
Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, T.D. Team Ireland Conference

'Ireland believes in freedom and justice as the fundamental principles of international law... and co-operation between the peoples for equal rights'. These words are almost 100 years old, and were drafted by the first Dáil in 1919 as a message to the nations of the world. They set-out the principles and ideals that have guided Irish foreign policy for almost a century. They still guide us today.

Ministers, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning.

I am delighted to be here to open this first Team Ireland Conference and I extend a very warm welcome to you all. For some of you, it has been a relatively short trip here, but for others it has been a long journey from your overseas postings. Thank you for the taking the time to be with us today.

I would like to thank Minister Coveney and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for organising this event. This forum will help us to explore how Ireland can achieve its objectives and goals by sharing insights, expertise and best practice.

We all have a common aim captured in the theme of today's conference – ensuring that Team Ireland, at home and abroad, works effectively and collaboratively in all our interests. This is especially important as we seek to grow trade and diversify markets as the United Kingdom prepares to leave the EU.

Ireland is a small country on the periphery of a continent. But we have ambition and we have influence. We have important values that we seek to advance throughout the world, and interests that we need to defend.

I believe in an open and engaged Ireland.

A trading nation.

A good global citizen.

A supporter of development.

A constructive contributor to the great debates and issues of our times from migration to climate change.

When I was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I had the opportunity to travel to all parts of the world promoting aviation and tourism and doing other work. And as Taoiseach, I have visited Canada and taken part in a trade mission to the west coast of the United States. So in my work, I have had the privilege of seeing close-up the work of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Bord Bia and our cultural agencies.

The staff we have on the ground - our diplomats, and the people working for our agencies - do hugely impressive work.

It is genuinely world-class - and I want to take this opportunity to thank you for all that you do for Ireland.

You help give us confidence as a country.

And it inspires me to want to do more.

The intention is, over the period 2018 to 2025, to double our global footprint. That does not necessarily mean a doubling of agencies, embassies, staff or budgets, but it does mean the doubling of our impact around the world.

There are more markets we can reach.

More countries with which we can build partnerships.

More opportunities for Ireland and for Irish people.

We want to diversify and grow trade. We want to attract inward investment to Ireland, including from new locations. We want to strengthen links with our diaspora and promote our culture internationally.

Expansion is, of course, already underway.

After years of retrenchment, we announced new resident diplomatic missions in Chile, Colombia, Jordan, Vancouver and Mumbai as part of a package of measures under Budget 2018.

More recently, during his recent visit, President Higgins announced our intention to open an embassy in New Zealand as well.

This offers a firm base on which to build our further plans towards 2025.

Of course, having diplomatic and agency officials active in the field is enormously important.

But it is also important that we reinforce our backroom operations to support them in their work.

The international context for Ireland has rarely been so uncertain.

We face a number of challenges which demand a coordinated and coherent response.

Brexit is the most obvious – and we have been preparing for its potential impacts since before referendum.

Brexit asks questions of our resilience and adaptability in the face of a disruption that is unprecedented.

It touches on the deep and wide trading relationship we enjoy with Britain, on the peace process and Northern Ireland, and the decades of normalisation in cross-border relations and trade that have evolved.

It affects the lives and livelihoods of our people, especially those living in border regions.

It changes our relationships within the European Union, where the UK has so frequently been a close ally and like-minded partner.

Managing the process in a way that secures a positive outcome for Ireland is our top priority.

Many of you play an important role in ensuring that Irish issues are placed and kept at the top of the agenda as the negotiations proceed, and we thank you for that.

Around the world, we see the principles and ideals of free trade being challenged in a way that has not been seen since the global economic order was established after World War II.

We are an economy driven by exports. Free and open international trade is central to the well-being of our country.

I believe that rather than retreat, we have to keep moving forward. The best way to harness the possibilities of the future is to work collectively and constructively for a rules-based international order that is open, engaged and democratic.

We have to work with others to shape the future in a way that reflects and secures our values.

Our active membership of the European Union – a community of values as well as of laws – will remain central to this. We are determined that Ireland will continue to be at the heart of the common European home we helped to build.

We will continue to value our ties with Britain, despite the enormous challenges that Brexit presents, not least to trade and investment.

We will continue to develop our relationship with the United States, a country which we helped shape, and which in turn has helped shape the modern Ireland.

We will also look to those parts of the world where our ties are not as developed, but where we can see opportunities to develop new markets, and build new partnerships and alliances.

In the noisy and tumultuous global market, we need to be assertive and effective. So, we also need coherent messaging overseas.

Achieving greater global visibility is of vital national interest.

We have a powerful message to deliver about our country - our economy, our innovation, our creativity, our talent, and our people. And about Ireland as a great place to live, work, invest, study, research, holiday and do business.

So we have to deliver our message effectively.

To support your work, we want a unified international identity for Ireland. We are now developing a single proposition, based on Irish culture and creativity that represents a considered, compelling and imaginative view of how we wish to be seen by the outside world.

This will be an outward expression of our identity – for everyone who wishes to know about or to engage with Ireland.

This identity will be rolled-out across Government and across our Embassy and Agency Network in time for St. Patrick's Day, Ireland's unique opportunity every year to generate invaluable global visibility.

I know that John Concannon will brief you further on this initiative later on this morning, and I encourage you all to engage with him on this important work.

Earlier generations of Irish leaders realised that an inward looking Ireland was doomed to poverty, stalled development, and dependence on a few neighbours and friends.

And so they turned to look at what lay beyond our shores.

In doing so, they were building on a long and ancient Irish tradition of setting sail and bringing our message to the world.

We are now writing a new chapter in this narrative of an island at the centre of the world. Let it be a successful and self-confident one.

As our team abroad, you are central to that work.

I want to thank you and to let you know that the Government is very proud of what you do - and you will continue to have our full support.

I wish you every success today and in your future work.

Thank you.