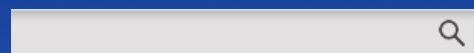


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## Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D., at Londonderry Chamber of Commerce President's Dinner

Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D.,

at Londonderry Chamber of Commerce President's Dinner, Derry, Friday 13 October 2017

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

Thank you, George for the very kind introduction and the invitation to be with you this evening.

It is an honour to be here for the 60th annual president's dinner, although I know that the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce has an even longer and more illustrious history going right back to the nineteenth century.

The very first president was Bartholomew McCorkell, whose family has long been associated with shipping in this city, and he is celebrated for his spirit of public service.

A few years ago a book on this city's port and harbour, 'Atlantic Gateway', discussed how his ship the 'Zared' was the first to use the new dock. His ships provided an invaluable service during the American Civil War, transporting people and supplies, and connecting the Union states with the outside world.

His great ship the 'Minnehaha' - and I'm sure I'm not pronouncing that right - was able to cross the Atlantic no matter what the weather or the season - and was one of the greatest ships of the day. It helped bring thousands of starving people to safety during the Famine and a new life in North America and is now rightly memorialised in the Harbour Museum.

McCorkell and his family believed in serving this city and that same spirit of public service has continued throughout the years, right down to the present day and your current president.

So tonight is an opportunity to celebrate the past as well as look forward to the challenges of the future.

One hundred years ago the poet Francis Ledwidge was killed at the battle of Passchendaele, fighting alongside fellow Irishmen from both north and south. Shortly before his death he was stationed here and he wrote many of his most famous poems, published after his death as 'Songs of Peace', and he was inspired by 'Derry of the little hills' as well as by 'the dreamy ways the herons go'. Perhaps most poignantly of all, he wrote about the need for 'a poet's song, for one whose harp had suffered many a wrong, in the lean hands of Pain'.

This summer Ledwidge was honoured with a blue plaque in this city joining the ranks of so many other great men and women who had similar connections.

But I wonder if we commemorate and then forget have we really commemorated at all?

If we remember the dead and then ignore their message for the living have we really honoured their memory?

I don't pretend to have all the answers. But I know that the best way of honouring their legacy is to try and do things differently, to learn from the past and make the future better.

Informed by the past, we can better prepare for the future, for the sake of the people on both sides of the border.

Examining an area like health brings home to me just what can be achieved when there is a spirit of co-operation.

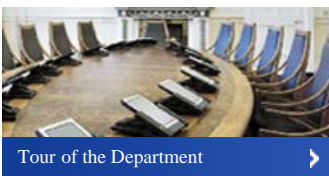
In my former role as Minister for Health I have seen the benefits that working together can bring. Patients on the island of Ireland are benefiting from significant developments in cross-border health care activity over the last decade.

Since May 2016 a cross-border cardiology service gives Donegal patients suffering from a STEMI heart attack direct access to emergency services in Altnagelvin Hospital where previously, they had to be transported to University Hospital Galway, and of course that is only if there was time.

In fact, last weekend, in a private capacity, I had the opportunity to be in this city to attend the Irish Cardiologist Society Dinner in the Guildhall and I had the opportunity to meet some of the people who are now delivering that service to people here in Derry and Donegal, and some of the first people who now have a joint post working part time in Derry and part time



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in Altnagelvin.

And as somebody who was Minister for Health a few years ago, it was great to see that practical, under the radar, low key co-operation that makes such a difference to people's lives and in that case actually saves lives.

Similarly cancer patients from Donegal that are now treated at radiotherapy unit Altnagelvin which the Irish Government helped fund to the tune of about €19 million.

Donegal of course as a county on its own doesn't have the critical mass of population to sustain specialist services such as that.

And in fact, Derry and Tyrone don't either.

But if you take Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Donegal, there is a critical mass of population to deliver services that could only be delivered otherwise in Dublin, Belfast and even Galway.

This is exactly the kind of model of working together that provides a future for this region, and it will be even more important post Brexit.

On the flip side, children from Northern Ireland with congenital heart disease now have their emergency surgery in Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin in Dublin and will attend the new National Children's Hospital now under construction.

Similarly, across this island, sport has shown a great potential to bring us together.

Next month we will find out if we have been successful in our bid to host the 2023 Rugby World Cup in 2023 in Ireland. If we are, it will be a powerful statement about how far we have come as a country, as the whole island joins together to showcase the best of Ireland north and south to the world.

In soccer, it's a little bit different, we have two separate teams. Even in soccer, we have many cross-border connections.

On Monday I received a text message from a DUP politician - whose name you all will know - reminding me that the role of people from Derry had in our success should not be forgotten, what with the manager, the goalscorer, and the man of the match, all from here!

Sport has an incredible way of bringing people together. Why does politics so often have to tear us apart?

Maybe it's because we try to approach them the same way, always keeping score, and never forgetting old rivalries.

Perhaps we should remember the words of the poet Derek Mahon, who also had so many connections here.

In one of his most famous works, set in this city, he spoke of how 'the fog of time receives the ideologue'.

Perhaps we need to embrace the fog of time and not be afraid of it.

We are met at a turning point in our island's history.

Later generations will judge us on how we respond.

The City of Derry has been a leader in showing how we can work together, knowing and understanding our history while at the same time not being prisoners of it. It is up to each generation to define its own history by dealing with the challenges and opportunities of its own time. A shared space is not a lost space and the city of Derry is to be congratulated for its efforts in this area.

While Brexit creates many challenges across the EU, the challenges for the island of Ireland are unique and of a different scale.

Perhaps no part of Europe will be affected by Brexit more than areas such as this one, straddling the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, between Ireland and the European Union.

We will ensure that the particular challenges presented by Brexit on this island are fully understood, right across the European Union.

Our priorities are clear. We must protect the peace process and ensure there are no new barriers to trade or movement of people across our island.

We are committed to safeguarding the Common Travel Area and the associated rights enjoyed by Irish and UK citizens - a commitment that is shared by the UK Government and supported by the EU.

The Irish Government also wants a transitional arrangement in place.

We were among the first to propose it will be needed to allow people and business to prepare for any permanent changes that may take place thereafter.

We also hope that the ultimate outcome of the negotiations will be the closest possible trade and customs relationship between the UK and the EU.

So, if this is ultimately not attainable, then we will seek a unique solution for Northern Ireland, reflecting its unique history and geography. A solution which does not undermine the constitutional settlement in any way, rather one that takes account of

the realities on this island and builds on common regulatory approaches, frameworks and systems.

Next week, I will sit around the European Council table with other Prime Ministers, deal with normal business, and then we will move on to Article 50. Theresa May will be asked to leave. And the 27 will take decisions on Brexit.

We will take stock of the negotiations to date but it seems likely that the decision on whether sufficient progress has been made on three significant issues - citizens' rights, the financial settlement and Irish issues - to allow the Brexit negotiations to proceed to the next phase will now be postponed to December, as sufficient progress has not yet been made.

In my contacts with European Presidents and Prime Ministers, I have received considerable support and understanding for the particular challenges we face.

From Berlin to Brussels, they understand that Northern Ireland is unique, that the peace is young and still fragile, and are willing to make exceptions for Northern Ireland that would not be made for others.

But while I will continue to make the strongest possible case for Northern Ireland, there is no substitute for a Northern Ireland Executive speaking directly for the people of Northern Ireland as your democratically elected voice.

I'll do my best for Northern Ireland, but my mandate is weakened because I don't come from here.

The best way to secure a unique solution for Northern Ireland is to ask for it. There is huge goodwill for Northern Ireland right across Europe. Everyone recognises what has been achieved and what can never be allowed to be lost. So there is a willingness to change the rules and create a flexible solution, a unique solution, one for Northern Ireland, one that may not be available to the rest of the UK or even the rest of Ireland.

Standing only 4 miles from the border, I know the importance of maintaining the freemovement of people, goods and services on this island.

Three border crossings between Donegal and Derry alone account for almost 60% of the 95,000 daily crossings between North and South - representing the day-to-day reality of the cross-border worker or student who travels from Donegal to Derry.

The Irish Government has been unequivocal in its position that Brexit must not give rise to any physical manifestation of a border on this island.

I know that concern about the border extends far beyond the impact on trade and balance sheets, important though that is.

It is also about the emotional impact on communities, North and South, which have become increasingly intertwined over the past two decades.

There is, understandably, heightened concern among communities who are worried about how their rights will be protected, including rights arising from citizens in Northern Ireland retaining EU citizenship after Brexit.

And, above all, there is concern that the reintroduction of a border will be a step backwards, a step in the wrong direction in terms of peace and political stability and the increased prosperity which has underpinned this.

In my political career I have sometimes been criticised for speaking my mind when perhaps it was safer to remain silent.

I have always believed that there is no point in being in politics unless you are prepared to speak up for what you believe is true and what you believe is right.

Better to make a stand and be true to your own values, than remain silent and regret it forever afterwards.

It is why I applaud the courage shown by this Chamber throughout its history. Your Chief Executive, Sinead McLaughlin, deserves a special mention for her courage in articulating consistently the need for progress in bringing together the political parties and re-establishing the Executive. Her eloquence has been notable and I do hope her message has been heard.

We too want to see devolution restored in Northern Ireland and working for the people here; decisions to be made on budgets, health and education, to be made here, not in Northern Ireland.

It is essential that a new power sharing Executive is in place in Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

We also need to have a North South Ministerial Council in place and taking decisions.

Your institutions could play an important role in the Brexit negotiations, particularly as there are structures and mechanisms in place for the devolved administrations to be consulted, and to have their say on legislation being considered in Westminster.

For our part, the Irish Government will discharge our responsibilities as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.

We will do all we can, in Brussels, in London and in Dublin, to achieve the best outcome for everyone on this island - to protect our peace, our freedom, our rights, and our prosperity.

Last week I met with Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, and I have been regular contact with the First Minister in Wales. These are two people with whom I share a common view about the UK remaining in the single market and a customs union.

Now more than ever we need an answer to the question, of who we - and others in Europe - talk to in Belfast?

Who will speak for Northern Ireland and her 1.8 million people?

The clock is ticking and it is later than you think.

We must protect what has been achieved in recent decades through the Peace Process and with the support and facilitation of the European Union.

The Good Friday Agreement and the European Union allows a dynamic and diverse region like the North West – with the city of Derry at its heart – to reach its full potential.

Central to the development of the North West is the dedicated work of this Chamber.

The growing confidence and renewal here has been driven by you and people like you - individuals and businesses who are imaginative, determined and prepared to take risks.

You have greatly contributed to Derry's transformation from conflict, to peace, to growing prosperity.

This growth is a real driver for the development of the whole of the North West with Derry and Letterkenny as its metropolitan centre.

In that context, I am looking forward to meeting the North West Strategic Growth Partnership tomorrow morning to hear firsthand of the work they are doing.

This Partnership, between Derry City and Strabane District Councils, Donegal County Council, and the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive is building on the strong cross border ties in this region to ensure that the North West region can thrive.

It's back by a €2.5 million financial commitment to the North West Development Fund, aimed at maximising the region's potential.

Particularly with Brexit, we need to be more imaginative and more ambitious in developing links across the border to ensure that our border communities can thrive and flourish. There are so many exciting ways we can work together. Through the continued work of North-South bodies and through exciting projects like the Ulster Canal and Ulster greenways and also upgrading the Belfast Dublin rail line we can usher in a new era of partnership and co-operation.

Of course, the North West has firsthand experience of the benefits of EU structural funds and we want to see this continue into the future.

Between them, PEACE and INTERREG have brought nearly €3.5 billion of investment to this region over the last twenty-five years, with a further half billion Euro being invested until 2020. That is not something that should be lost.

Think of the North West Greenways project which will create almost 50 kilometres of new cross-border greenways.

Foreign investments on either side of the border can also bring benefits to the other.

Our forthcoming 10 year capital plan will improve links between Dublin, Donegal and Derry. The Irish Government has already made a very significant contribution to the construction of the A5 dual-carriageway.

The commitment is cast iron and the money has been allocated by the Minister for Finance. I want to see that project go ahead as quickly as possible. I also believe that the completion of routes from Dublin to Derry and Donegal should be a strategic priority for governments both north and south.

We know how important this road will be for the connectivity of Derry and Donegal to the rest of the island and I am looking for this project to be advanced as rapidly as possible.

If Batholomew McCorkell was around today I think he would be proud of all you have done to ensure that Londonderry Chamber of Commerce is at the heart of supporting a creative, innovative, competitive and confident region. You have honoured his legacy and all those who have been involved with the Chamber over its distinguished history.

The late and much missed Seamus Heaney believed that poets like Francis Ledwidge 'faced the choices and moral challenges of their times with solitude, honesty and rare courage.' We need to be inspired by that same spirit of honesty and rare courage.

If we do, then the future here – and the future of the whole island - will be a bright one.

To do that, we need to ensure that the political architecture and physical infrastructure is in place to realise that potential.

The Irish Government shares your goals.

We will invest in your endeavours and we will continue to work with you side by side.

Thank you.

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