



**Building trust across the world's divides**

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Most state visits by royalty and presidents seldom make it to the history books. However, in recent years, two state visits can truly be called historic. The first of these is the visit of the Queen of England to Ireland in 2011 and the second is the visit of the President of Ireland to Windsor in 2014. Both of these visits have opened new chapters in history.

Why should we understand that this is so? There are many reasons why these visits are historically significant, but the following three are the most obvious.

### Historical significance:

**Reason No: 1** Because of her status as a constitutional monarch many political pundits consider that the Queen has little say on how she should act on state occasions. Her conduct is dictated by her government ministers. However the Queen has not reigned for 62 years without learning how to bend the rules.

Here in Ireland two recent Presidents, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, both constrained by the Irish Constitution, succeeded in stretching the rules until nearly fracturing them. It seems perfectly clear that the Queen regards relationship with Ireland and its transformation for the better as an important legacy, probably the most important legacy of her reign.

There is no doubt that she oversaw each detail of the Irish President's visit as Justine McCarthy writes in today's *Sunday Times*, 'A spokesman for the Queen told how she had taken a keen personal interest in the visit, including analysing the itinerary. Hosting Michael D Higgins and his wife at Windsor Castle, the Queen's home, was one personal touch, far removed from the austere, formal, and often chilly rooms at Buckingham Palace.'

Declan Kiberd, a distinguished scholar, writes in the *Irish Times*, 'For the current English Queen, Ireland was indeed the Unconscious, a sort of "secret garden", locked and impenetrable, like those gardens which tease the minds of girls in classic children's novels of the Victorian and Edwardian period. Elizabeth Windsor had visited half the countries on the planet, but was forbidden by security officials from entering the ultimate mystery of the neighbouring island, home of those horsey people whose world she loved. By the time she prevailed against more cautious advisers, she was in her 80s; but she had a high old time here, which is all Irish hosts ever ask of a visitor.'

The Queen was determined that the President's visit to England would be a triumph equal to her visit to Dublin three years before. In President Higgins she had a worthy companion. John Grace in the *Guardian* wrote, 'Unlike Bercow, what Higgins lacks in stature, he more than makes up for in presence. He is one of those rare politicians who naturally inspires trust in an audience: a man for whom the bullshit radar can be switched off. Academic, poet, author, as well as statesman.'

**Reason 2** concerns London's changed relationship with Ireland. From 1922 London's primary relationship with Ireland was one with the Protestant unionist community in Northern Ireland. Today the primary relationship is London/Dublin.

**Reason 3** concerns Martin McGuinness and his presence at the dinner in Windsor Castle. Dublin governments, and especially one led by Fine Gael, tend to consider Ireland as consisting of only 26 counties. The Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, was at the dinner but Martin McGuinness was also at the dinner. He represents a 32-county Ireland, and he stated this as he accepted his invitation to Windsor Castle.

*Dr Roddy Evans, 13 April 2014*

**NOTE: Individuals of many cultures, nationalities, religions, and beliefs are actively involved with Initiatives of Change. These commentaries represent the views of the writer and not necessarily those of Initiatives of Change as a whole.**



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