

**Dáil (Irish Parliament) Statement by the Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and
Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Dick Spring, T.D.,
on the White House Conference for Trade and Investment in Ireland**

8 June 1995

I welcome this opportunity to make a statement to the House on the White House Conference for Trade and Investment in Ireland which took place in Washington from 24 to 26 May.

Let me say at the outset - and I am sure that members of the Oireachtas who took part in the Conference will agree - that this Conference was a uniquely valuable occasion. It would have been difficult to believe, even a short while ago, that the entire attention and weight of the administration of the most powerful country in the world would be put at the disposal of the people of Ireland for a day. Yet that is what happened.

It is too soon yet to count the strictly economic benefits of the Conference. That will depend essentially on the quality of our follow-up. I believe it has initiated a process which will lead over time to significant additional US investment in Ireland and to a substantial reinforcement of economic ties between the United States and both parts of Ireland. The role of the Conference in promoting awareness of Ireland, and in promoting the culture of dialogue among Irish people, is already beyond question.

The White House Conference was an unprecedented personal initiative on the part of the US President which succeeded richly in the objectives it had set itself. The Conference provided a uniquely prestigious showcase for the attractions of Ireland, North and South, as a location for US investment and business partnerships. Over three days, it kept in sustained focus the case for investment in Northern Ireland and the Southern border counties in the new context created by peace.

Backed by the authority of the President and the most senior members of his Administration, the Conference highlighted dramatically for the US business community the transformation of Ireland's prospects since the ceasefires of last autumn and the reasons why investment here is now a more attractive option than ever before.

I wish to place on record, the Government's deep gratitude to the President for his initiative in holding this Conference. Along with his continuing strong commitment to the peace process, and the other initiatives which he has taken to support the process, the Conference is a striking example of the President's generous concern, and profound sympathy with the needs of the Irish people, North and South. The commitment of Presidential time and effort to the Conference was truly extraordinary and contributed in no small measure to its success. We are deeply in his debt. I hope we will have the pleasure of expressing our appreciation to him more directly when, as I hope, he visits this country before the end of the year.

We also owe a special debt of gratitude to the Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, to the Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown, and to the President's and the Secretary of State's Special Adviser for Economic Initiatives in Ireland, Senator George Mitchell, for the major contributions which they made to both the organisation and execution of this initiative. The US Administration worked tirelessly to translate the President's vision into reality.

The result was a Conference which has ensured unprecedented attention for the benefits of US investment in Ireland, North and South, and the prospect of substantial underpinning of the peace process over the years ahead.

In organisational terms, the Conference was a formidable undertaking. It brought together an attendance of some 1200 people which included senior representatives of the US business sector, Irish companies from North and South and Governmental and political representatives from the United States as well as from the two jurisdictions in Ireland. I believe that, within the practical constraints of a Conference of this kind, a fair balance was achieved by the US organisers in ensuring representation for the key sectors of relevance in both the United States and in both parts of Ireland. The various US Departments involved grappled with the formidable logistical challenges of the Conference with great patience and skill and are to be congratulated on their dedicated efforts.

The primary focus of the Conference was, of course, on the business opportunities which exist for US investors, particularly in the context of the direct access afforded to the European Union market, by investment either in Northern Ireland or in the border counties.

The Irish and British Governments and our respective agencies agreed on a cooperative approach to the presentation of the arguments for such investment. We impressed on the American audience the reasons why it makes sense to consider either Northern Ireland or the border counties for future investment.

At the same time, the Irish Government delegation availed of every opportunity to draw attention to the benefits of investment in the six Southern counties, as did the Oireachtas and Local Government representatives of those counties. In addition, the attractive promotional material which was distributed to participants highlighted the economic, social and environmental advantages of investment in those counties. The concern of Ministers, agencies and officials alike was to ensure full recognition at the Conference of the opportunities for investment in the six border counties, which have suffered greatly over the past 25 years from the consequences of violence and unrest in Northern Ireland.

It is right that, having their efforts overshadowed and hampered by their location in the past, and their vulnerability to the repercussions of the Northern conflict, that the border counties should now be given special attention as we seek to realise the dividends of peace for Northern Ireland.

and the island as a whole. We ensured also that the six border counties were given the necessary focus in the strategic documents produced by the US Department of Commerce.

The main work at the Conference was conducted at the eight different workshops or break-out sessions. The topics covered Business Partnerships, Information Technologies, Food Industries, Tourism, Manufacturing, Tradeable Services, Employment and Community Development. The breakout sessions allowed for direct discussions with panel members representing US companies and organisations with experience in Northern Ireland and the border counties, US government officials and Government, private sector and community leaders from Ireland and Northern Ireland. All the Irish Ministers who attended the Conference participated in these sessions as did representatives from the State Agencies. We were grateful for the testimonials of many US business persons who told the Conference in very forthright terms of the benefits to their particular companies from location in Ireland.

With the primary emphasis of the Conference being on trade and investment, it was fitting that the greatest representation from the border counties was from its business community. The US Commerce Department organised a specially designed "Matchmaker programme" which matched border county companies with American companies in order to explore investment, joint ventures or other forms of commercial relationships.

The "Matchmaker" programme launched at the Conference will be followed up on and developed further. I believe it to be a very positive initiative which can play a very significant role in directing more US inward investment to the border counties.

A major aim of the Conference was to demonstrate to US companies that sustained peace is dramatically improving business opportunities on the island of Ireland, and, particularly in Northern Ireland and the border counties. I believe that this objective has been fully achieved. The case for US investment in Ireland on grounds of economic self-interest alone has also been compellingly reinforced by the Conference. US business representatives who attended will have taken away with them the clearest possible sense of the merits of Ireland, North and South, as a location for their investments.

The Government now looks forward to active follow-up to the Conference in the form of investment missions in Northern Ireland and the border counties in the individual sectors identified for priority attention.

Following on the discussions I had at the Conference with the US Secretary of Commerce, Ron Brown, we have already engaged in ensuring the necessary momentum in the follow-up to the Conference.

We have already had the benefit of consultations with the US Assistant Secretary of Commerce, Chuck Meissner, who visited Dublin immediately after the Conference. We look forward to

fuller discussions with Senator Mitchell when he visits this country within a few weeks time. Clearly the visit by President Clinton which is planned for later this year will afford a major opportunity to assess the outcome of the Conference and the prospects for converting the opportunities identified into real and lasting investment on the ground.

Beyond the strict business emphasis of the Conference, there was a broader political dimension which contributed greatly to its success. As US Commerce Department Assistant Secretary Chuck Meissner remarked during his visit to Dublin last week, this was "an economic conference that turned into a political success". In this case, good economic endeavor also proved to be good politics. The Conference brought together under one roof, what I believe was an unprecedented span of Irish political and economic opinion. It proved how readily even entrenched barriers to dialogue can fall away where there is agreement on the common goal of enhancing the welfare of all the people of this island, the goal which united, I believe, every single participant at the Conference.

The extensive informal contacts which took place between the participants from North and South on the margins of the Conference facilitated an invaluable political dialogue of an informal nature whose repercussions, I believe, will be felt for some time to come on this side of the Atlantic. As I said, I believe the Conference enhanced significantly the culture of dialogue, which is so important to all of us.

I personally had the benefit of informal meetings with a wide range of political representatives and found this to be among the major benefits of the Conference. It was gratifying to register in these contacts the extent of common ground which exists between the various traditions in Ireland both on the economic business of the Conference and on wider issues. There is much to be built on here and I look forward to further exploration of this common ground in bilateral discussions with the various parties over the coming months.

Progress in the economic field has an enormous contribution to make to the goal of achieving a lasting peaceful and political accommodation in Northern Ireland. While there are of course deep divisions on political matters in Northern Ireland, there are few who will contest the view that economic co-operation between the two parts of Ireland makes sound common sense.

I would like also to pay tribute to the members of the Oireachtas from all sides of the House, and particularly from the border counties, who participated with great commitment and dedication, in this historic occasion.

The White House Conference for Trade and Investment in Ireland marked the beginning of a longer term process aimed at converting the potential of the peace process into lasting economic and social progress in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

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Again, as I stated in Washington, one cannot judge the harvest on the day seed is planted. The amount of information and contacts engendered by the Conference will need time to digest and analyse.

I believe that the Conference helped to generate, in the first instance, an increased awareness among American companies of the potential benefits for investment, trade, joint ventures and other business relationships in both parts of the country.

The follow-up process to this unique Conference will continue the close cooperation on economic matters between the US, British and Irish Governments. For our part, Departments and State agencies will continue their close involvement in the process to ensure the necessary back-up for companies in the border region.

I told my audience in Washington, that now is an exciting time to be involved in Ireland as the creative skills and energies of people on both parts of the island rise to the challenge of shaping a new and peaceful future. The advent of peace in Northern Ireland can only enhance this situation further. I did not seek charity in Washington, I offered opportunity, an opportunity now more attractive than ever.

The case we put forward in Washington was not based on sentiment, but, rather on opportunity for profit for all potential investors. In my speech to the Conference, I made it clear that we were not asking business representatives to sail into uncharted waters or expose themselves or their shareholders to unwarranted risk.

Ireland already offers a very profitable location for US business. The presence of more than 450 US companies who have chosen to locate here is evidence of this. In particular, companies in the electronics, healthcare, pharmaceutical and financial services sectors are prominent amongst those who are prospering from their location in Ireland.

As President Clinton pointed out, benefits accrue on both sides of the Atlantic. The US enjoys a growing trade surplus with Ireland, now amounting to nearly \$1 million dollars. The US corporate presence in Ireland sustains thousands of domestic jobs in the US itself, since, overwhelmingly, Irish involvement is the beach-head for expansion into new markets, rather than displacement of existing patterns.

Let me reiterate once again that the White House Conference was an outstanding expression of President Clinton's personal support and commitment to the peace process in Ireland. For that he deserves the appreciation and admiration of all peoples on this island. His visit later this year will provide us with the opportunity to let him see these feelings for himself.
