



STRICT EMBARGO: WEDNESDAY 9 JANUARY 17.45 HRS



Speech by Theresa Villiers, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

9th Jan 2013: University of Ulster, Belfast

Building a Shared Future for Northern Ireland

There's no doubt that we meet here at the University of Ulster at a difficult time for Northern Ireland. But despite that I want to start on a positive and optimistic note.

Despite the current situation I continue to believe that 2013 has the potential to be a great year for Northern Ireland. Derry-Londonderry has taken its place as the UK's first ever City of Culture and in just a few months time it will be the first city here to host to All Ireland Fleadh.

Belfast will be playing host to the one of the largest multi-sport events in the world when the World Police and Fire Games come to town.

And in June, some of the most powerful figures on the planet will come to County Fermanagh for the G8 Summit.

All of these provide us with the opportunity to present to the world a modern, optimistic and forward looking Northern Ireland that is both a thriving cultural hub and very much open for business.



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That is the Northern Ireland which I believe the overwhelming majority of people here want - a place which has left its bitter past behind and whose best days lie ahead.

This is also essential if Northern Ireland is to compete effectively in the global race for jobs and investment.

And I pay tribute to the work done by the Executive here on promoting Northern Ireland as a great place in which to invest and do business.

Both the First and Deputy First Minister and Enterprise Minister Arlene Foster have shown huge commitment on this with striking successes in high value sectors such as aerospace and financial services technology.

I also pay tribute to our hosts this evening, the University of Ulster, for the role that they and Queens University play in enhancing the attractiveness of the Northern Ireland for inward investment.

As well as delivering world-class teaching across the full range of disciplines, both universities are involved in cutting edge research and spin-off businesses creating jobs for local people and developing products that change lives.

In the light of those kinds of success stories, it has been deeply depressing to see such negative images of Northern Ireland beamed around the world over the weeks since the vote on flags in Belfast City Council on 3rd December.

The global economic downturn has hit us hard in Northern Ireland, not least because of the depth of the economic connections with the Republic of Ireland where the property crash was even more devastating than in the UK.

Even with signs of recovery now emerging, many businesses are struggling to keep their heads above water. For retailers in particular, the crucial weeks in the run up to Christmas and the January sales can make the difference between survival or insolvency.



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Flag protests

In these circumstances it is difficult to imagine anything more damaging than continued street protests about flags.

I condemned this disorder at the dispatch box in Parliament in the strongest terms the day after the fateful vote took place.

I say again that the violence we have seen on our streets is appalling and it is intolerable.

I fully and wholeheartedly support the efforts being made by the PSNI to keep order in the face of this lawless rioting.

And I pay tribute to the courage being shown by PSNI officers night after night on the streets of Belfast, putting their personal safety on the line to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe and secure.

Those who have been trying to bring Northern Ireland to a standstill need to take a long, hard look at what it is they think they're achieving.

I can understand that feelings run high when it comes to issues on flags, particularly in Northern Ireland where questions of identity remain so sensitive.

But nothing can excuse the scenes we have witnessed, with over 60 police officers injured.

The idea that hurling bricks and petrol bombs at police is a way to express patriotism and support for the union flag is incomprehensible.

These violent protesters are damaging the cause they claim to support.

And I am convinced that they are doing significant damage to the Northern Ireland economy.

They are threatening people's jobs and livelihoods.



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And they are undermining the very cause they profess to uphold and they are being reckless with the peace process and all it has achieved over the last 20 years.

They are putting police in harm's way not just with bricks and petrol bombs but by opening up opportunities for attacks by dissident republicans who relentlessly continue their attempts to murder police officers.

It is vital that this issue comes *off the streets* to allow local politicians and community leaders the space to sit round a table and engage in a dialogue.

The recent history of Northern Ireland demonstrates clearly that it's when the rioting and violence stop and the talking begins that workable and practical solutions can be found to deal with too long-entrenched problems.

So it's essential that all of Northern Ireland's political parties work together to find a way forward which sees decisions on flags made in a way which respects different views and takes into account the different traditions and identities present in today's Northern Ireland.

That is something I've pushed for repeatedly in my meetings with Northern Ireland's political leaders over recent weeks.

Shared Future

And it is absolutely crucial that real progress is now made to address the underlying divisions in the community which can poison the debate on issues like flags and make them so fraught with tension.

Time and again, Northern Ireland's political leaders have rightly expressed their commitment to building a shared and cohesive society.

This is a theme to which I and my predecessor and the Prime Minister have returned many times.



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If this disorder demonstrates anything it's that we just can't go on as we are in Northern Ireland.

So much has been achieved here in the 20 years since the peace process really got underway.

The overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland can lead their lives with a normality and a freedom from fear which would have been impossible back in the dark days of the Troubles.

But we all need to acknowledge that the process isn't finished and the stability delivered by the Belfast Agreement should never be taken for granted.

Sectarian divisions remain deeply entrenched and it is time for bold moves by Northern Ireland's political leadership to address them.

That is essential for both for our security and for our economy.

The costs of division remain far too high.

There are already a number of initiatives underway to start the process of bringing different parts of the community together and building mutual understanding.

For example, the Executive's Programme for Government sets out the goal of ensuring that all children have the chance to participate in shared education by 2015.

Important work has also been done on the plan for Lisanelly Shared Education campus.

There is now an urgent need to press ahead with a range of projects which will deliver real and lasting change.

The devolution settlement means that the policy levers for delivering such change now lie in the hands of devolved ministers.



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But the UK Government will continue to push for progress, not least because of the Prime Minister's personal commitment to Northern Ireland and to bridging its sectarian divides.

And I welcome the strong support for this goal expressed by the Tánaiste and the Irish Government and I'm happy to work with them on helping to move things forward.

We all know that delivering a shared future won't be easy, but over recent years, the political leadership of Northern Ireland have shown themselves capable of taking difficult decisions to make progress.

They have fixed more difficult problems than the ones we face today.

I believe that they can rise to this challenge as they have to so many others over the last two decades.

Economy

And let's face it, even before the setbacks of the last three weeks, Northern Ireland businesses were already having a hard time.

These protests are an added burden they can well do without during a period when we're still living through some of the most difficult economic conditions since the 30s.

Of course a large number of economic policy areas are now devolved.

But the UK Government's national economic responsibilities mean that many of our decisions have a significant impact in Northern Ireland.

So that gives us an important role in efforts to secure the prosperity needed to help underpin political stability here.

We are determined to put the whole of the UK, including Northern Ireland, back on the right path to growth and recovery.



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When the Coalition was formed, we inherited the largest deficit in our country's peacetime history - one of the worst of any major developed economy.

That's left us having to borrow around £200,000 a minute and pay £120 million a day in debt interest.

So we've had to take action to ensure the country lives within its means after the decade of irresponsible borrowing and reckless spending that occurred under our predecessors.

In two and a half years since the election the deficit is down by a quarter, helping to keep interest rates at near record lows.

We've achieved this and yet still been able to support Northern Ireland with the highest grant per head received by any constituent part of the UK.

And reductions in spending in Whitehall Departments and a shift to capital investment in the Autumn Statement will see the Northern Ireland Executive benefit from a further £132 million of capital funding.

By the end of this Parliament, Corporation Tax will be down to 21 per cent - the lowest of any major western economy.

And we are continuing to consider the case for devolving Corporation Tax.

We've introduced the Funding for Lending scheme to get much needed capital flowing to businesses.

Our changes to tax allowances will mean a tax cut for 615,000 people here - with 8,000 people lifted out of tax altogether.

Businesses *and* families will also be helped by the Chancellor's decision to cancel January's planned fuel duty increase - meaning that a litre of unleaded is now 10p cheaper than it would have been had we stuck to the previous Government's plans.



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Of course we recognise that there's still a long way to go.

We are dealing with the toxic legacy of debt and we're hugely impacted by Eurozone instability.

But we are on the right road and the last few months have witnessed first tentative signs that the economy is starting to heal.

There's no doubt that the road to economic recovery is a long one and it's a difficult one but we are making real progress.

Conclusion

In concluding, I'd like to refer back to some comments I heard Peter Robinson make during the Hillary Clinton's visit to Belfast a few weeks ago.

He said that inevitably there were bumps along the way towards building a better future for Northern Ireland but that this disorder would not deter us all from moving forward.

I think he was absolutely right.

And I think it's also right to say that in a place like Northern Ireland, if you're not pushing forward with further progress there's always a risk that things will start to slip backwards.

Looking back on 2012 - there was so much good news for people here: the Titanic events, the Irish Open at Portrush, a broadly peaceful start to the decade of commemorations with the Ulster Covenant centenary and of course the hugely successful Diamond Jubilee visit by Her Majesty the Queen.

The political stability in Northern Ireland that made these events possible has been hard won.

It would be a tragedy if that stability were to be jeopardised by continuing violence on our streets.



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It's down to all of us to ensure that doesn't happen.

To those who are worried that their Britishness is being eroded - I'd say that Northern Ireland's position within the UK is arguably more secure than it has been for decades.

We have a Government that has made it clear that it isn't neutral on the union and believes that the family of nations which make up the United Kingdom is stronger together, weaker apart.

The agreements of the past two decades have settled the constitutional position of Northern Ireland on the basis of consent.

And there will never be any change to Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom without the agreement of the people of Northern Ireland.

That is more widely accepted than at any point in Northern Ireland's history.

And a key part of the devolution settlement that underpins that success is the principle that the different identities that make up today's Northern Ireland should all be respected.

One of the defining achievements of the peace process was the recognition that those who define themselves as British and those who define themselves as Irish can co-exist in modern Northern Ireland... that they can work successfully together even though they may have very different views on some key questions, that life here doesn't always have to be a zero sum game.

The unprecedented constitutional stability delivered by the Belfast Agreement gives us the opportunity to move on and to focus on the crucial challenges Northern Ireland faces on issues like jobs, healthcare, educational under-achievement and a whole range of other ways to provide real help for disadvantaged communities.



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And it gives us the opportunity to work together to build a successful and cohesive Northern Ireland of which all its citizens can be proud ... a place where everybody is treated with equal respect ... whatever their background and however they choose to define their identity.

Thank you.