

# Building a better future for all

By H.E. ENDA KENNY

AN TAOISEACH OF IRELAND



**ENDA KENNY** has been Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland since March 2011. 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.

## What was the impact in Ireland of the State visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 2011?

The visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland in 2011 will always be regarded as an historic moment, serving as a symbol of a modern, deep and friendly relationship which exists between Ireland and Britain today. The Queen's visit also highlighted importance of British-Irish relations in all their dimensions – in trade, business, culture and politics.

The visit reflected a reality that relations between our two countries have been transformed and strengthened in recent decades. It also represented a fantastic platform from which to begin to build the next phase of the relationship between our two countries. Following the visit, Prime Minister Cameron and I agreed a comprehensive 'Joint Statement' in March 2012 which sets out our vision for closer cooperation between us over the next decade.

The success of the visit showed how we can mark our shared history in a spirit of respect and reconciliation. It also created an opportunity for us to write a new and exciting chapter in the book of British-Irish relations.

## How would you evaluate the current state of relations between our two countries on the eve of this historic State Visit?

In terms of cooperation and engagement, relations between Britain and Ireland have never been closer and I am confident that this historic State visit of President Higgins will greatly strengthen the important ties that bind our two islands.

As I mentioned, in March 2012 the conclusion of a joint statement on British-Irish relations set out a vision of closer co-operation between Britain and Ireland and identified a range of areas where this could be advanced over the next decade. Work on delivering on the aims set out in that joint statement is now being carried forward through an extensive programme of collaboration between our two administrations. The Prime Minister and I agreed to hold annual summits to review progress and the third of these was held last month, shortly before St Patrick's Day, in Downing Street. I am pleased that we are seeing steady progress across many areas.

One of the first things we did on foot of our Joint Statement was to commission jointly an independent Study of the Economic Relationship. The results of this study were published on 18 July 2013 and represent an

important contribution to the vision of closer bilateral cooperation between both countries over the next ten years. The study has helped to identify areas where both jurisdictions could collaborate and outlines a range of proposals in which collaboration could reap many rewards.

The report draws on the contributions of policy makers, industry experts and businesses, including SMEs. I believe that the results represent a rounded view of where both governments can best direct our efforts and resources for the maximum return across fundamental sectors of the economy.

Certainly, economically, we are doing more trade and better and smarter business than ever before but our cooperation goes well beyond mutual economic and trade benefits. Our two countries enjoy immensely close and interwoven ties in areas such as sport, arts, culture, education and science, to mention just a few areas. And the interpersonal and family ties between our two countries run incredibly deep. President Higgins' visit will stand also as a mark of respect to the men and women who left Ireland in all the generations, to make Britain their new, or second home. Every aspect of British life has benefited from the presence of the Irish, be it from its buildings and railways, to the Irish nurse or Irish doctor who cares for people in the NHS.

Overall, the extent of ongoing cooperation is clear evidence that the close, neighbourly relationship between Ireland and Britain continues to grow and flourish at all levels.

## What are the current priorities for your government in its relationship with the UK?

Co-operation and collaboration between Ireland and the UK are essential for both economies and by working together, politically and economically, we can build a better future for all people who make their home somewhere in these islands.

Despite the constant need for vigilance and progress, the current balance sheet for British-Irish relations is overwhelmingly positive as displayed by the Joint Statement and subsequent follow up and implementation of key initiatives. Strong interdependencies continue to exist between both economies. Trade remains a cornerstone of the strong relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom. This has been reiterated in the Joint Economic Study.

For example, Britain is Ireland's most important export market for food and beverages, for indigenous exports, for first time exporters and for tourism. Ireland, in turn, is also a very important market for British exports, notably food, textiles and fuel.

Trade will always centre on competitiveness; Ireland has made considerable strides to regain lost competitiveness and I believe we have reclaimed a reputation as a stable location for investment and jobs. But we cannot become complacent about this. We have committed ourselves to keeping competitiveness at the heart of government economic and enterprise policy, including most recently in the new Action Plan for Jobs 2014.

The global economic crisis affected both economies in different ways. It highlighted further the strong interdependencies between both countries and made clear that the recovery of the British economy has significant impact on the Irish economy and vice versa. Ireland had a clear plan exiting the Troika Programme and now we have a clear plan for jobs and recovery. We are now moving in the right direction but we have to press on with job creation, responsible management of our public finances and the reform of our financial sector. Fostering even better trade relations with our neighbours can help return Ireland to a prosperous country once again.

Importantly, our two countries are also very focussed on our ongoing cooperation in relation to peace, prosperity and security in Northern Ireland where we continue to work together very closely, as well as with the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. Enormous progress has been made in recent years and it is incumbent on all of us to keep working together to deliver a better, safer and happier future for all of the people of Northern Ireland.

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#### **What are the implications of the EU debate in the UK for the relationship with Ireland?**

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We are all aware of the strength of our bilateral relationship at present. This is of enormous tangible benefit for both Ireland and the UK. Personally I have no doubt that our common membership of the EU over the last forty years has played a hugely positive role in shaping that relationship. We have worked together in Brussels to build the single market, to progress free trade negotiations and to ensure that business regulation is sensible and promotes jobs. This work is continuing, but look at how much progress has been made, how easy it is to move and trade across these islands and across the continent. We need to remember how much administration and bureaucracy has already been reduced or eliminated. Our joint efforts in Brussels have also had EU support, including financing for the peace process in Northern Ireland.

We are fully respectful of the importance of

reflecting on the nature of the EU today – having seen so much change in recent decades. In the eyes of some though, the UK EU debate raises the issue of the degree of UK attachment to Europe, thereby potentially reducing the UK's influence. Because Ireland and the UK share perspectives across so many areas, we have and will achieve more together within Europe than either of us could achieve alone. A strong UK voice in Europe is not just in the UK's interest, it is in Ireland's and Europe's interests too. Ireland's future is in the EU and we want to be working together there with the UK in this increasingly globalised world.

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#### **Both Britain and Ireland are commemorating the centenaries of a number of important events in their shared history. What is the scope for collaboration in relation to these commemorations?**


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The period of 2012-2022, our Decade of Commemorations, sees a large number of significant centenaries and other very important milestones in the history of the island of Ireland.

Clearly, these centenaries have considerable meaning and resonance for communities and traditions North and South and also in Britain. The underlying intention of commemorating affords us a glimpse not only into the past but also the present, offering us a time to reflect on our values, opinions and hopes for the future. It is important to ensure, as far as possible, that the centenaries are commemorated in a peaceful, inclusive and appropriate manner, so as to strengthen peace and understanding within and among communities and traditions on this island and on the two islands and also to provide better foundations for ever-improving relations into the future.

The events of this period shaped relations between Britain and Ireland for the century which followed. British-Irish coordination on significant commemorative events is therefore an important aspect of the commemorative programme. Certain historical events will call for joint cooperation and attendance.

Ceremonial events around the First World War, including the commemoration of the outbreak of war, the Battle of the Somme, and the Armistice are also opportunities to reflect upon and better understand our shared experiences through the war. This partnership allows for the strengthening of the British-Irish relationship, grounded in a respect for the past, reconciliation, recovery and prosperity.

Recently, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and I visited the war graves in Flanders to honour all those soldiers – both Irish and British – who fought and died in the First World War. This was the first such joint visit to commemorate the terrible loss of life that occurred during the First World War. 

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