

# An important visit

By LORD CORMACK FSA DL

CONSULTANT, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, FIRST



**PATRICK CORMACK** was educated at the Havelock School and the University of Hull. He was elected as Member of Parliament in 1970 and initially served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Department of Health and Social Security. Having served continuously in all parliaments since 1970, he was knighted in 1995 and during the 2005-10 parliament was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Select Committee. He is recognised as one of the leading parliamentary historians and has written a number of books on parliamentary history. He was raised to the peerage as Baron Cormack of Enville in 2010.

Tuesday April 8th will be an historic day for Parliament. For the first time, a President of Ireland will address Members of both Houses of Parliament in the Royal Gallery, following in the immediate footsteps of Angela Merkel, who spoke there a few weeks ago, and of many Heads of State. Since I was first elected to the House of Commons in 1970, we have welcomed American and French Presidents, the King of Spain, and other world leaders, but an address to both Houses is not a part of every State Visit. The Irish President's address is eagerly anticipated and he can be assured of as warm a welcome as the Taoiseach received when a great gathering was held, addressed by him and Prime Minister Blair, to mark the establishment of a power-sharing Executive in Belfast.

Indeed, President Michael D. Higgins will, in effect, be setting the seal on two decades of increasingly warm and close relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic, the most symbolic and memorable moment of which was Her Majesty's State Visit to Ireland in 2011, an event which, even as late as the beginning of this century, few in either country expected to see for at least twenty years. Her Majesty's visit, the warmth of the welcome which she received, and the resounding appreciation of her particularly carefully chosen words of confidence, trust and friendship, will never be forgotten in either country.

In 2005, I had the great good fortune to become the Chairman of the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. It was a Committee which itself reflected a genuine all-Party accord on the need for establishing a new era in Northern Ireland politics and in Irish-British Parliamentary relations. The Committee, very properly, had a majority of Labour Party members – seven in all. There was only one other Conservative apart from me and there were four members from Northern Ireland itself, drawn from the three Parties which then had representation in Parliament. We worked together as a team and produced a series of unanimous reports on often difficult subjects – organised crime, the penal system, the Omagh bombing, among them. But fundamental to all our deliberations was being able to contribute to

a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland and to strengthening relations with the Republic.

We made regular visits to Dublin, and indeed to other parts of the Republic, and I shall never forget being taken aside on the first of these visits, at a dinner hosted by the British Ambassador, by a very senior member of the Dáil. He said to me that his dearest wish was to see a State Visit from the Queen to the Republic but the fact that he was diffident in his approach, and spoke to me in confidential terms, indicated that his thinking was a little ahead of some of his colleagues, a fact that he freely acknowledged. He asked me if I would try and introduce the subject into conversations that I had with other politicians and community leaders in the Republic, if I judged it appropriate, and asked me to let him know how "my" suggestion had been received.

I did precisely that. The reactions ranged from the very positive and totally enthusiastic to the exceptionally cautious. Some felt that the time was just not right even to discuss the matter but many thought that it was something devoutly to be wished. When my Irish friend and I had a conversation at a similar dinner two years later, a State Visit had become a regular topic of conversation and many said that not only would the Queen receive a typically warm Irish welcome but also went on to say that the process of total reconciliation would be accomplished when the President of Ireland made a State Visit to the United Kingdom.

During those nine years since my first discussion in 2005, relations between our two countries have strengthened and deepened. We have both, in our different ways, suffered from the recession, Ireland especially and visibly so. I shall never forget on my last visit as Chairman seeing so many cranes on deserted building sites. The 'Celtic Tiger' had ceased to roar. Ireland has proved determined and resilient and through the good times and the bad, mutual trust and confidence has increased. No single event did more to reinforce both trust and confidence than the Queen's visit. It is my confident belief that this return visit of the President will mark the end of a truly remarkable chapter in Irish-British relations and the beginning of a new, and even more exciting one.

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