

# Parity of esteem

By **EAMON GILMORE**

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**EAMON GILMORE**

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.

## How did the State Visit of H.M. The Queen advance relations between the two countries?

That visit really was enormously significant. We prepared for it very carefully, of course. And, in one sense, we knew exactly what was going to happen. But in terms of the impact on the mood of the nation, on public sentiment, we didn't really know just how transformative it would be.

Her visit to Ireland was the first by a British Head of State since the signing of the Anglo Irish Treaty in 1921. Thankfully the relationship between Ireland and the UK evolved to the point where it was possible, and, indeed, desirable, for her to come. However, I think it's fair to say that her visit marked the start of a new phase, and a forward-looking relationship between our two nations.

Most importantly, Queen Elizabeth's visit advanced reconciliation between our two countries and our peoples. It showed that we can find a way to come to terms with the past and to see each other as part of a better, shared future. The visit celebrated the significant progress achieved in the peace process and provided a strong impetus to eliminating the remaining shadows of sectarianism.

The visit also underscored the strength of the economic relationship which exists between our two countries. The Queen was accompanied by Prime Minister Cameron and Foreign Secretary Hague, who both participated in business-related events throughout the course of the four-day visit.

Naturally, it was also an important opportunity to reflect on the history of our two nations. The first public event on the Queen's programme was a visit to the Garden of Remembrance, which is an element included in all State visits to Ireland but that had a particular significance in this case. The presence of the Queen and President McAleese together, in the place where those who died in the cause of Irish independence are commemorated, represented a powerful symbol of reconciliation. The Queen also visited the Irish National War Memorial Garden at Islandbridge, which is dedicated to the memory of the 49,400 Irish soldiers who died in British uniform in the First World War, before Irish independence, which is a very significant element of our shared history.

Ireland and Britain enjoy a vibrant friendship, based on equality and mutual respect. For those four days,

the Queen really embodied and demonstrated that. The people of Ireland responded very spontaneously to her obvious enjoyment of her visit and extended to her the very warm welcome for which we are famous.

## What role can this visit play in fostering peace and reconciliation across these islands?

The peace process in Northern Ireland has helped to make President Higgins' visit possible. And this visit, in turn, can give something back to the peace process. It will, I hope, inspire people, and show what is possible. Fundamentally, both the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland and this visit are strong expressions of respect for Britishness and Irishness – in all their variety – on both islands. This has particular significance in Northern Ireland where, to some extent, all of us are still grappling with how Britishness and Irishness can prosper together and be reflected and respected throughout society.

The British and Irish governments reached agreement on issues of sovereignty and identity in relation to Northern Ireland at the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Since that time, Northern Ireland has been transformed and is an immeasurably better place in which to live. But reconciliation is a long-term project, and it is important that we continue to work at it. There are fundamental principles of the Agreement which have not found full expression as yet in Northern Ireland – in particular, the principle of parity of esteem for British and Irish identities. Respectful reciprocal State Visits embody that very principle. They are an important signal of intent and commitment to reconciliation. They assist in showing leadership, thereby providing support and encouragement to all those who are challenging the sectarianism and division that still scars society in Northern Ireland, be that at a political or a community level. Through the visit we can celebrate all that has been achieved in terms of reconciliation, and also carefully and deliberately raise the bar to set targets for the next stages of the process.

Northern Ireland is at the heart of the British Irish relationship and that is reflected in the programme for the visit. I am delighted that Queen Elizabeth will host a specific Northern Ireland-themed reception during the visit in recognition of its enduring importance in the context of British-Irish relations.

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**There is a strong economic dimension to this visit. How important is the economic relationship?**

The economic relationship is enormously important. The UK is our biggest trading partner. Our most recent full-year statistics are for 2012, and they show bilateral trade in goods and services valued at more than €59bn – that's over €1 billion per week.

We are an exporting nation, and doing business in Britain is the first step on that journey for many of our companies. The British market is particularly significant for Irish food and drink producers. In 2013, 42 per cent of those exports went to the UK. That's worth over €4 billion to the Irish economy. Likewise, for our indigenous exporting companies in other sectors, more than 38 per cent of the exports from clients of our trade-promotion agency, Enterprise Ireland, went to the UK in 2012. I should say, of course, that the trade relationship and two-way flows of investment are not just beneficial for Ireland. In fact, Ireland is the UK's fifth most important export market – putting us ahead of China, India and Brazil combined.

All of this trade is hugely valuable to both economies. Almost 200,000 people in Ireland have jobs as a result of our exports to the UK, and just over 208,000 UK jobs are sustained on the back of exports to Ireland. Exports have had a huge part to play in our economic recovery, and we continue to push for more growth across the full range of goods and services, from our quality agricultural produce to our innovative technology start-ups.

On the tourism side, about 5.5 million people visit in both directions every year. That is worth about €800 million to the Irish economy, and £800 million to the British economy, annually.

The visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland in 2011 and this first Irish State Visit add a very special momentum to the relationship, and when our economic relationship is as close as it is, that results in a real positive, knock-on effect on business and on tourism.

Of course, we're competing with the UK in international markets also. But our companies have had some successful collaboration beyond these islands. We recently undertook our first ever joint trade mission to Singapore, to engage with the aviation sector. That mission involved ministers from Dublin, from the Northern Ireland Executive in Stormont and from Westminster. It was a success, and I think there's real potential for further collaboration in specific sectors in overseas markets.

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**The Irish community in Britain is central to the State Visit – how do you engage with the Irish community in Britain?**

There is no single Irish community in Britain. Even among first-generation emigrants, there is enormous diversity. Some have found personal and professional

success in their new home, and we are proud of what they have achieved and continue to achieve.

But, for some others, it has been a less successful experience, and the challenges of loneliness and dislocation can make them vulnerable. These challenges can be compounded as people get older and may not have access to the same social supports they might have at home in Ireland. The government, through our embassy in London, provides targeted support to the most vulnerable Irish people. Over the last ten years, we have provided more than €80 million in direct funding to Irish community and welfare organisations in Britain, and the bulk of this money has gone to helping the most vulnerable.

As I've said, we are proud of the success of so many Irish people in Britain. I was delighted that Queen Elizabeth hosted a reception for the Irish community at Buckingham Palace, ahead of the State visit. Those invited illustrated the diversity and success of the Irish community. There were artists, businesspeople, sports people and representatives of community groups. Many of them are well known in their own right in Britain; some are household names.

The Irish government – and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in particular – on occasion, looks to members of the community for their insights or advice in particular business sectors or areas. Members of our diaspora based in the UK have been particularly supportive of our economic recovery, both by sharing ideas with government through the Global Irish Network and the Global Irish Economic Forum, and by enhancing Ireland's reputation more generally in their own field of work, be that in the boardroom, in the entertainment industry, in academia or elsewhere.

Overall, the Irish government's engagement with the community is as diverse as the community itself. By way of example, there are over 80 clubs promoting Irish sports across Britain, and we also provide financial support to them. There are Irish musical and cultural organisations across the country, and we support them too.

Maybe most importantly, we listen to them. I am a regular visitor to Britain and I hear views and concerns from different parts of the community. The same goes for my government colleagues, and, as you know, the President himself is a regular visitor.

I think the State Visit is of enormous importance to the members of all Irish communities in Britain. It was not always easy to be Irish in Britain. But I think that has changed. There are wonderful opportunities for the Irish in Britain, as there are for the British in Ireland. This visit, coupled with the Queen's visit to Ireland in 2011, marks that change. The Irish in Britain were proud of the reception Queen Elizabeth received in Ireland, and they will be proud to see their President formally received in Britain. E

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