
Keynote address by Minister Flanagan at Fordham University, New York

[Speech](#)

Minister Charles Flanagan, TD - 20/9/16



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Ireland and the European Union in changing times

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President, Fr. McShane ,

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to address you today – as a lawyer myself I am particularly delighted to be a guest of the Fordham’s renowned School of Law and I look forward to sharing my views and those of my government with such a distinguished audience.

Fordham University has always shown itself to be a firm friend of Ireland, with links that stretch as far back as 1841 when Tyrone man Bishop John Hughes founded this great institution.

I’ve been told that since then, 24 of the 29 Presidents of Fordham University have been Irish or Irish-American. Though I suspect that had the 5 other Presidents employed better genealogists, they too might have found their Irish roots. Following a visit to his ancestral home in Co. Offaly a few years ago, President Obama lamented that he hadn’t known of his Irish ancestry when running for office in Chicago at the start of his political career.... So, sometimes these things may be waiting to be discovered. I am delighted that the current President of Fordham, Fr. McShane, can trace his roots to three out of four Irish provinces with roots in Armagh, Louth and Tipperary. He is rare indeed in being an Irish-American in New York without West of Ireland heritage.....

The students of this law school who participate in the summer school held in Ireland each year have also contributed hugely to our connections to one another. In an excellent collaboration with University College Dublin, Queen’s University in Belfast and this fine establishment here in New York, the ties between these colleges and their students, and past students, are proof that this warm relationship is alive and well and will continue to thrive. This is all the more important as it brings valuable understanding of the work for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, a subject I will discuss in further detail shortly.

During this time of geopolitical turbulence and upheaval, many previous certainties must be re-examined. One thing that remains constant is Ireland’s strong, mutually enriching relationship with the members of our diaspora, as evidenced through Fordham’s strong Irish links. We are grateful to everyone who counts themselves as Irish or part-Irish, for their ongoing engagement with our shared nation and their contribution to its cultural vitality and economic development.

The strength of this connection has probably never been more visible than it has been during this year of historical commemorations which were marked not only at home in Ireland but throughout the world. The period 2012-2022 has been designated a “Decade of Centenaries” in Ireland where we commemorate and reflect upon a series of significant events which shaped the century that followed. There has been an emphasis on respect for different traditions as well as shared experiences. 2016 has been the most important year of the decade with events to mark the Centenary of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme later that year.

Over the last nine months in particular, we have engaged in an historical reflection, as we consider what these events have meant for our Irish nation, our Irish culture, and our Irish citizens. But we have also engaged in a geographical reflection, with a global programme of events taking place across the UK, Asia, Australia, Europe, South America and with an outstanding programme here in the US, including

events from San Francisco to Savannah to New York. I know this great city has special links with the 1916 Rising and these connections were recognised by a programme of events under the leadership of our Consulate. Thank you to all of you who took part in these events.

Ireland and the European Union in changing times

Father McShane, in preparing to speak today on the theme of *Ireland and the European Union in changing times*, I took note of the Fordham approach to education and of your own personal priorities as its President. As the European Union and Ireland prepares for a challenging period ahead, there is much to learn from the Fordham ethos. Above all, there will be a need to apply what is emphasised in this University in terms of critical thinking and creative problem-solving.

Perhaps *the* major issue facing Ireland and the EU is the prospect of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union after 43 years of membership. Back in 1973 when the UK joined the then EEC, its trade links to Ireland were such that it would have been unthinkable for both countries not to join together. In the years that have followed, Ireland has been totally transformed, enjoying, by and large, an extremely positive experience as a committed EU Member State. We continue to have a close relationship with the UK but we have opened up to the world, economically and in many other ways and that is important in securing a prosperous future for our people.

I know the lawyers among you will clearly appreciate that the European Union while, fundamentally, a European Peace Project, is best characterised as a 'community of laws'. We are conscious that it will require the finest legal minds in Dublin, London and Brussels to navigate the unknown waters ahead. Our overarching goal is clear: Ireland's future is as a committed EU Member State and we wish to see a strong EU with the strongest possible relationship with the UK.

Prior to the referendum, Ireland was clear that we wished the UK to remain in the EU as our analyses had shown that such an outcome best served our strategic interests. We were careful to be respectful in the debate but when the opportunity arose, we were clear in setting out our perspective and the thinking that informed our viewpoint, particularly when addressing the comparatively large cohort of voters with Irish ancestry or citizenship. However, by a narrow margin the result was otherwise and the UK electorate voted to exit. The decision was a democratic one and we respect that. In the three months since, the UK has been absorbing the outcome. There is a new Prime Minister, Theresa May, and she has appointed a new Cabinet.

The UK exit process is not yet formally legally underway, as the application to leave must be made by the UK government, but three months on from the referendum result, let me share with you some of the Irish government's analysis, approach and actions so far.

Planning for the Referendum

In Ireland, we are veterans of difficult referendums and our contingency planning had been going on for some time before the referendum, though our public focus was on advancing a positive case for a Remain vote.

For about a year leading up to the referendum the government in Ireland engaged in a planning process. Expert reports were commissioned. All relevant government departments were asked to examine the possible impacts of a Brexit vote on their sectors – from foreign affairs to justice to energy, transport, agriculture, trade and so on. State agencies, business representatives, trades unions and other stakeholders were consulted with and kept informed on the government's approach. I briefed my colleagues in Government on an almost weekly basis.

When the disappointing result was announced on 24 June, Ireland was as ready as we could be. When the negotiations for a UK exit begin, they will be between the 27 Member States of the EU on the one hand and the UK on the other once the UK decides to formally apply to exit – generally referred to as "triggering Article 50". It is therefore essential that the unique challenges that Brexit presents to the island of Ireland are well understood in the capitals of Europe.

On the day of the referendum result, I began a round of contacts with each and every one of my EU counterparts which continued throughout the summer months. I made clear that the UK's decision did not affect Ireland's deep commitment to the EU and I set out the challenges that might arise in the context of Northern Ireland, the border, the Common Travel Area between Britain and Ireland and the strong and historic links between our countries.

The Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, as head of government, also spoke extensively to his counterparts including Prime Minister May, Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, President Tusk and many others.

And to illustrate the governmental challenge of this for the United Kingdom itself, I can tell you that before July, I had three UK opposite numbers – their Foreign Secretary, their Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and their Secretary of State for International Development. Now I have five opposite numbers - two new government ministries have been formed, one to manage exiting the EU and the other to work on international trade in the context of the UK being outside the EU.

So as you can see we must not underestimate the scale and complexity of the challenge ahead of us. Ireland's relationship with the UK is composed of many different strands, all of which will be affected by the UK's decision to leave the European Union. These strands include the relationships between the UK and Ireland, between North and South on the island of Ireland, and between the UK and an EU which includes Ireland.

The negotiations themselves will prove challenging to say the least – on the one

hand, the formal exit process set out in Article 50 of the EU Treaty, on the other an even more complex challenge to design a new relationship between the UK and the EU. But both Ireland and the EU have overcome great challenges in the past and I know that we can meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Ireland's priorities

So where does Ireland stand as this process gets underway? The Irish Government is clear on a number of key points.

First, as I've made clear, Ireland remains wholeheartedly committed to our membership both of the European Union and of the Eurozone. While we deeply regret the UK decision to leave the EU, Ireland intends to remain very much at the heart of the European Union.

Secondly, Ireland will continue to serve as a gateway to the EU for foreign investors. I know that American companies are particularly attracted by what Ireland can offer them: an English-speaking base, ease of doing business, a competitive offering, a track record in innovation, and most of all, a highly-educated talented workforce which I'm sure you'll agree is the cornerstone of industry.

Thirdly, our focus for the negotiations will be on:

- Northern Ireland and protecting the peace process;
- retaining the open border with Northern Ireland and preserving the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland;
- the economy and trade;
- and protecting the future of the European Union itself.

Northern Ireland

Turning to Northern Ireland, an area where our US friends can be justly proud of their invaluable contribution to the peace process over many decades now.

While the peace settlement in the North is by now well-established, we can never afford to be complacent. The peace process is just that – a process – that requires ongoing work to protect and preserve what has been achieved since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brokered with the help of Senator George Mitchell.

I have been Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for just over two years now and during that time I have participated in two talks processes in Northern Ireland resulting in two agreements – the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 and the Fresh Start Agreement last November. These talks were needed to stabilise the devolved institutions in Belfast during a period of political fragility. I would like to acknowledge the positive role played by Senator Gary Hart in those talks and his ongoing commitment to supporting peace in Northern Ireland.

I have therefore seen first-hand how the still-delicate political stability in Northern Ireland can be shaken. The Good Friday Agreement provides the framework for our engagement in Northern Ireland and we have worked alongside the UK government and Northern Ireland's political leaders to stabilise the devolved institutions in Belfast and deliver important initiatives. Most recently, last week I and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland signed an international Treaty to establish an Independent Reporting Commission to help tackle the legacy of paramilitarism which continues to plague some vulnerable communities in Northern Ireland. All this progress is very welcome.

Into this environment, Brexit now presents a new and substantial challenge for Northern Ireland. Across the UK as a whole, 52% of voters opted to leave the EU. However, in Northern Ireland, 56% voted to remain in the European Union. The people of Northern Ireland are in a unique position both in the UK and in the EU, entitled as they are to define themselves as British, Irish, or both. This is an important aspect of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and it will have to be accommodated in the final settlement between the EU and the UK. Both the Irish and British Governments agreed that the principles and institutions of this solemn international agreement will be fully respected and protected.

When the UK leaves the EU, Northern Ireland will be the only region in Britain which shares a land-border with another EU member state. The fact that the UK and Ireland are currently both in the EU provides an important stabilising context in which we all live and work together and naturally many people in Northern Ireland are understandably concerned that the leaving the EU would have implications for political stability, reconciliation and prosperity.

One of our key concerns raised by Brexit, is a return to a hard or fortified border dividing North and South. First Minister Arlene Foster, deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, Prime Minister May and Taoiseach Enda Kenny have been unanimous in their view that we must maintain the openness of the border which is enjoyed today. The re-instating of a hard border would have obvious negative consequences for cross-border trade and economic activity as well as adding complication and hardship to people's lives. But the more serious effect would be the symbolic one of resurrecting one of the most potent symbols of our divided history. The Common Travel Area where citizens of Britain and Ireland have enjoyed free movement since the foundation of the Irish State is highly valued on all sides, and maintaining it will be a key priority for the Irish government.

We must be in the business of solutions as we face these challenges and thus the dialogue is firmly underway – between the north and south, between London and Dublin and with our EU partners. The ultimate shape of the settlement between the UK and the EU will be worked out in negotiations between an EU of 27, of which Ireland is an active member, and the UK. We must all work together to

ensure that the benefits of the peace process are protected and safeguarded for future generations. I know that is a view which is shared here in the United States. The US voice, as ever before in relation to Northern Ireland, will be welcome and valuable in the months and years ahead.

The EU and the Wider Global Agenda

Having outlined Ireland's national interests, I must stress that the wider EU and global interests are very much Ireland's interests too. Ireland intends to be a strong and active member of a strong European Union.

Just last week, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, was in Bratislava, where Slovakia hosted a summit of 27 EU leaders – that is all the heads of state or government of the EU's member states except the United Kingdom. The summit very much focussed on the future of the European Union. In his contributions, the Taoiseach made a strong and positive case for the future of the European Union. His vision is of an EU characterised by partnership, peace, and prosperity.

While Brexit is a huge challenge, the reality is that it is just one of a number of issues which the European Union is currently grappling with, and it must be analysed in that context. The European Union is very much citizen-focussed and our commitment to providing jobs and prosperity, safety and security becomes more challenging in the context of mass migration via the Mediterranean basin, the appalling conflict on our borders in Syria, the wider instability across the Middle East and parts of Africa and, of course, the spectre of terrorism. The simultaneous presence of these issues will add an additional layer of complexity to the upcoming Brexit negotiations, and means that they can never be viewed as a "purely economic" matter.

These issues and more obviously require action at a global level too. This, my latest visit to the United States, includes a strong programme at the United Nations, where Ireland has sought and got important leadership roles in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and also in relation to migration and refugees.

Economy and Trade

It is clear, therefore, that current challenges are not just economic. However our economies remain a core concern. We will certainly make economic and trade issues a priority in the upcoming negotiations around the UK's exit from the EU.

Trade between the UK and Ireland is significant: each week over €1.2 billion of goods and services is exchanged between the two islands. Ireland is the UK's fifth largest export market has traditionally been Ireland's largest trading partner for goods and services combined.

However, I am pleased to report while here in New York that, in fact, the United States is overtaking the UK as Ireland's largest trading partner. Meanwhile the Eurozone economies account for twice the goods trade we enjoy with the UK, while we continue to expand on a global scale, especially in Asia. This illustrates the very different trading profile that Ireland now enjoys compared to the early 1970s when Ireland and the UK joined the EEC together.

The UK remains a very important partner and we remain determined to maintain the strong flow of goods and services, both North and South on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. But it is important to point out that our economy is now more diverse much better positioned to meet the trade challenges around Brexit than at any time in the past.

It will be some time before the full consequences of Brexit on the UK economy emerge, but we are very much aware that a downturn in the UK could have negative impacts for us at home. However, the Irish Government is confident of the resilience of our economy. We have put in place the necessary policies to help us adjust to the economic side-effects of Brexit and will continue to do so in the time ahead.

We are well experienced now in dealing with economic challenges, having emerged from the severe economic crash that afflicted Ireland most adversely in 2008. We emerged from that crisis, and through significant hard work, rebuilt an open, attractive and competitive economy.

Just ask one of the 700 US companies who have made Ireland their home and employ 140,000 people between them – they will attest to our strengths!

We will continue to promote Ireland as an attractive location for mobile international investment and for talented people, because those things continue to be true, regardless of the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

There may be certain opportunities for Ireland arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU, and we will naturally seek to maximise these opportunities. Nonetheless, from our perspective, it's clear that the economic interests of Ireland and the UK alike are best served by the UK remaining strong and maintaining a close trading relationship with the European Union.

Conclusion

In concluding my remarks today, I feel it is important to say that I am of course aware that Europe is not alone in facing political change and challenges. We continue to watch the presidential campaign here with great interest and I'm certain that there are many more twists and turns to come before polling day on the 8th November.

The warmth of America's friendship with Ireland was expressed most recently and most visibly through Vice-President Biden's very successful visit in June, but has

also been demonstrated over decades across the political spectrum – visits by Presidents from both sides of the aisle who have sought to connect with their Irish heritage and have created bonds and friendships that have served us all so well over the years.

I am also conscious of the great challenges from the recent past, as brought home to us by the powerful and moving ceremonies to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001. We will never forget those who lost their lives on that fateful day.

Finally, I would like to congratulate Fordham University on its 175th anniversary of learning here in New York. John Hughes' vision to make education the key to unlock the cycle of poverty is an ideal that we can all learn from and one which is at the heart of Ireland's education policy.

As I said at the outset, that drive for critical thinking and creative problem-solving is never more needed than it is today – and we would, of course, welcome the insights of Fordham scholars past and present in this respect.

In the meantime, I look forward to hearing your thoughts and unique perspective on the challenges which lie ahead.

Thank you.