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## Speech by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, Ireland Funds Gala Dinner, Powerscourt Hotel, 23 June 2017

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His Serene Highness, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening. You are all very welcome to Ireland on this wonderful summer evening.

I am delighted to be here for my first Ireland Funds Gala Dinner as Taoiseach, but by no means my first as a Minister. On this wonderful summer's evening I cannot think of a better place to spend my 10th day in office than in the company of such great friends of Ireland.

Ever since the days of FDR people like to talk about the first 100 days of an administration. Well I am determined that this government makes real progress not just in the first 100 days, but in the following 100 days as well, and in the 100 days after that. This is a moment in history when we have the opportunity to deliver real change on this island and help all our citizens.

Thank you John [Fitzpatrick] and Kieran [McLoughlin] for the warm welcome, and for your incredible service to Ireland over so many years. You are both true patriots.

I wish to particularly welcome this evening's special guest, Prince Albert, who I have had the pleasure of meeting on a few occasions in the past. You are very welcome back to Ireland.

Your late mother, Princess Grace, was immensely proud of her Irish heritage and we in turn were very proud of her and all she achieved in her iconic but all too short life.

We greatly appreciate that you have travelled from Monaco to be with us tonight. You always have a home here.

Likewise many of the guests here today have travelled from far and wide to participate in this Annual Conference. As well as a strong local representation, I believe some 37 cities and 12 countries are represented here tonight.

Let me begin by thanking you for the truly invaluable contribution you make to Ireland and to the Irish diaspora all over the world, through your individual and collective actions.

I want to pay a special tribute to one of your leaders, and one of my friends, who died this year, the indomitable Dan Rooney, a giant of Irish-America and American sports and a wonderful man who had a profound impact on racial relations in the United States in his quiet, but effective way.

As you know, Dan's wife Patricia and their children, including Art Junior, continue to play a significant role in the Irish-American community.

We send them our thoughts and best wishes.

Dan was a co-founder of the Ireland Funds, which have done so much to promote peace, culture, education and community development throughout the island of Ireland, and Irish-related causes around the world.

Today John Fitzpatrick carries on the tradition of outstanding leaders of the Funds, and, with your tireless President, Kieran McLoughlin and a distinguished Board of Directors, you continue to go from strength to strength.

As you all know so well, the generosity and goodwill of your members in 12 countries have raised not only over 550 million dollars but provided an important network for the Irish diaspora around the world.

Over 3,000 organisations have benefitted and your record speaks for itself - 41 years of unbroken support and service to the island of Ireland and its peoples.

The Ireland Funds

When The Ireland Funds were established, this country was a much gloomier and much more pessimistic place. We had a faltering economy, armed conflict in Northern Ireland, and a certain insecurity about how we should resolve the many problems we faced.

So much has changed in the meantime, and so much is due to your belief and support.

Today we have a peaceful, prosperous society, an optimistic and hopeful people, and a growing self-confidence about how to meet challenges new and old. You have helped this country move to become a Republic of Opportunity by your incredible support for the non-profit sector, by your commitment to the most vulnerable in our society, and by encouraging us as a nation to believe in ourselves.

We still need your support.

The challenges we face are many.

Brexit will redraw the map of Europe, and Ireland's relationship with our nearest neighbour and the EU.

Progress in Northern Ireland needs to continue so that we can build on the peace process and provide real security to all the people on this island.

At home we need an ambitious programme of activity to solve longstanding problems in housing and health, and rebuild our infrastructure.

We can be successful in all of these areas – and more – with your continued support and friendship, and by being ambitious in how we tackle our challenges at home, and our responsibilities abroad.

Jack Kelly

Prince Albert's grandfather, Jack Kelly, a proud Irish-American and an incredibly successful businessman and sportsman, was the first rower to win three gold medals at the Olympic Games.

According to his daughter, (Princess) Grace, he had a very simple view of life. It was: 'you don't get anything for nothing. Everything has to be earned, through work, persistence and honesty'.

That message could be the slogan for the kind of Ireland I believe in, and which my government is working to achieve.

A Republic of Opportunity based on work, persistence and honesty, where we provide a threshold below which no one is



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allowed to fall, and enable people to reach their full potential for the benefit of themselves and their families.

The United Nations

A little over fifty years ago President Kennedy addressed a joint session of the Irish parliament and reminded us that the achievement of nationhood should not be seen as an end, but only as a beginning. Believing that Ireland had a role to play on the world stage, as the 'protector of the weak and voice of the small', he suggested that this was possible through our involvement with the United Nations.

Back then Ireland was a recent member of the organisation, but was already playing a major role in the Congo and other trouble spots. In the fifty years since, our involvement has grown substantially, and we are respected and trusted around the world as an honest broker and bridge builder.

Now, we want to do more.

I would like Ireland to secure a seat on the UN Security Council, so that we can play an even greater role in international affairs and to achieving 'a world of laws'.

In a time of global uncertainty, rising terrorism, and threats to peace, it is right that we expand our diplomatic footprint overseas.

It is precisely because our forces threaten no one that, in the words of President Kennedy, we can 'help create a world in which no nation is threatened'. Today the world faces threats that even President Kennedy at the height of the cold war could never have imagined.

President Kennedy ended his speech in Dublin on another warm June day by quoting an unnamed 'great Irish poet' who had predicted that when our hour had come we would have something to give to the world. In the 21st century, with peace on this island, an educated people, and a recovering and growing economy, our hour has come, and we want to give something to the world.

Incidentally, that unnamed poet was George William Russell and he was writing those words in a very important year in Irish history – 1916. We were all inspired by the incredible array of commemorative events which took place around the world last year to celebrate the centenary of the Rising.

The Rise of Populism

Russell's essay back then has much that still speaks to us one hundred years on. Russell believed that 'passion had become dominant in our politics', and that it seemed enough for people to vent what they liked or disliked, confusing feelings for thoughts.

Recognising the power of passion, he warned that in national life it was the most dangerous of all guides.

In an era of growing populism around the world, where sometimes people are guided by passion rather than moral and intellectual principle, or are fired up by anger instead of idealism, we need to become better at articulating what it is we believe in, and what we think is worth defending.

The best way of responding to uncritical and seductive populist appeals is not to try and match them, or to ignore them, but to inspire people with something more truthful, more realistic, and more noble. This country's combination 'of hope, confidence and imagination' is needed in the 21st century even more than it was in 1963.

When it comes to idealism that inspires, the Ireland Funds provides a perfect model. You have been our friends and champions, in good times and in bad.

Through your continuing support for Ireland, you have been instrumental in promoting peace, equality and opportunity across the island of Ireland and among Irish communities worldwide.

On a personal note I would like to end by discussing one programme the Ireland Funds sponsors which helped me enormously when I was starting out in my career.

When I was 21 years old I spent a summer on the Washington Ireland Programme, and I learned so much in the office of Congressman Jack Quinn, meeting fellow students, especially those from the North, and so many other people who were committed to public service.

It helped shape the values that would drive me in life –

- encouraging people to reach their potential,
- the importance of hard work,
- the need to support opportunity for all,
- the power of politics to meaningfully change people's lives.

I would never have imagined that seventeen years after my internship I would be elected the prime minister of my country. You helped make that possible.

Thank you.

ENDS

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