

# A changed relationship

By **HE BOBBY McDONAGH**

AMBASSADOR OF IRELAND TO THE UNITED KINGDOM



**BOBBY McDONAGH** was educated at Gonzaga College Dublin and at Balliol College Oxford. He joined the Irish diplomatic service in 1977. He has held several posts dealing with EU matters in Dublin, Luxembourg and Brussels, including periods at the European Commission and European Parliament. He has been Irish Ambassador to Malaysia and to the European Union. He took up his post as Irish Ambassador in London in 2009.

The complex relationship between Britain and Ireland has changed fundamentally over the years. Having gone through some testing times, relations at every level and in every sphere – political, economic, social and cultural – are now stronger than ever. They are marked by a spirit of respect between our nations and a particularly warm friendship between the peoples of both islands.

The State Visit of Her Majesty The Queen to Ireland is confirmation of the maturity and warmth of the relationship. I have no doubt that Her Majesty will receive a warm welcome at the historic and beautiful venues which she will be visiting in Dublin, Cashel and Cork, and that throughout her stay she will enjoy the traditional Irish hospitality of which I believe we can be rightly proud.

The political relationship between Britain and Ireland is one between friends, with both countries working closely together in the European Union and other fora. The peace process in Northern Ireland, which was made possible by the close partnership between successive British and Irish governments, is – despite the challenges which remain – the envy of the world.

As close neighbours and fellow Member States of the EU, trade and economic relations between our two countries are excellent. Britain continues to be Ireland's most important export market and most important source of tourist visitors to Ireland. Britain exports more to Ireland than it does to China, India, Russia and Brazil combined. Two-way trade in goods and services – at a billion euro a week – and the significant flows of investment in both directions, mean that we are critical markets for each other. The continued strength of our relationship has perhaps never been more important as both countries seek to rebound from a difficult and challenging economic period and look for new opportunities to support development and growth across our islands. With that level of interdependence, it is important that we continue to work together to generate the growth that will see us through these challenging times.

In addition to the warm welcome that will be afforded to Her Majesty by the people of Ireland, there is a great deal of anticipation and excitement about the visit amongst the large and diverse Irish community

living in Britain. For our community in Britain there is an immense pride that the Head of State of the country which this community now calls home will pay a visit to the land of their birth and heritage.

For many, Her Majesty's visit to Ireland is an important reminder of the enormous contribution that the Irish have made to all aspects of modern British society. Britain is recognised as a global leader in the world of arts, commerce, fashion, media, architecture and many other disciplines. In each of these areas, first, second and third generation Irish are continuing to make an exciting and important contribution.

Last year, I was honoured to welcome His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall to the Irish Embassy to meet with many of the Irish who are making such a distinctive contribution in Britain. In addition to meeting with industry and society leaders, the royal guests met with many of the Irish community leaders who help to support and care for some of the less fortunate members of the community. The occasion was an exceptionally warm one and Prince Charles paid glowing tribute to the Irish community and its important role in British society.

Notwithstanding our community's integration into British life, the Irish in Britain are often at the same time deeply proud of what makes them distinct and different. This manifests itself through their unique Irish culture and heritage. Cultural relations between Britain and Ireland continue to be both extensive and intensive, with exchanges taking place across the entire cultural spectrum. As well as the many Irish artists and cultural personalities living in Britain, there is a huge appetite for visiting Irish performers, writers and artists. Irish theatre continues to enjoy critical and commercial success across Britain while, in academic circles, Irish studies are increasingly popular.

On the occasion of the visit of Her Majesty, we can reflect on how far the British/Irish relationship has come. The visit provides an opportunity to celebrate all that has been achieved and to open a further positive chapter in our relationship, which reflects the reality that Ireland and Britain are now both mature nations, equal international partners, close neighbours and especially friends. **F**