

# Partnership of common interests

INTERVIEW WITH ENDA KENNY TD

AN TAOISEACH



ENDA KENNY TD has been Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland since the 9th of March 2011 in a coalition government. He has been a member of Dáil Éireann (the Irish parliament) since 1975 and leader of the Fine Gael party since 2002. He is also Vice President of the European People's Party. He was educated as a teacher at St Patrick's College in Dublin and University College, Galway. He previously served as Minister of State for Education and for Labour, and as Minister for Education, for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, and for Tourism and Trade.

## How would you assess the current state of British-Irish relations?

I believe that relations between our two countries have never been stronger. The relationship has been transformed in this generation's lifetime from one marked by centuries of conflict and division to one today of mutual respect, trust and opportunity. Reconciliation between our two countries has been hugely advanced, most importantly through the working together of successive Irish and British Governments over many years on the Peace Process, but also through our immense economic and cultural links and through the movement of our peoples to one another's countries. Britain continues to be Ireland's largest trading partner, our most important export market, and the most important source of tourists to Ireland. For Britain too, Ireland is a vital export market, a significant source of inward investment and the second largest source of tourists. We are also of course both proud and mature members of the European Union, which itself has served as a vital catalyst for the building of a deeper relationship between our two islands. As we now enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, a decade of significant historical commemorations, I am confident that this generation

is leaving the divisions of the past behind and that we are opening a new chapter in our relationship. This new chapter will reflect the deepening cooperation and friendship between Ireland and Britain today.

## What are the key priorities for your Government in developing relations into the future?

I believe the success that we have seen over recent decades – in re-imagining British-Irish relations and in establishing peace in Northern Ireland – is only the beginning of what our two countries can achieve together. As Taoiseach and leader of the Irish people, ours is a friendship that I value and that I intend to prioritise and develop at the highest level. This friendship has been achieved through decades of working together towards the goal of peace in Northern Ireland. We must continue to sustain and build on our hard-won achievements. We cannot take for granted the stability and the hope that now exists. Both Governments will continue to work very closely as we seek to ensure that peace is consolidated and that the people of Northern Ireland can take advantage of new opportunities for growth and progress. I believe the achievements we have seen in Northern Ireland will also open up still greater opportunities for economic

growth across these islands.

The scale of economic partnership between our two countries is impressive and is immensely important for all our people. It has always been, and remains, a cornerstone of our prosperity and our friendship. As Ireland seeks to recover from challenging economic times and return to growth, we will seek to build on and strengthen our bilateral trade and investment. We will also seek to further develop and nurture our rich cultural ties, not least in the areas of music, literature, education, theatre, film and sport. It is these ties that create understanding



Leinster House, seat of the Irish Parliament

and foster friendships between our peoples and which are perhaps most identifiable to the younger generation in both of our countries today. For decades, relations between our two countries have often been filtered through the prism of conflict. Now, building on the peace and progress of the last decade, we have the opportunity to advance the wider partnership of common interests between our two islands.

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**In the context of the above, what is your assessment of the importance of the visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II?**

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The visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland is truly historic and hugely important. The visit will symbolise the end of centuries of mistrust between both countries and will mark the start of a brand new and forward-looking relationship between our two nations. We believe the visit will have a significant impact in advancing reconciliation on this island and will demonstrate how both nations have come to terms with a difficult past and are now cooperating together for an even stronger future. The visit will also convey a powerful message to other nations who are struggling with their own conflicts and difficult histories and who have seen Ireland and Britain make peace with one another. The huge international interest generated by the visit will also provide Ireland with a great opportunity to send out a positive message that Ireland is dealing with its economic difficulties with determination and is open for business. The visit is testament to the modern relationship which now exists and it is right and timely that relations between our two countries would be marked by the normal courtesies between neighbouring states.

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**What do you think will be the implications for peace and stability in Northern Ireland?**

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Thirteen years ago, the people of the island of Ireland democratically endorsed the Agreement reached in Belfast on Good Friday. Shared devolved government, commanding support from both communities and all the main parties in Northern Ireland, is now in place. The Northern Ireland Assembly has just completed the

first full term of power-sharing government. The Assembly and local elections in Northern Ireland passed off successfully. This showed that the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are fully bedding down. The democratic will of the people is clear. It is on that strong and solid platform which we stand as we look to the future. I believe the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II will underscore just how far we have travelled in this process of peace and reconciliation. Leaders of unionism and many people from the unionist community have made clear that they view the visit of the Queen to Ireland as a further important step forward in the history of these islands and as a respectful recognition of their identity and tradition. The visit will have a significant impact as another important step towards advancing the long journey of reconciliation on the island.

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**What message do you have for the peoples of both countries on the eve of this historic visit?**

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The visit to Ireland of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is a truly historic and significant event in our shared history. It is one which would not have been imaginable five, ten or twenty years ago or indeed to many people of my generation. Today, as we look to build for a better future, particularly for our younger generations, all of us have the opportunity to reflect on how far we have come. The transformation in our relations has allowed us build a remarkable foundation for a whole new level of cooperation between our two countries. All of us should now look forward to the start of a new and better chapter in our relationship. **F**



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*Photo: Bert Bui*

Sustainable energy is a strategic priority of the Irish Government