
Speech by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny T.D., Ireland France Business Awards, Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Thursday 24th November 2016

Check against delivery

It is an honour to be here this evening to celebrate the 2016 Ireland France Business Awards. It is my pleasure to be joined here today by the French Ambassador to Ireland, his Excellency, Mr. Jean-Pierre Thébault, and our own Ambassador to France, her Excellency Mrs. Geraldine Byrne Nason.

I would like to thank the France Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Network Irlande in France for organising this event.

This evening's awards are a great credit to the passion and commitment of both Joanne Grant and Richard Dujardin and their teams. I know that an immeasurable amount of work has gone into today's event. Be assured that your work has added an extraordinary amount to relations between Ireland and France.

It is a truly welcome opportunity to honour excellence in business and a particular privilege to do so when it spans the interests of Ireland and France, two long-standing friends and partners.

Ireland-France History

This event is about two very important things; celebrating those businesses who have contributed to the unique relationship between Ireland and France and secondly, honouring the strong fraternity that exists between our two countries.

Ireland and France have a long history with our peoples leaving significant marks on our respective histories. Perhaps one of the most famous Irish people in France was St. Columbanus who arrived in France in 585 AD. There he founded his monastery of Luxeuil les Bains, and St. Columbanus started something that was only to grow.

Less than two weeks ago in Glasnevin Cemetery, the France-Ireland memorial was unveiled.

The France-Ireland memorial was gifted by the French Government and features a replica of the wooden cross built by the men of the 16th Irish division for the churchyard at the French village of Ginchy, at the heart of the Somme in 1916. It is a truly important part of our shared history with France.

The European Union

Our membership of the European Union has been at the core of our friendship. Working with President Hollande at a European level has shown him and the French government to be true friends of Ireland.

Since its foundation, the European Union has ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity and peace across Europe. Europe at the end of World War Two was a continent divided and impoverished. The European Union enabled us to emerge stronger economically and socially, but we are not without our shared challenges.

Brexit

In a world that is increasingly uncertain, it is important that all Europeans continue to work together. We are living in challenging times. Across the Atlantic, the recent Presidential election has seen unprecedented debate and new political forces emerging. Next year, France herself will hold an important election.

And of course, one of the largest economic challenges facing both Ireland and France is the exit of a valued partner in the EU, the United Kingdom.

The Irish Government is continuing to ready itself to meet the Brexit challenge. There are particularly significant implications for Ireland.

In all future negotiations following the formal notification under Article 50 to the EU, the Government will ensure that the best possible outcomes will be achieved for our citizens, for the economy, for Northern Ireland and for the Common Travel Area.

At an EU Summit in Bratislava during September, I clearly reiterated Ireland's

strong commitment to EU membership and our intention, once withdrawal negotiations commence, to play an active and constructive role in the EU team.

Our history as an island nation has shown us the benefits of being open and engaging with the rest of the world. Ireland will continue to be a global island that strives to enhance long standing relations while welcoming new ones.

The challenges that we are presented with are ones that we will face together with our French partners. At times of uncertainty we all naturally hold to that which is loyal and endures, and the Franco Irish partnership is certainly that.

Ireland-France Trade & Investment

Trade has been the cornerstone of the good relationship between Ireland and France for centuries. For example, there are records of wine sales from 1740, when four thousand caskets of wine were supplied from Bordeaux to Ireland.

We're a little beyond that now. Our total trade relationship is valued at approximately €1.6 billion a month. France is Ireland's 4th largest market for services and the 5th largest for merchandise.

Irish and French companies have made significant investments in both countries. France is the fourth largest source of inward investment to Ireland.

There are fifty six French IDA-assisted companies in Ireland employing 6,230 people. Taking a conservative estimate there are some fifty Irish companies employing 13,000 people in France.

Ireland continues to be an attractive tourism destination for French tourists. France is our fourth-largest source of incoming tourists and 2015 was a record year for French tourists visiting Ireland.

I was delighted to join with President Hollande, during his visit to Ireland in July, to initiate the next stage of the Celtic Interconnector.

This project is a vital piece of European infrastructure, which will see a sub-sea electricity cable linking Ireland and France.

The connector will have a capacity of 700 megawatts, enough to power 450,000 households, and will greatly improve security of supply.

This strong level of investment by both countries is vitally important to our economies and our relationship.

The Awards

When I travelled to France last year I had the opportunity to meet with many of you. I was extremely impressed by the quality and high added value of your businesses. Ireland and France are both highly developed economies. To succeed in them, you need to not only be good but be the best.

From an Irish perspective, our agrifood sector has been at the fore of Ireland's export-led economic recovery.

Grassland Agro, the winner of tonight's award for the best French company in Ireland supplies fertilisers and high performance products, all of them specially blended, for the animal, soil, dairy and hygiene sectors, which underpin that critical success. The company itself is a merger of a French and an Irish company, and what better combination could there be.

The life sciences sector is another excellent example of where we have focussed efforts on giving Ireland a leading edge. That is why 9 out of the top 10 global pharmaceutical companies now have operations in Ireland.

It is not only in the multinational sector that we are seeing success. We also have a very strong SME indigenous life sciences sector, and the winner of this evening's best Irish company in France award, Venn Life Sciences is an excellent example of that.

Venn Life Sciences conducts research, drug development and clinical trial management for health, medical and academic organisations, and employs 50 people in France.

Ireland recently completed its ratification procedures for the Accord de Paris, agreed after much deliberation at Paris in late 2015.

It is fitting therefore that our final award this evening is the Special Award for Impact on Climate Change, and that it goes to an Irish company, Ecocem. It produces environmentally friendly cement that is used across Europe and which helps to lower the carbon footprint associated with concrete production and usage, traditionally one of the polluting sectors.

Climate Change

The Irish Government is taking significant steps to address climate change and put Ireland on a sustainable pathway to a low-carbon economic future. We will continue to work with France and other key partners to support the implementation and achievement of the historic Paris Agreement.

Companies, such as those here today, play a central role, by driving investment in sustainable opportunities and developing technology advancements, to support our future.

Last year saw the passage by Dáil Éireann of Ireland's first ever climate change legislation and a National Mitigation Plan is being prepared. This Government is the first Irish Government to have a Minister for Climate Action, with dedicated responsibility for climate change and energy policies.

Conclusion

Mesdames et Messieurs, from the outstanding calibre of companies on show here tonight the futures of both Ireland and France are very bright. Enjoy your night and be proud of you achievements. Soyez fiers. Et amusez-vous bien.

ENDS