussions on an orderly departure were held and, as history shows, Ireland and the UK are now closer than at any time in our history. Our joint EU membership was, of course, a key element in this deepening of our relations.

Today, the UK and the EU share the objective that a close partnership between the EU and the UK be established after the UK's departure and Ireland also wants the closest possible relationship between the EU and the UK. No-one wants complicated, messy arrangements and I am confident we can avoid them, if we work hard together again to attain "the flexible and imaginative solutions" called for in the European Union's own negotiating guidelines.

Of course, Brexit is not just a challenge for Ireland. It is a challenge to the entire European project. We can take some comfort from the a recent opinion poll which showed that, almost a year after the British referendum, support in Ireland for membership of the European Union is as strong as ever. According to the poll, some 83% of the people believe Ireland should remain a part of the European Union, despite the British vote, and by happy coincidence, the exact same percentage – 83% - voted in June 1972 to join the then EEC.

But there is no denying the scepticism which bedevils the continent. We have been able to breathe collective sighs of relief after recent elections in Austria, The Netherlands and France. But the Eurosceptic challenge remains. It is a cause for concern that, notwithstanding President Macron's decisive victory, over 10 million voters in France were still seduced by the ugly, xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric of the National Front and the Le Pen dynasty.

Recently, the Taoiseach spoke of democracies where the best are being pushed to the hard left by anger, and to the hard right by fear.

Protecting the centre is, therefore, more vital than ever, if we are to face down the populist threat. Over recent years, both at home and abroad, I have observed the chilling effect that brash and bullying populist rhetoric can have on the body politic, where evidence based arguments are derided and dismissed. In the last couple of years there have been many shocking developments but one that particularly stood out for me was the British Daily Mail's description of High Court judges as "enemies of the people" following a ruling on the separation of powers between the Prime Minister and the Parliament.

I found that front page frightening and I know many shared that view, particularly for those familiar with the history of our continent in the twentieth century. I acknowledge that it is vitally important that politicians confront the hollow rhetoric of populists and do so consistently and persuasively. I have strong views about this subject and I am pleased to have the opportunity to address it here today.

A new report by the Council of Europe has found that populists display common characteristics. They tend to be anti-establishment. They respond to widespread public grievances and they appeal to emotions. But what sets them apart is the cynical way in which they invoke the "will of the people" in order to put themselves above democratic institutions. They are the people who denigrate professional expertise before a vote before acknowledging the need for experts to mitigate a damaging outcome.

As the report explains, populism damages democracy by limiting debate, squashing dissent and reducing pluralism. It dismantles checks and balances, undermines human rights, the protection of minorities and challenges checks on unrestrained State power.

The onus is on us, therefore, to challenge the populist narrative, to insist on zero tolerance of all forms of xenophobia and discrimination, to protect the freedom of expression and to face down all forms of misinformation.

Ireland was, of course, one of the 10 founding members of the Council of Europe and the Council's finest, lasting achievement is the European Convention on Human Rights which was drafted in 1950. The Secretary General of the Council, Thorbjørn Jagland, has argued that the Convention "remains the ultimate backstop for our democracies, preventing a slide towards a more antagonistic and chauvinistic Europe" and, when launching the report, he urged us all – rightly - to re-commit to the Convention.

The Convention was negotiated soon after the Second World War at a time, as Jagland reminds us, when the only way to avert future upheaval was to safeguard fundamental freedoms and entrench the rule of law.

We are living through a new time of upheaval and instruments such as the Convention, and the values they enshrine, are as vital as ever today. We need to protect civic space and give voice to the civil society actors who drive progress and innovation.

Research has pointed to a variety of causes behind the rise in populism. Many point to rapid economic and social change. Some say it is driven by demographics and cultural factors and this year the 'Global Risks Report', published by the World Economic Forum, has highlighted inequality as a growing threat, not just to inclusive economic growth but to democracy itself.

In Europe we have been preoccupied, understandably, with mitigating the impact of the financial crisis. Stabilising the Eurozone and emerging from the crisis has been a painful experience for many families and this upheaval has occurred in the context of an opening of the global economy which has brought with it its own winners and losers.

New research by the economist Branko Milanovic shows, for example, that in the United States between 2009 and 2012, the incomes of the top 1% grew by more than 31%, compared with less than 0.5% for the remaining 99%. Globalisation has undoubtedly raised many from poverty and increased global wealth but in many OECD countries the benefits of growth have been unequally shared. As the Global Risks Report points out "traditional manufacturing hubs in advanced economies have been hollowed out by a combination of labour-saving technology and outsourcing."

We are being asked today whether we should retreat from globalisation. I have no hesitation in saying we should not as I see no advantage in isolation or narrow nationalism. When I published our foreign policy statement in 2015 I called it "The Global Island" because our people, our economy, our culture and our outlook are inter-woven with the rest of the world. It is a policy statement which equips us for a changing world, a world that is changing faster than ever. It is also a world that is becoming more volatile and more uncertain and that is why managing risks as well as opportunities is an essential task of our foreign policy. We want the best future for our people and, as a small country, our influence is amplified by our membership of the European Union. It has assisted us in social and economic transformation and helped us to grow as a people. Today, as we emerge from a challenging economic and financial crisis, the EU remains central to our long term economic stability and growth.

As a small country, we are best served by a rules-based international order and, as a member State, we can have our say on the formation of policies and rules which ensure the Europe we want is fair, inclusive, sustainable and future-proofed. In short, a Europe that is based on equality.

I want to wish you every success, therefore, in your deliberations today. You have a busy agenda ahead of you and I have every expectation that the proceedings will be – to borrow President Obama's terminology - tough, complicated and maybe even messy. But I have no doubt that the collective outcome will be a rich contribution to this important debate.

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