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Speeches

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Online address by An Taoiseach on Shared Island

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I want to thank everyone for taking the time to join this morning.

I dtosach, ba mhaith lion mo bhúochas a ghabháil le gach duine a thóg an t-am bheith linn anseo ar maidin.

Tá áthas orm bheith in ann caint libh go léir.

This is an online gathering that represents the full diversity of society on this island, and the connections we enjoy North and South, as well as East-West across these islands.

And although we feel the loss of not being able to gather in person for now, there is also a message in the patchwork of screens that we create instead, in this online forum.

These snapshots of our homes and work places remind us just how rooted we all are to home and place. And to our communities across this island.

The deep human connection we all feel to home place and to community, is why we must always work to accommodate and understand each other on this island.

Because as Seamus Mallon perfectly described it, this is our shared home place.

The hall in which I stand this morning - St. Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle - resonates with the complex history of this island. A history which was too often marked by conflict and division through the centuries.

This hall has also recorded moments in the modernisation of Irish society in recent decades, and of the journey of reconciliation we embarked upon on this island in 1998 when the people, North and South, overwhelmingly endorsed the Good Friday Agreement.

And it is here in Dublin Castle that the new Shared Island unit of the Department of the Taoiseach will be based and where we look forward to welcoming you all to make your contribution to shaping a Shared Island.

I want to set out today how the Government is pursuing our goal of building consensus around a shared future, founded on the Good Friday Agreement.

Collectively, through the Agreement we have made huge strides over the last 21 years towards the goal of "reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust".

There have been challenges in recent years, but the power-sharing Executive and Assembly, the North South Ministerial Council and East-West institutions, including the British Irish Council, are now fully operating again.

The Agreement is the indispensable framework for our political relationships. It is the foundation stone upon which we build.

The strong partnership of the Irish and British Governments, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and as closest neighbours, continues and will endure.

In my discussions with Prime Minister Johnson we have a shared determination to see our bilateral partnership grow, reflecting the depth of the connections and friendship between our peoples.

Peace in Northern Ireland created and has consolidated the space and the need for mutual understanding and trust between all communities and traditions.

The imperative to use that space and the potential it offers us all has grown since 1998.

Constitutional issues and reconciliation

As a vital part of the Good Friday Agreement, we definitively resolved how we decide on the constitutional future for the island, founded on the principle of consent.

As Taoiseach, I respect and I affirm everyone's right on the island to make the case for the constitutional future they wish to see for Northern Ireland, whether they are nationalist, unionist or neither.

The genius of the Agreement is that we do not need to be defined or dominated by constitutional questions, as we were in the past.

We can all work together for a shared future without in any way relinquishing our equally legitimate ambitions and beliefs - nationalist, unionist or neither.

As John Hume said in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, jointly with David Trimble, by working together through the institutions of the Agreement:

“the real healing process will begin and we will erode the distrust and prejudices of our past and our new society will evolve...”

“The identities of both sections of our people will be respected and there will be no victory for either side.”

None of us, in good conscience, can claim that this vision has been fully realised over the course of the almost twenty-two years since John made this speech.

But the fact that we have not yet achieved what is possible does nothing to dim the transformational potential that the Good Friday Agreement still holds for us all on this island.

Shared Island

I believe that now is the time to renew our commitment to building that truly shared future.

To redouble our efforts to build connections and trust between traditions on our island.

To do more together so that in each area of the Agreement, we are making tangible progress on reconciliation.

This is the core of Government's approach to a shared island.

- It involves working together, North and South, to meet the major strategic challenges we face together.
- It involves further developing our shared island economy; working to deepen our cooperation in areas such as health and education; and investing together for the benefit of the North West and border regions.
- It involves fostering constructive and inclusive dialogue and supporting a programme of research so that we have access to the best of ideas grounded in the strongest of evidence.

The Shared island agenda is a priority for the entire Government and the Shared Island unit in my Department will be a driver for this work.

It is a broad, positive and practical agenda.

All sections of society, North and South - nationalist, unionist or neither - can engage with this fully and confidently.

Because no outcome is pre-ordained under the Good Friday Agreement.

Save that we should strive together on this island for a reconciled and shared future.

Building a Shared Island

These are unprecedented and uncertain times.

We face a series of major challenges on this island. These include -

- Overcoming the threat of the Covid pandemic
- Working through the consequences of Brexit
- Building economic and societal recovery
- Tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis

These are shared challenges.

We want to work in partnership with the Executive, through the North South Ministerial Council and with the British Government to tackle these together for the benefit of all.

The pandemic has highlighted in new ways how interdependent and connected we are on the island.

Just as we stand together in overcoming the immediate impacts of COVID-19, so we must work together for an economic rebuilding that will benefit all parts of the island.

As I have said, Prime Minister Johnson and I are determined to work together to ensure a strong thriving relationship into the future.

The British-Irish trading relationship and the economy on this island face clear challenges as a result of Brexit, even with the vital protections of the Protocol and the maintenance of the open border.

In addressing that, we must protect the inherent benefits of our all-island economy and take up its untapped potential, while also ensuring strong East-West trade.

And we must be honest and confront the issues of ingrained disadvantage that still exist on both parts of the island.

I believe we should also work together, North and South, with more coordinated policies and supports for enterprises, to support the creation of new jobs, particularly in border regions.

People, particularly younger generations, are rightly calling on politicians to act on the climate and biodiversity crisis with the speed and ambition we need now.

That is why the Government will seek to develop an all-island strategy to tackle the biodiversity and climate crisis.

The Shared Island Unit is also developing a comprehensive research programme across a range of sectors, in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Institute and the National Economic and Social Council. North/South and East-West collaboration will be an important part of this work.

Shared Island Fund

Last week, the Government announced the Shared Island Fund as part of Budget 2021, with €500m to be made available over the next 5 years to 2025, ring-fenced for Shared Island projects.

This complements the significant support for peace and progress on the island that will be delivered through the EU PEACE PLUS programme and Government's existing all-island commitments, including to the North/South Bodies, to cross-border health services and the Reconciliation Fund.

We are providing the significant new Shared Island capital resourcing to meet the level of our ambition to build a shared island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

This is a game-changing approach to how we invest in support of the Agreement.

It means that our Shared Island priorities are resourced and fixed where they belong at the top of our agenda and at the centre of Government.

Clearly, progress is overdue on long-standing joint commitments to cross-border investment in the A5 transport corridor, the Ulster Canal and the Narrow Water Bridge.

We want to progress investment in cross-border greenways, like the Ulster Canal and the Sligo-Enniskillen route, which can support sustainable regional development.

I also look forward to progress on scoping the viability of high-speed cross border rail links.

Through the Shared Island Fund, the Government is ready to meet our commitments to these projects. We will be working closely with the Executive to seek to move ahead with full delivery, without undue delay.

More broadly, we need to enhance connectivity on the island, not only to support the further growth of the all-island economy but also to facilitate and expand our social, cultural, sporting, artistic and civic connections.

We are also strongly committed to working with the Executive and the British Government on new investment development opportunities in the North West and Border communities.

Clearly, access to higher and further education is fundamental to greater economic opportunity. The Government's commitment to coordinated investment at University of Ulster Magee Campus in Derry, is one important part of how we can achieve that together in the North West.

Through the Shared Island Fund, we are ready to make that investment, and consider other opportunities, so that we address the unique economic challenges of border regions in a strategic and integrated way.

Investment in research and innovation is of course central to economic and societal progress and to building a better future

I have long been an advocate for proper, sustained investment in scientific research. I know from experience and from speaking to researchers and industry the gains that are there to be realised through a North/South

programme of research and innovation, operating at scale.

There are particular knowledge bases across the island on moving to a carbon-neutral economy, cyber security, food security, as well as next generation cancer treatment and biomedical devices.

This enormous and exciting potential is at the core of why we are supporting an all-island research hub.

We are ready to discuss and take these areas forward in partnership with the Executive, through the NSMC and working with the British Government.

And through the Shared Island Fund we will make the investments needed to deliver results on a collaborative North/South basis.

Shared Island Dialogues

Today I am very pleased to launch the Shared Island Dialogue series to foster constructive and inclusive engagement on all aspects of our shared future.

In looking to the future, we will continue to need a broad-base of reflective, inclusive conversations on the island.

These discussions already happen in community and civic settings, across all aspects of the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement.

The Government wants to hear people's ideas, questions, concerns, fears and hopes for the future.

This series will support the Government's commitment to work towards a consensus on a shared future

Some groups have been traditionally under-represented in the Peace Process, including women, young people and new communities on the island.

The Shared Island Dialogue series will actively seek as broad a range of perspective and experience as possible.

The Dialogue series will start next month and engage with key issues I have just mentioned - our environment, economy and health on the island.

The Dialogues will also seek views on an inclusive basis on overarching concerns for the Agreement including around issues like identity rights and the equality agenda on the island.

Also, on how we foster better mutual understanding of our diverse identities and experiences, for instance through joint work on education curriculums and through artistic and cultural exchange.

There are 1.3 million young people on this island who have been born since 1998 - their views and actions are fundamental to our shared future.

That's why the first Shared Island Dialogue will be 'New generations and New voices on the Good Friday Agreement'.

I would also like to see more reflection and engagement in the South, so that we look at preconceptions, mutual understandings, challenges and opportunities for our shared future on the island.

What a Shared Island means for you may be different depending on whether you are in Cork or Cavan, in Wexford or Donegal.

We also need to probe some of the simplistic narratives about what we have all come through, which have emerged on both sides of the border.

The persistence of identity politics, where a position on constitutional identity is judged to be of primary importance, hindering productive discussion about policy priorities or good governance, is a challenge that we must also recognise.

The tough truth is that before we even start this series, your view on the value of this work will also be different depending on whether you are in Newry or Newtownards, Coleraine or Coalisland.

I understand this, but I am determined to challenge it.

Concluding Remarks

So, I want to conclude by making the call today to people North and South, and on these neighbouring islands and beyond - everyone with a stake - to bring your energies, ideas and interests to bear, to building consensus on a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Government is ready to play our part and support this positive, inclusive endeavour on a shared future for this island.

We will invest time in our political partnerships, North-South and East-West and devote resources to match the level of our ambition for building a shared island in the years ahead.

And we will strive in every way to see that the full possibilities of the Good Friday Agreement are realised.

We know that there are challenging questions for all of us on the island around a shared future. Questions that don't have any easy answers:

- While recognising the divisions and differences of the past, how can we genuinely embrace and build on all that we share today - as we look to the next 100 years on this island?
- 21 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, how do we advance the work of bringing down barriers to understanding and trust between communities?
- What does it mean to have British or Irish identity on the island today? Have each of us thought about how we can better engage with and cherish our diverse identities?

We can't change the past, but we can change the future.

The question for us all is:

What future do we want for our children and grandchildren on our shared island?

It is time to work together to answer that in a way we can all be proud of.

I believe we will.

Thank you.



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