
Address by Minister Flanagan at the British Irish Association Conference in Oxford

[Speech](#)

Minister Charles Flanagan TD - 10/9/16

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Saturday, 10 September 2016

My Friends,

At the outset I want to acknowledge my old friend and former Fine Gael Party colleague, Peter Barry who died just a fortnight ago. Peter will always be remembered for the part he played in the painstaking work of building peace on the island of Ireland in some of our most difficult years, in particular during his tenure as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Last November we marked 30 years since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In commemorating that event we reflected on the multiple seemingly unconquerable obstacles faced by those working for peace and justice during that time – and this only served to bring into sharp relief just what a remarkable achievement the Anglo Irish Agreement was in 1985 – the cornerstone of our current Peace Process.

I know Peter was very proud of all that had been achieved in terms of peace and reconciliation and he continued to take a keen interest in Northern Irish affairs right up until his death. His legacy continues to inspire me as I go about my work as Minister.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Since our last meeting, there has of course been a lot of change in political roles. I want to pay tribute to Alastair McDonnell's work as SDLP leader and acknowledge Colum Eastwood's presence here this evening, as well as that of UUP leader, Mike Nesbitt. We now have a new First Minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster – I wish her well and acknowledge the work of her predecessor, Peter Robinson over many years. On the British Government side, I want to recognise the significant contribution to Northern Ireland made by former Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers and to wish her well in her future endeavours. I know her willingness to come here today and participate in the debate was appreciated.

I am pleased to have had an early opportunity to meet with the new Secretary of State, James Brokenshire, and I look forward to working together with him in the spirit of partnership envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement.

But to address current challenges:

We have experienced a turbulent year since our last meeting at Cambridge. It is no surprise that the prospect of a UK exit from the EU has dominated the conversations both inside and outside the Conference this weekend.

In Ireland our long experience of referendums informed our approach in the months leading up to the UK vote. We passionately believed that a strong UK in a strong EU was the best possible outcome for Ireland, the UK and the EU – but we had contingency plans in place should the electorate choose a different path.

Immediately after the result, I began a round of contacts with each and every one of my EU colleagues. To my mind, it is vital that in this period before Article 50 is triggered, there is a clear understanding among all EU Member States of the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland. The ultimate settlement will be one between the EU 27 and the UK.

The Taoiseach spoke to you yesterday about the priorities and objectives which will inform Ireland's approach to these negotiations. Of course, Northern Ireland and the relationships on the island of Ireland feature prominently within those priorities. This is because the North South relationship is of central importance for this Government in all circumstances – with or without 'Brexit'.

What has been achieved in Northern Ireland over the past decades is extraordinary. And it is important to acknowledge the role the EU played in fostering and supporting our Peace Process and in facilitating cooperation and reconciliations on these islands.

But, as everyone in this room knows, there is a long way still to go. I want to assure you that I, together with my colleagues in Government, will ensure that the important ongoing work of protecting the peace and building reconciliation is pursued just as vigorously as the challenges posed by a UK exit from the EU.

Northern Ireland is a society at peace with much to be proud of. It is important that we remind ourselves that 30 years ago, in Peter Barry's time, the current arrangements would have seemed unimaginable. In reflecting on the enormity of what has been achieved, we can also find the courage to take the next steps.

And the next steps are by no means easy ones; leading us, as they do, to confront the legacy of the past. This involves going to the heart of traumatic and divisive events which impact society as a whole and impact directly on individual victims

and survivors, their families and their communities. There are no easy answers – if there were – they would have been identified and implemented them long ago.

The challenges, however complex, must be addressed. In my two years as Minister, I have worked consistently to deliver because I believe it is the solemn responsibility of politicians in London, in Belfast and in Dublin to deliver a framework for dealing with legacy issues. This must ensure equality of access for victims and survivors to whatever truth and justice is available in their case and provide a platform for genuine reconciliation in society.

We have created such a framework in the Stormont House Agreement Legacy Institutions. It is not perfect - nothing is - but it offers a comprehensive approach which will facilitate both families and society in finding whatever healing is possible.

I must express disappointment that, almost two years on from the Stormont House Agreement, this remains unfinished business. Significant progress was made during the Fresh Start talks in elaborating the detailed operation of the Historical Investigations Unit, the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval, the Implementation and Reconciliation Group and the Oral History Archive, but not enough to achieve final agreement in all areas.

Then we faced elections north and south. I was determined that we would not lose momentum during that period - because I am acutely conscious at all times of the continuing needs of victims and survivors. Under my direction, my officials carried out an extensive consultation where they met with 22 groups to hear their perspectives on the institutions and their progress.

My determination remains undimmed and is, if anything, stronger than ever after my experiences in this area over the last few years.

Because behind each statistic from the Troubles is a name and behind that name is family – bereaved, traumatised, scarred and all too often left without any answers. This has not been the case for four years or even 14 but in some cases for over 40 years. While this is perhaps politically understandable given the difficult issues involved it is not acceptable nor is it sustainable.

Our collective inability to find a better way to address individual experiences of loss and horror damages our collective wellbeing and our ability to build the fully reconciled society we all want to see. It is time for all of us to step up.

It is most unlikely the legacy framework will provide all of the answers or that everyone will find comfort or closure as a result of their engagement. Nor am I saying to any family or individual that this is something with which they must engage. I know that life is not that simple and that nothing can, or ever will, repair the loss experienced.

What this framework can offer is an opportunity for a coherent system with which families can engage in a straightforward and timely way. It does not close off options around either prosecution or truth recovery. It establishes a mechanism through the Implementation and Reconciliation Group for engagement on how Northern Ireland can take account of its past in planning and shaping policy for a genuinely shared future. It must also be underpinned by policies and resources which support victims and survivors and others in society who have been traumatised by the horrors of the past.

There are still political differences to be bridged before the institutions can be established. I am pleased that the Secretary of State James Brokenshire has, so early in his term in office, prioritised legacy issues and engagement with the groups working in this area. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State shares my view that there is an urgent need to establish these institutions. So doing would help to fulfil the promise of the Good Friday Agreement which explicitly acknowledges that addressing the needs of victims and survivors is an important part of building a reconciled society.

I welcome the Secretary of State's call for a public dialogue around this which I believe will help us to ensure the institutions are responsive to the needs of those who will use them and allow us to better explain what is planned. Public confidence and that of victims and survivors and their families will be essential to the success of these institutions.

There will be challenging debates and discussions about this and there will be those who have difficulties with some aspects of the institutions. However I would appeal to everyone not to lose sight of what can be achieved and urge that we all stretch ourselves to reach our shared goal of a comprehensive framework to deal with the past.

We will need to find a balance between legitimate national security considerations, including the need to protect life, with the profound requirement for maximum disclosure to families and society. In seeking this, we cannot be blind to the history and context of Northern Ireland which will require a massive effort to build confidence in any system of this nature.

The implementation of the proposals set out by the Lord Chief Justice on legacy inquests would not only engender trust and confidence in our collective capacity to address legacy issues, it would also address the unacceptable delays faced by so many families. There can be no hierarchy of victims within the process.

We cannot and must not say to any bereaved family that their loss, trauma or suffering does not count or is somehow 'less than'. I am also very conscious of those families outside of Northern Ireland who have suffered a loss whether they are in Dublin, Monaghan, London, Warrington, Guilford, Aldershot or elsewhere.

We must be clear that this work is also about society. Northern Ireland is,

thankfully, now a peaceful society, but it is not a fully healed society. The pain of the past – currently ever present in daily politics and media discourse and indeed in policing and judicial systems– is an element of this and it is one which we cannot continue to ignore.

By implementing a comprehensive legacy framework we will, I hope, create a safer space for the hard conversations that need to happen. The aim is not an agreed narrative or –worse still – an exercise in sectarian finger pointing but hopefully an honest exchange from which we can all learn. It will not be easy or comfortable for any of us but if we genuinely want to move forward it is an essential part of the broader reconciliation process.

In recent months I – like many of you – have participated in a number of centenary commemorations and a phrase I encountered in that context has enormous resonance for reconciliation on the island of Ireland. One aim of the commemorative programme in Ireland was to ‘broaden sympathies without having to abandon loyalties’. I think that sums up my vision of reconciliation. It is not about giving up your own identity or beliefs it is about understanding the context of other points of view and respecting that difference.

The commemorations this year have allowed a space to open up for conversations that have been avoided for a century. Different perspectives have been heard, contrasting views debated but all in an atmosphere of respect.

I was proud to lay a wreath in May to commemorate Thomas MacDonagh, a leader of the Easter Rising, and just as proud to lay a wreath in Dublin yesterday to commemorate Tom Kettle who encapsulates so much of the complexity of identity which exists even within nationalism.

Most symbolic of all perhaps was the ceremony at Grangegorman to commemorate the British soldiers who were killed in the Rising and I would like to close with some of my reflections from that day which I think also sum up this gathering here tonight.

“Those of us participating in today’s event are a diverse group of individuals, with different backgrounds, beliefs and aspirations. Such differences do not divide us and need not hinder us from coming together to reflect upon the moments that have shaped our islands’ history. In the century since the events of 1916 we have learned, through painful experience, the importance of mutual respect for the different traditions and multiple narratives across these islands.

“Days like today are an opportunity to broaden our understanding of all the varied influences that contributed to making the Ireland and Britain of today and to demonstrate our respect for all the traditions of these islands. Reconciliation and mutual respect are at the heart of how we approach this Decade of Centenaries and of how we develop the ever stronger relationships that continue to flourish East and West, North and South.”

ENDS