

Speech by Minister Martin to Ireland Funds Global Young Leaders Conference

19/06/2010

Opening speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Micheál Martin, T.D. to the Ireland Funds Global Young Leaders Conference, Farmleigh, 19 June 2010

Last September, at this same venue, the Government convened a unique gathering of leading members of the Irish Diaspora along with key domestic political and business figures.

The inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum was conceived with two overriding objectives- to identify ways in which the Irish at home and abroad could work together to assist with our economic recovery; and to develop a greater strategic relationship between Ireland and leading members of our Diaspora.

The Forum was widely regarded as a significant and transformative event.

It has delivered on both objectives- we have taken forward and implemented many of the proposals which emerged; and there has been an upsurge in the nature and extent of the engagement between Ireland and the global Irish.

In planning the Forum and taking forward its subsequent work programme, we have been fortunate to have the strong support and assistance of the Ireland Funds. Many of the Funds' leading supporters played a constructive role during the Forum itself and have continued this positive engagement in the period since.

I would like to pay special tribute to Lorretta Brennan Glucksman for her assistance and for her longstanding and unstinting commitment to the development of a peaceful and prosperous Ireland.

Implementing a successful Diaspora strategy can only be achieved by Government in close cooperation with our communities abroad.

In pursuing our objectives in this priority area, we are fortunate indeed to have the benefit of a strong and enduring partnership with the Ireland Funds:

Your organisation has long recognised the enormous resource that is the global Irish and the exciting opportunities it provides;

You have been an invaluable partner in our efforts to build lasting peace and reconciliation on this island;

You have built a global network of highly influential individuals and orientated them towards constructive engagement with this country;

And you are now regarded rightly as a world leader in philanthropy and Diaspora engagement.

Young Leaders

One theme which featured prominently during last year's Forum was the need for greater engagement with the next generation of global Irish leaders and the importance of forging links between these leaders and their counterparts in Ireland.

Today's meeting represents a vital contribution towards achieving this objective. I warmly commend all those who have embraced this opportunity by travelling to Ireland from the US, Britain and elsewhere, as well as those who are based here in Ireland.

We have seen the Ireland Funds Young Leaders grow as an organisation from their early beginnings in Boston in 1991, to a vibrant network of more than 5,000 members in cities across the United States and, increasingly, worldwide.

Though your greatest accomplishments are no doubt yet to come, the Young Leaders have already achieved much. You have energetically taken up the philanthropic tradition of the Ireland Funds, supporting organisations like Barretstown, Habitat for Humanity, Peace Players International, the Special Olympics, and many more great causes.

I would like to also commend the emphasis put on personal mentoring – allowing the Young Leaders to benefit from the experience and contacts of the established members of the Ireland Funds. This has simultaneously helped Young Leaders advance professionally, while embedding the ethic of wider social responsibility and affinity with Ireland which has characterised the Ireland Funds since its foundation.

Networks like the Young Leaders take their place alongside a spectrum of organisations working to promote and deepen those business, cultural and personal links between us and our Diaspora.

I am particularly pleased to also welcome here today representatives of Irish Network USA, including its Chairperson, Aoife Butler. I know that this new and growing professionals network already collaborates with the Young Leaders on the ground in cities across the US. That kind of cooperative approach – linking our efforts, expanding our networks – is the only way we will mobilise the real potential of our global community.

The Global Irish

Any discussion of harnessing the Irish Diaspora for the 21st Century must commence with a recognition of how some 70 million people around the world can today trace their ancestors to this island. The modern global Irish family emerged from the generations of Irish emigrants who left Ireland out of necessity. Though many carved new and successful lives for themselves abroad, the emigrant experience was often one characterised by hardship, loneliness and considerable personal sacrifice.

I am therefore pleased that, over the past six years, the Government has been able to provide over €60million to support those Irish emigrants abroad who continue to experience difficulties and to ensure that our communities have the necessary infrastructures in place to remain vibrant for the foreseeable future. The Ireland Funds have also recognised the importance of reaching out to the more vulnerable members of our overseas communities through your 'Forgotten Irish' campaign.

Together we have made a difference in the quality of life experienced by thousands of Irish people abroad, particularly the elderly and most vulnerable. In doing so, we honour the experience and legacy of generations of emigrants.

As part of our commitment to building on their legacy, the Government has taken a broad and inclusive approach when it comes to defining our global community. The Irish Diaspora is not limited to Irish citizens living abroad or to those who have activated citizenship. Instead, it encompasses all those who believe they are of Irish descent and feel a sense of affinity with this country.

This is powerfully reflected in Article 2 of the Irish Constitution which now states that "*the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage*". It was entirely appropriate that this amendment was included as a consequence of the Good Friday Agreement- a landmark development in Irish history that the Irish abroad, including the Ireland Funds, did so much to help achieve.

There are many in this room whose Irish family connections date back several generations and who may not therefore qualify for Irish citizenship. However, your presence here today and ongoing commitment to this country is a powerful testament to the enduring draw of our common heritage. I believe it is essential that we in Ireland value and affirm the validity of this sense of Irishness felt by so many people abroad.

I have therefore decided to proceed with the introduction of a Certificate of Irish Heritage which will be available to those of Irish descent who do not qualify for citizenship. It is expected that this new initiative will be operational later this year.

Forum Follow Up

Since last year's Forum, extensive efforts have been taken by the Government and the private sector to advance the various initiatives that emerged from its deliberations and to further enhance the practical connections between the Irish at home and abroad.

A Progress Report published in March contains specific updates in respect of a wide range of initiatives in areas as diverse as innovation; greentech; Diaspora engagement; culture, financial services; tourism, energy and food.

As part of this follow up process, the Government has also provided over \$3million for a landmark Irish Arts Centre in New York and significant funding for new initiatives such as the Irish Technology Leadership Group in Silicon Valley and a Farmleigh Fellowship Graduate Programme in Asia.

The broad economic policies that were advocated by many participants were reflected significantly in Budget 2010. The Farmleigh follow-up process has also assisted other work underway across Government, including the implementation of our strategy for a new *Smart Economy*.

While the range of practical ideas that are now being implemented are significant in themselves, I believe that the lasting legacy of the Forum will be the manner in which it generated a heightened level of awareness of the importance of the Ireland-global Irish relationship.

The Forum created an invaluable network of successful business figures across the globe who now feel that they have a stake in delivering renewed economic growth in Ireland.

It demonstrated that in this modern globalised world, the reach, power and influence of so many members of the Irish Diaspora can provide Ireland with an important competitive edge.

Our communities abroad, through organisations such as the Ireland Funds, have long understood the inherent value and importance of the relationship between Ireland and its Diaspora. However, perhaps we in Ireland, across all sectors, tended at times to take the relationship for granted or were slow to appreciate its full potential. The energy, commitment and sense of innovation generated at last year's Forum fundamentally changed perceptions here- a change that I believe is irreversible.

There is now widespread acceptance that a small country like ours must maximise the potential of all sources of 'soft power', of which our Diaspora is a prime example. The Government has, therefore, moved quickly to establish a new Global Irish Network made up of those invited to Farmleigh and other Irish business leaders abroad.

A series of valuable regional meetings of this network have taken place so far this year in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Middle East and I intend to convene a further such meeting for US based members in New York in November.

I am delighted that the Ireland Funds and its supporters have played a central role in this development which is designed to complement the work of organisations such as yours and will provide an important mechanism for building on the work begun at Farmleigh.

The new generation of the global Irish family have a critical role to play in this process of deepening and strategic engagement. In this globalised world of mass and easy communication, the range of demands and opportunities which compete for the attention of our young people are considerable.

It would be easy and understandable for this and coming generations of the global Irish to regard their Irish connection as a positive, but essentially passive dimension to their lives- as a legacy that helps explain who they are, rather than one which can actively contribute to their future achievements.

The Government's Diaspora strategy and the work of the Ireland Funds seeks to ensure that all of us, at home and abroad, see our future as a shared one. As one where our common Irish connection gives us a unique advantage that can deliver practical win-win results for Ireland and the individual members of our Diaspora.

The Young Leaders, and other young networks abroad, have recognised and embraced this powerful concept. Targeted networks with a clear remit and focus are the key mechanism through which the aspiration of greater Diaspora engagement can be made meaningful and deliver real and practical results.

From a Government perspective, networks such as the Young Leaders are critical to ensuring that successful young people abroad with Irish connections remain engaged in developments here and willing to work with us to overcome challenges and avail of opportunities.

I want to assure all of you that you will have the strong support of the Irish Government as you continue to build and expand your organisations.

Northern Ireland

As we identify and face future challenges together, we can draw inspiration from the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland as a powerful demonstration of what Ireland and its communities abroad can achieve through common purpose and endeavour.

I recognise and deeply appreciate that the commitment by our friends abroad to the cause of peace and reconciliation remains as strong as ever.

The appointment of Declan Kelly by Secretary Clinton as US Economic Envoy to Northern Ireland is yet another demonstration of the way in which the United States, and our community there, has stood with Ireland as we travelled the long road to peace and in ensuring that the achievements of the past decade continue to be consolidated.

As those of you who travelled to Belfast yesterday will no doubt agree, we are in a better position than ever before to capitalise on the new opportunities made possible by peace and political stability. And we are working together, North and South, to make our shared vision of a prosperous and innovative island a reality.

Where once politicians from each part of Ireland read about their differences in a newspaper, today they are meeting in person or picking up the phone, arguing options and agreeing joint plans for investment or shared services.

We have had more than 60 meetings of our North/South Ministerial Council in the last three years alone, taking forward joint initiatives in areas like transport, health and education and directing the important work of our North/South Bodies on issues like trade and tourism. The Government is investing very significant funding in new roads to the North-West and along our eastern seaboard and we have delivered a Single Electricity Market for the island.

The growing recognition is that we're stronger when we stick together and weaker when we work alone.

And, increasingly, our joint work is in conjunction with our friends and partners in the United States and around the world.

We are building new linkages between our brightest innovators through the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership, pioneering work in areas like diabetes and nano-technology.

We are delivering high-speed and low-cost broadband to both parts of the island and our shared investment in a high-tech transatlantic connection with North America. And we are continuing to deliver the highest quality cancer research for both parts of the island through the US-Ireland Cancer Consortium.

We have North-South cooperation in Ireland now in almost all policy areas and across all disciplines. But it is the collaboration between our universities, between our researchers and between our young people that is perhaps the most encouraging development of all. It is the story which will ultimately give us the confidence to project to the world a coherent – and, crucially, accurate – message of a dynamic and thriving 'Innovation Island'.

Building lasting reconciliation throughout the island remains an ongoing, indeed generational project, and one which I am confident the Ireland Funds and the Young Leaders will contribute significantly in the years to come.

Economic Recovery

Re-building our economy in the wake of the global recession and turbulence in the eurozone remains the Government's number one priority.

Many here today have played a very constructive role in these efforts and I would like to thank you for your continued support.

The government is tackling economic renewal on three fronts:

- correcting the public finances;
- repairing the banking system; and
- improving competitiveness.

Correcting the public finances is at the heart of our budgetary policy and the latest exchequer figures show that tax returns are on target. Our fiscal strategy has met with the approval of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, the

OECD and the IMF. We face another difficult budget in December but we will return to growth during the course of this year. Indeed, some commentators believe the economy has already begun to grow again and the European Commission and the OECD are projecting GDP growth for Ireland next year of 3%.

Repairing the banks involves re-capitalisation, financial regulation and, of course, NAMA, the National Assets Management Agency. With the appointment of a new Governor of the Central Bank, a new Financial Regulator, the announcement of new capitalisation rules and the transfer of the first tranche of loans to NAMA, no one can deny that we have moved on from the precarious position the financial sector was in back in 2008. The Government has welcomed the preliminary reports, published last week, on the sources of the banking crisis.

Real progress is being made towards increasing our competitiveness. The country has taken tough, but necessary, decisions to reduce the public sector wage bill and social welfare spending.

The economic outlook was probably best expressed – last month – by the influential New York-based economist, Professor Nouriel Roubini.

He said he was “more optimistic about Ireland” because “the country has been willing to do fiscal adjustment in a more credible way.” “Ireland,” he said, “is a more flexible economy, more dynamic, more entrepreneurial” and the “loss of competitiveness was less than” other European countries.

Improving competitiveness is, of course, key to sustainable employment. Competitiveness alone will not be sufficient, though, unless it is linked to increased productivity. We have identified innovation as the key driver for productivity and generous tax arrangements for research and development and for intellectual property were introduced in recent budgets with that in mind.

The factors which facilitated our economic success in recent years still remain in place. We have the right demographics with a young, highly educated, flexible workforce. Ireland is the only English-speaking country in the eurozone with barrier-free access to 500 million consumers in Europe.

Our 12½% corporation tax rate remains – and will continue to remain – at the heart of our strategy to attract foreign direct investment.

It is also encouraging that despite the global recession, our exports have held up well and foreign direct investment has continued.

Given the strong US focus of the people gathered here today, it is worth noting that US companies here employ 95,000 workers and Irish companies employ 82,000 Americans. It's clear, therefore, that our futures are inextricably linked and perhaps a glance at the IMD's 2009 World Competitiveness Yearbook will show just how advantageous it will be to continue to deepen that engagement with Ireland as we fulfil our ambition to become a global innovation hub.

According to the IMD Ireland ranks:

- 1st for the availability of skilled labour;
- 1st for the availability of financial skills;
- 1st for real corporate taxes;
- 3rd for flexibility and adaptability of the people;
- 3rd for being open to new ideas; and
- 4th for labour productivity.

I mentioned at the outset that a theme to emerge at the Farmleigh Forum was the need for greater engagement with the next generation of global Irish leaders.

You will forgive me, though, if I leave you with the words of an older leader, Abraham Lincoln.

As you are all well aware, Lincoln faced many challenges during his political life but had a characteristically straightforward prescription for dealing with them:

“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and how to do it.”

He recognised the value of having a clearly defined plan and so do we. Our message is clear: we have a plan and the plan is working.

I am confident that together, the Irish at home and abroad, will successfully work to overcome our present challenges and deliver a future rich with opportunity- a future that generations of Irish emigrants would be proud.

Thank You.

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