

A partnership of people

INTERVIEW WITH EAMONN GILMORE TD

AN TÁNAISTE AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



EAMONN GILMORE TD was elected as the 10th leader of the Irish Labour party in 2007. Educated at University College, Galway he was active in politics from a young age serving as President of the Union of Students in Ireland and in the trade union movement as well as on Dublin County Council. He was first elected to Dáil Éireann in 1989 as part of the Democratic Left party which subsequently merged with the Labour Party. In previous governments he served as Minister of State in the Department of the Marine. He is currently Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Ireland's coalition government.

What role can the State Visit play in further fostering peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and across our islands?

Over the last few decades, and particularly since the historic agreement reached in Belfast on Good Friday, 1998, we have seen extraordinary progress in establishing peace in Northern Ireland. This progress, often slow and painstaking, was made possible by the exceptionally close connections that were forged between successive British and Irish Governments and Parliaments. These connections allowed many courageous and symbolic steps to be taken over the recent decades towards acknowledging the painful legacy of the past and towards building peace and reconciliation. Prime Minister Cameron's response to the findings of the Saville Report last June was just one such step. His response touched many people across the two islands, most importantly the families of Bloody Sunday's victims, and it was a brave and generous example of how we can engage with, and move forward from, difficult chapters of our history. This weekend saw a further historic milestone reached quietly in the journey toward lasting peace and reconciliation. The Assembly and local elections in Northern Ireland passed off successfully, forging the way for a smooth transition from the first Assembly in Northern Ireland to complete a full term in office to a new Assembly with a strong mandate from the people of Northern Ireland to continue to secure and consolidate peace and stability in Northern Ireland. The new Irish Government is committed to building on the peace achieved in Northern Ireland and to further developing our relations with Britain. We believe that now, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, a decade of significant historical commemorations, that both Ireland and Britain have the opportunity to open a new chapter in our relationship and lay the foundation for a lasting partnership of common interests between our two islands. The visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland reflects the transformation in the relationship today and will be the stepping stone to a deeper relationship of cooperation, trust and friendship between the peoples of our islands.

How would you evaluate the importance of the economic relationship between Britain and Ireland?

The economic relationship between our two countries is fundamental for both of us. It has always been and remains a cornerstone of our prosperity and friendship. Ireland's bilateral trade and economic relations with Britain are extensive and there is a strong interdependence between the two markets. Trade in goods and services between Britain and Ireland is at a billion euro a week. The UK continues to be Ireland's largest merchandise trading partner and it is our biggest market for food and drink. Ireland was the third largest European investor in the UK in the year ending March 2010, and we are the UK's fifth largest export market and its eighth largest source of imports. In fact, Britain exports more to Ireland than to Brazil, Russia, India and China combined. Britain is also Ireland's most important source of tourists. In 2010, Great Britain accounted for 50 per cent of visits to Ireland with over 3.4 million visitors travelling to Ireland from Great Britain. Many UK companies continue to find significant opportunities in Ireland. In 2010, there were 100 UK companies backed by the Irish Industrial Development Authority (IDA) based in Ireland employing over 10,000 people. On the other hand, Irish investment created more jobs in the UK during 2009/2010 than Chinese firms.


But further, because of our proximity, openness to trade and same business language and culture, the British-Irish economic relationship is about much more than exports, imports and tourism numbers. The particular ease with which capital, labour and ideas can move freely between the islands is reflected also in: the number of British 'high street' names in Ireland; the numbers of brands that are common to both markets; the fact that Britain is still the market of 'first resort' for Irish exporters, even in high-technology sectors; the volume of business-related travel between Britain and Ireland; the numbers of Irish people that choose to access London as a market to sell their goods, services or professional skills; and other areas such as the amount of R&D collaboration between Irish and British organisations, energy interconnection, the numbers of Irish companies on the London Stock Exchange or the numbers of Irish directors on British companies.

Britain will always be an attractive place for Irish firms and Irish people to do business and likewise Ireland will be always be an attractive place for British firms and British people to do business. As both countries seek to emerge from current economic challenges and return to sustained growth, it will be more important than ever to look for new opportunities for further trade and investment in each others' economies. The achievements we have seen in Northern Ireland will also offer up still greater opportunities for economic cooperation between both parts of Ireland.

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

We are all aware that Ireland is facing severe challenges at present. We are going through a very testing period and we have lessons to learn from that experience. While we are now seeing our economic situation stabilising and witnessing a return to export-led growth, we have undergone a tremendous economic shock. The continued strength of our economic relationship has perhaps never been more important. In this difficult and challenging period we should work strongly together to look for new opportunities to support sustainable growth across our two countries and in the European Union as a whole. We fully expect that the forthcoming Royal Visit will allow the opportunity to celebrate the depth of economic relations between Britain and Ireland and I see it as a challenge for all of us to maximise the business opportunity presented. As well as building on our strengths in construction, food and software, we see opportunities for collaboration in emerging sectors like Cleantech, the creative industries and business-related tourism. Tourism is a hugely important industry for both of these islands. Irish visitors are greatly sought after by the tourism and hospitality sector here in London and, indeed, across the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Britain is the largest single market for tourism to the island of Ireland, accounting for more than half of all our overseas visitors. We believe that Tourism will play a significant role in the regeneration of our economy. Over a million visitors most recently flocked to London to witness and join in the celebrations of the Royal Wedding of HRH Prince William and Catherine Middleton. The attention of the world's media was fixed on London during that time. We hope that the visit to Ireland of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II will also remind British and other tourists that 2011 is a great year to visit Ireland to experience the genuine welcome and the wonderful holiday experience that is on offer. The high level of international media interest in the visit will also provide us with a unique opportunity to put out a positive and forward looking message that Ireland is open for business.

What do you believe will be the impact on Irish people living and working in Britain?

Our relationship is a partnership of people, first and foremost. Emigration has been woven into the history of Ireland and our relations with Britain. Many people went to Britain as emigrants and today there are hundreds of thousands of Irish-born people living in Britain and millions of Irish descent. All of their stories, of dislocation, of aspiration, of new lives built and of families created, have been woven into the rich tapestry of Britain today. There were of course difficult times in our history and for the Irish community in Britain. However, today there is a positive story to tell. Relations between Ireland and Britain have never been better and we are proud that today the Irish community in Britain is positively recognised for its contribution to modern British society. Indeed, the close relationship between our countries is in large measure due to the generations of Irish who have settled in Britain and contributed to British society, and to the way they have been received and welcomed by their British neighbours. Our diaspora are to the forefront of almost every field in Britain from television and radio through literature, the theatre, all forms of music and into the creative industries such as fashion and design. The extent to which Irish people have been integrated into British society is at the same time a tribute to the open nature of British society itself and to the warmth of the welcome the Irish community has received in Britain. The State Visit will also allow us to celebrate the tremendous contribution that the Irish community has made in Britain. 



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