

Good neighbourly relations

By LORD CORMACK FSA

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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.

Photo: Bord Bia

There can be no more beautiful island on earth than the island of Ireland and now that island can be enjoyed, as perhaps never before, both by those who live in the Republic and those who live in Northern Ireland, and by all who visit from around the world. There are no longer any real obstacles or impediments, to the businessman, politician, sportsman, or tourist who wishes to understand and enjoy the beauties of the landscape, or to experience the friendliness and hospitality of the people.

The Ring of Kerry and the Giant's Causeway; the glens of Antrim and Bantry Bay; the hills of Donegal and the Mountains of Mourne; the Lakes of Fermanagh and the Rock of Cashel: all are now equally accessible to any traveller who appreciates glorious countryside and unsurpassable hospitality, history and tranquillity.

As my name would imply, I have been fascinated by the history of Ireland all my life. As a newly elected Member of Parliament in 1970, and for many years afterwards, it was deeply distressing to have to listen to frequent sombre statements which marked each of the major tragedies of that period we now know as 'The Troubles'. What was reassuring, however, was

that governments in Westminster and in Dublin were constantly seeking for a peaceful solution to the issues that divided communities in the north, and made it impossible for anyone thoroughly and truly to enjoy the island as a whole.

Having been a troubled observer for thirty five years I felt privileged to be asked, immediately after the 2005 UK General Election, to take on the Chairmanship of Parliament's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. That was at the beginning of those five remarkable and memorable years when politicians, north and south, and governments in Dublin and in Westminster, moved towards an historic reconciliation and firm constitutional settlements. I was able to witness at close quarters the establishment of the power sharing Executive, to see the extraordinary and moving friendship which developed between Northern Ireland's First Minister, Ian Paisley, and his Deputy, Martin McGuinness.

I was not, alas, present at the Battlefield of the Boyne when Ian Paisley had his historic meeting with the Taoiseach, Bertie Aherne, but I was at Hillsborough on the eve of Ian Paisley's retirement as First Minister, when he, and his successor, Peter Robinson, were present with Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, and Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and newly

appointed Taoiseach, Brian Cowan. That memorable evening came at the end of a great 'Invest in Northern Ireland'. Conference, and there was understandable pride that such a conference had not only been possible, but been successful. The whole event underlined the crucial contribution which the Government of the Republic had made to what had been achieved, both leading up to, and since, the Good Friday Agreement of



Ireland's coastline is especially beautiful

1998. And the Government of Ireland also played a significant part in resolving the final difficulties before the parties in Northern Ireland would agree to the devolution of policing and justice from Westminster to Belfast in 2010.

My regular visits to Dublin were among the highlight of my five years Chairmanship as I came to know, and to like and to trust, colleagues in Dublin, and to admire the close co-operation between various Government agencies and departments north and south of the border, and especially between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Garda Síochána. There can be nowhere in the world where neighbouring police forces co-operate more closely, or in a more amicable spirit, as they seek to combat organised crime and to deal with the threats from dissident republican terrorists.

The progress that was made between 2005 and 2010 was symbolised for me, personally, by two contrasting experiences. In 2006 my Committee published a report on Organised Crime in Northern Ireland. We deliberately chose to hold our press conference outside the historic city of Armagh, close to what was known for so long as 'bandit country'. All went well but we did have very considerable police protection. What a contrast, and what a sign of the improved situation, when, on St Patrick's Day in Downpatrick three years later I was invited, by the local Member of Parliament, to join him in leading the St Patrick's Day Parade – and received the warmest possible welcome as we paraded through the nationalist areas of the city where almost every other face seemed to be painted green, orange, and white.

The growing trust and confidence symbolised by that friendly spirit has not been shaken or shifted by more recent terrorist outrages by dissidents – tragic events which have served further to unite the two communities in Northern Ireland, and politicians in Belfast, Westminster and Dublin.

At one of my first informal meetings with a group of colleagues from the Dáil a veteran Irish politician expressed the hope that it would not be too long before Her Majesty The Queen could make a State Visit to the

Republic. His words were enthusiastically echoed by everyone present, to the delighted surprise of one or two of my British colleagues. The only difference of opinion seemed to be over timing. At almost every informal meeting that I held in Dublin afterwards the subject of a State Visit by the Queen was raised, although when I had my last such conversation, in the spring of 2010, a note of impatience had crept into the comments of some of my Irish friends. They thought the time had come and hoped that an announcement would be made soon after the impending British general Election. Well, there was a slight delay as Ireland grappled with severe economic problems, but the enthusiasm for the visit did not wane, and by the time the new Taoiseach and the President issued the official invitation a couple of months ago I was back in Parliament, as a Member of the House of Lords, and was able to gauge the very enthusiastic response in both Houses of Parliament.

I have absolutely no doubt that The Queen will receive the warmest of welcomes from one of the warmest and most hospitable people on earth, and I have no doubt too that Her Majesty and Prince Philip will enjoy their visit enormously, and that they will be as fascinated and moved as I was when I first went to Cashel. The visit sets the ultimate seal on the good neighbourly relations that have developed between our two countries in recent decades. They grew ever stronger during times of trouble and in the time of healing. Never has a bond between two countries been stronger than that which now unites our two nations. **F**

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Photo: Bord Bia



Glennelly Valley, Sperrin Mountains, Co. Tyrone