



**OSCE Chairmanship Conference
'Shared Future: building and sustaining peace'
The Northern Ireland case study
27 April 2012, Dublin, Royal Hospital Kilmainham**

Opening Address by the Tánaiste

Mr President,
Ministers,
Secretary General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure, as Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE, to welcome you to Dublin for this conference. I am pleased to have here today representatives of the participating States, the Partners for Co-operation, the Parliamentary Assembly, the OSCE Institutions, Members of the Oireachtas and other international representatives. You are all very welcome.

This is the first time we have hosted an international conference on the subject of the Northern Ireland peace process. It is fitting that we have chosen our Chairmanship of the OSCE – an Organisation which has conflict prevention and resolution at its core – to do so.

We have entitled the conference 'Shared Future: Building and Sustaining Peace'. I hope that, by presenting the experience of achieving a peaceful

political settlement in Northern Ireland as a case study, we can illustrate that shared futures can be forged from seemingly intractable situations.

As we gather in the beautiful surroundings of the Royal Hospital, Ireland's history of conflict cannot be far from our thoughts. This complex was built as a home for retired soldiers at the end of a particularly bloody 17th century. Our island has experienced significant violent conflict since that time, but we have never lost our desire to pursue a peaceful path.

Today, we meet in this historic place in happier circumstances. Following decades of distrust, peace has been achieved in Northern Ireland, relationships within our island have been transformed and relations between Ireland and Britain have never been stronger.

The aim of this conference is to share with you how this has been achieved, and to give expression to aspects of this island's recent past that may be of relevance to an international audience.

At the outset, I would like to thank President Martti Ahtisaari, a true friend of Ireland and Nobel Laureate, who will act as Moderator for our conference today. He brings a unique experience of conflict resolution and mediation to bear on these discussions, including his own contribution to the peace process here in Ireland.

I would also like to thank our speakers, many of whom were directly involved in the peace process and continue to work for reconciliation in Northern Ireland. I am delighted that we are able to draw on their vast experience and I warmly welcome them to Dublin.

It is my particular pleasure to welcome the speakers for this morning's panel. The joint presence here by First Minister, Peter Robinson, and Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, is eloquent testimony to what can be achieved with peace and through leadership. The presence of Owen Paterson, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is testimony to the warmth and closeness in the bilateral relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is also a great pleasure to welcome to Dublin the Secretary General of the OSCE, Lamberto Zannier.

I am also delighted to welcome another great friend of Ireland, Senator George Mitchell, who will join us later this afternoon. Both as chair of the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement and in his subsequent roles, Senator Mitchell has made an outstanding contribution to the cause of peace and I am pleased he will share his thoughts with us.

This promises to be an interesting and thought-provoking conference. The opening session is being web-streamed live and I am delighted to welcome students from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek who are joining us today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

William Butler Yeats, in his poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* wrote "peace comes dropping slow." That was the case for Northern Ireland, as for so many other conflicts. The Good Friday Agreement, whose fourteenth anniversary has just passed, and its related Agreements, was the culmination of more than thirty years of intensive efforts by successive Irish and British governments, as well as by the political parties in Northern Ireland, at bringing peace to the Island of Ireland.

The key fundamentals of the Good Friday and St Andrew's Agreements were consent for constitutional change, commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means, stable inclusive partnership government, respect for equality and human rights and a balanced institutional accommodation of the key relationships on and between these islands. They have collectively contributed to the peace we see today. This is a success story, one of which all involved can be rightly proud. Our combined efforts culminated in the great achievement of peace, with the opportunity to build prosperity.

We have seen incredible progress in Northern Ireland. The Institutions of the Agreements are now firmly bedded down. Last May saw the completion of the first uninterrupted term of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We are well on the way to increasingly normalised politics.

The achievements are many. An end to large scale violence that had seen more than 3,000 people killed. Normal life resumed for the people of Northern Ireland and for people living in border areas in the Republic. A State Visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II which surpassed the expectations of even the most optimistic observers, copper-fastening our relationship with Britain. A generation of young people in Northern Ireland that, thankfully, know of the Troubles only as history.

While no two peace processes are the same, it is nonetheless useful to look at aspects of our experience in Northern Ireland that could have application in other contexts.

At the outset, I wish to emphasise that peace is a process rather than an event. It requires ongoing and painstaking work, particularly after an agreement has been signed. Work that must be based on mutual trust and partnership, on an ability

to step into the shoes of the other and to view things from the other's perspective.

As many of you will be aware, the Agreements recognised the particular situation facing Northern Ireland, where three sets of relationships needed to be addressed. One strand of work dealt with internal Northern Ireland issues, through a power sharing arrangement between the two traditions. Another strand addressed relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic, through a North South Ministerial Council to develop consultation, cooperation and action on an all-island and cross border basis. A third strand dealt with the British-Irish relationship, to promote harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships across these islands.

During the negotiations, ground rules reflecting shared understandings were very important. One was that “nothing will be finally agreed on any of the tracks until everything was agreed in the negotiations as a whole”. Another was that talks would proceed on the basis of “sufficient consensus” so that where unanimity was not possible; any decision would have to be able to command a clear majority in both communities in Northern Ireland.

The mutual trust and good faith required to underpin any peace agreement was painstakingly established in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government contributed to this building of trust, but ultimately it had to be built by the people and their elected representatives in Northern Ireland.

The cessation of violence by all parties is a prerequisite for a long term peace agreement, accompanied as in the case of Northern Ireland by a normalisation of security arrangements and practices. The ending of large scale violence was achieved, albeit in fits and starts, in line with overwhelming public support.

The recognition that violence could not succeed was accompanied by an acceptance that neither could a purely security solution succeed on its own.

Today, attacks by dissident republican paramilitaries are perpetrated by a tiny minority who have no mandate from any one in Northern Ireland. The efforts of a small few who would seek to drag Northern Ireland back to the past will not be allowed to succeed.

Other vital elements for this peace agreement included the need to comprehensively address the full range of important and sensitive issues. However, there may be value in leaving some contentious issues until a later stage, if the parties are not ready. In the case of Northern Ireland, devolution of responsibility for policing was not fully addressed until the parties were ready to deal with it and an external body (the Patten Commission) had made recommendations on police reform. The sensitive issue of decommissioning of paramilitary weapons was dealt with through an Independent International Commission.

The Agreements built on previous negotiations, going back to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1972. Accordingly the Agreement developed and refined previous areas of consensus.

Open and transparent communication with the parties, sometimes via small informal groups, was very important. Ambitious timetables and programmes of meetings ensured that momentum was maintained. The involvement of the international community was crucial. That support continues to this day and remains vital as we move forward in consolidating the peace which was so hard won. The United States, the European Union and others supported the peace process throughout. President Clinton played a vital role in persuading key

players to remain at the table at a critical point. Others, such as President Ahtisaari and Senator George Mitchell, worked selflessly to ensure that the Peace Process remained on track.

Aside from dealing with political challenges, Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe and throughout the world, has experienced the difficulties associated with the economic downturn. However, thanks to the effective operation of the Assembly and the Executive, locally elected and accountable politicians can and are working to address the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

Effective North-South economic cooperation continues to be a priority for the Irish Government. In these times of economic uncertainty, the impetus for cooperation in order to attract investment, improve infrastructure and increase synergies by taking an all-island approach is greater than ever. Indeed after we address this Conference, I will join Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness for discussions on our ongoing economic cooperation.

Despite all the progress we have made, work is ongoing. As highlighted by the recent Peace Monitoring Report from the Community Relations Council, addressing the divisions in society is a priority and a challenge for all. In order to secure the enormous potential which exists, it is important that we do not lose sight of the work that is yet to be done. Genuine, sustainable reconciliation will require painstaking work over the coming years. We still need to support reconciliation and peace building activities, particularly those pursued by community and voluntary sector organisations.

The Irish Government will continue to work closely with the British Government, the political parties in Northern Ireland and other actors to ensure the enormous achievements of peace and stability are sustained and embedded.

This is not easy – politics never is. There have been challenges and difficulties. However, politicians in Northern Ireland, among them the First Minister and Deputy First Minister who will address us shortly, have demonstrated an ongoing ability to persevere and work through issues. Both have made significant recent moves to challenge their respective communities to continue their efforts at working more closely together. This work must be built upon if the people of Northern Ireland are truly to have the peaceful, shared and prosperous future to which they all aspire.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have a rich subject matter to discuss today. I am sure there will be lively and open discussions in the course of the day.

Across the OSCE area, we are dealing with conflicts and the legacy of conflict. As we know, these are not easy issues to deal with. I commend the efforts of those engaged in the work of finding lasting political settlements, many of whom are here today. As Chairperson-in-Office, I am fully committed to doing what I can to advance these processes. I also believe it is the responsibility of we, who have known peace, to share our experience with you. Some of what you will hear today may be specific to the circumstances here in Ireland. However, I believe there are some universal experiences which can be of resonance in the OSCE area and elsewhere and that this may contribute to advancing the search for lasting peace.

I hope you will leave with a sense of encouragement. Ireland's story is one of the impossible made possible; I hope it is one that will inspire those striving for peace beyond this island.

But before I hand you back to our Moderator, I am pleased to introduce a video message from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to our conference. The United States has been a firm and steadfast friend of this country for generations, a relationship based on the solid pillars of family ties and common values. Successive American administrations have made an invaluable contribution to the cause of peace in Ireland, at times intervening to encourage those involved to ‘go the extra mile’ for peace, as President Clinton put it. It is my great pleasure today to see this unique relationship reaffirmed by a message from another great friend of Ireland, Secretary Clinton.

Thank you.