



Department of Foreign Affairs Press Release

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**Remarks by Minister of State, Tom Kitt T.D., at the National Europe
Centre, Australian National University Canberra**

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It is always a special pleasure for an Irish Government Minister to visit Australia, a country which for over two centuries has been a destination for thousands of Irish emigrants whose contribution to Australia has been recognised and appreciated.

I understand that some 30% to 40% of Australians today are of Irish heritage and the bonds of kinship between us continue to go from strength to strength.

It is no surprise then that our outlook and attitudes are very similar. In our political systems, we both put people, not institutions first. We both take success with a pinch of salt unless it is rugby, of course, where I am glad to inform you - if you have not already heard - that Ireland beat England at Twickenham in recent weeks!

I am very happy to be able to bring you that excellent news, particularly at this time of year when the Irish everywhere traditionally celebrate pride in our nationality and heritage, and to have this opportunity to update you on recent developments at home in the peace process.

The strength of the bonds between Ireland and Australia are especially evident in the support and encouragement Australia has given us for our ongoing work to establish a just and lasting peace in Northern Ireland. I would like, in particular, to mention the support given by Foreign Minister Downer, who met with our Foreign Minister, Brian Cowen on his visit to Ireland last January.

I am also happy to have this opportunity to thank Australia for your contribution to the International Fund for Ireland over many years, and your continuing engagement in the Fund's work through the active participation of Ambassador Herron as your Observer for the Fund. The International Fund for Ireland supports reconciliation and economic regeneration in NI and the border counties, and continues to play a key role in underpinning the peace process by addressing disadvantage and promoting mutual understanding.

A second fund, the Australian Ireland Fund, also plays an important part through supporting projects such as the Northern Ireland Children's Enterprise, which provides young people on both sides of the community in Belfast a neutral venue called 'Australia House' to come together, often for the first time, to form friendships. This Fund has also helped establish the Chair of Modern Irish Studies at the University of New South Wales which helps to enrich the understanding of Irish issues in the wider context. This work of reconciliation and mutual understanding is, of course, vital in helping communities to break away from the sterile dissensions of the past, to begin to work together to create a new and better future for all.

As many of you know, the political landscape of the island of Ireland was changed forever, and for the better, by the historic Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Despite the inevitable challenges, we have made much progress in our work of implementing the Agreement since then.

The Agreement represents an accommodation that protects and promotes the identities and rights of all political traditions, groups and individuals. No one is asked to yield their cherished convictions or beliefs. Everyone is asked to respect the views and rights of others equal to their own.

Perhaps the clearest sign of this progress has been the fact that recent years - while far from perfect - have been the most peaceful in most of our memories.

We have also, for example, seen a very encouraging start to a new policing service in Northern Ireland, which has had considerable success in gaining the support of all parts of the community. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has a vital role to play in building trust within and between communities, particularly those emerging from years of conflict. The police service is gradually becoming more representative of all the communities it serves and we continue to urge all parts of the community in Northern Ireland to support the new arrangements.

The Irish and British Governments continue to work closely together and we have also seen many new and positive partnerships develop, within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland, North and South, and with our neighbours in Britain.

In the last six years we have also seen an unprecedented level of co-operation between both parts of the island of Ireland through the North South Ministerial Council. The Council has been developing new and fresh all-island approaches to a number of practical issues such as infrastructure and telecommunications.

These are the types of initiatives which demonstrate more clearly than any words could the tangible and practical benefits to be gained by people, North and South, when differences are put aside and all work together.

The North/South Bodies established under the Agreement are now important providers of public services throughout the island of Ireland, employing some 700 staff.

Just one example of the benefits which these bodies provide is the success of Tourism Ireland, the body which encourages overseas visitors to sample our hospitality throughout the island. Tourism Ireland's latest estimates suggest that the overall number of tourists visiting the island grew by 4.5% last year, with visitors to Northern Ireland up 11%. Here in Australia, I am glad to say that Tourism Ireland has recently launched an Australia website to enable you to stay up to date on special packages and festivals in Ireland, and hopefully interest those who have not already visited to do so.

Through our work in the British-Irish Council, we have also seen excellent co-operation continue to develop with near neighbours, including with the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. Through the British-Irish Council, we have agreed a number of areas of practical co-operation on issues of mutual concern which can make a real difference to everyday life, including the environment and matters relating to social inclusion.

The success of these areas gives us a glimpse of the many opportunities ahead when we work together as partners.

It is partnership, of course, which is at the core of the Agreement and issues about the principle and practice of partnership are at the heart of the discussions currently taking place.

Following the elections in Northern Ireland last November, the two Governments encouraged the parties to find a way to secure the re-establishment of devolved government and a functioning Assembly as quickly as possible. At the same time, we also put in place arrangements for the

scheduled review of the operation of the Agreement. Parties subsequently submitted their views to the Governments, and discussions on the operation of the Agreement to date are currently underway.

As one of the Ministers directly involved in the current discussions, I want to make it clear that the review is not in any sense a renegotiation of the Agreement. The fundamental principles underlying it remain steadfast.

These Principles include a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means and the rejection of violence or the threat of violence. We are determined that there will never again be a return to the tragedies of the past.

Other fundamentals of the Agreement include respect for human rights and equality of opportunity, and the promotion of inclusive, cross-community government, as well as the need for a new beginning to policing, which I mentioned earlier, reform of the criminal justice system and the normalisation of security arrangements on the ground.

The Irish Government firmly believes that these principles, taken together as a balanced whole, represent the best opportunity to secure lasting peace and prosperity. The full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement remains the goal of the Irish and British Governments and we will continue to make every effort to achieve this.

The Agreement is the historic result of many long hours, weeks and indeed years of complex and often difficult negotiations. It includes the elements essential to securing a better future, while respecting the differences of each tradition and the diversity of cultures on the island of Ireland.

In short, the Good Friday Agreement remains the template for securing sustainable peace in Northern Ireland. If there had been a better way we

would have found it.

Despite the successes of the last six years, however, we have also run into some difficulties, and we are now redoubling our efforts to resolve the outstanding issues so that the Agreement can function at its best, as we intended.

I am glad to have this opportunity to speak to you at this very interesting time in the history of the process. Whatever the origins of the problems, all now share responsibility for ensuring that every effort is made to resolve them and move forward. Above all, all sides must focus on rebuilding the trust and confidence needed to ensure that the momentum for change we have built in recent years can continue apace.

The Irish Government's goals are clear. We want to fully implement the Agreement and to see it deliver its promise of a stable, inclusive and peaceful society. We want an immediate and definitive end to paramilitarism, no matter what its cause or origin. We want to see devolved Government restored, operating on an inclusive basis and working for the benefit of all the people.

We want full and open dialogue with and between unionists and nationalists. In this context we welcome the recent engagement between the Irish Government and the Democratic Unionist Party which is currently the dominant political force within unionism. We want to broaden and deepen that engagement in the best interests of all of the people on the island.

Outside of the immediate political context, both Governments also have responsibilities to ensure, as far as possible, that the non-devolution aspects of the Agreement including equality, human rights and the mandated reforms of the policing service and the criminal justice system continue to be implemented in a vibrant and pro-active manner for the benefit of the whole community in

Northern Ireland.

Viable and sustainable partnership in Northern Ireland needs to be constructed within a framework of equality and mutual respect.

As the Taoiseach said recently, there can be no half-way house between violence and democracy, nor can there be any comfortable resting place between exclusion and partnership.

For the republican movement – and, indeed, for the loyalist paramilitaries - that means bringing closure for once and for all to paramilitarism. It also means absolute commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

For unionism it means irrevocably signing up to total partnership based on the inclusion of all parties whose electoral mandate gives them a right of participation.

We believe that the resolution of these apparently simple, yet politically fraught, issues will be the key to a new era of progress which will result in a win-win situation for all. We have already had an exciting glimpse of what can be achieved and know the breadth of the great possibilities that can come about when we all work together in the spirit of co-operation and friendship to overcome challenges.

We believe we can meet the challenges, and I am happy to assure you that the Irish Government intends to continue until we succeed. The support and encouragement of our friends here in Australia is much appreciated as we continue with this vital work.

Thank you