

# Depth and diversity

By H.E. DAN MULHALL

AMBASSADOR OF IRELAND TO THE UNITED KINGDOM



DAN MULHALL is a graduate of University College, Cork. He entered the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1978 as a Third Secretary and following a spell in Dublin served in New Delhi, Vienna, Brussels and as Consul General of Ireland in Edinburgh. His first Ambassadorial posting was to Malaysia in 2001, followed by Berlin. He was appointed Ambassador of Ireland in London in September 2013, and is Ireland's fourteenth Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

The State Visit of Ireland's President, Michael D. Higgins, has a special profile because it is the first such visit in the nine decades since Ireland became independent.

I would see the significance of this highest-level Irish visit to our nearest neighbour under three main headings: history and reconciliation; the economy; and people.

*History and reconciliation:* Ireland's ties with Britain have long been burdened by awkward legacies left over from the past. For decades, these obstructed the evolution of normal neighbourly relations, even though Britain was always Ireland's predominant economic partner and a country which continued over the decades to receive substantial numbers of Irish immigrants.

British-Irish relations have been undergoing positive change during the past 20 years in particular. There have been many major landmarks in reconciliation between our two countries including the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the Queen's historic visit to Ireland in 2011. Working together as partners within the European Union has also had a positive impact on the way in which we view each other. These developments opened up positive new vistas for our two countries.

This constructive agenda has been taken forward by the two governments during the past two years, with an enhanced commitment to political and economic cooperation, an annual Summit at Prime Ministerial level and intensive dialogue among our most senior officials.

The State Visit represents an important milestone on this ongoing journey of partnership and friendship between our two countries. It will cap a period of dramatic improvement in relations, highlight their current positive condition and act as a base camp for future improvements in the period ahead.

It is fitting that the State Visit will take place in this centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War in which so many Irish people from all parts of Ireland and from different political traditions fought and died alongside soldiers from Britain.

*A unique economic partnership:* No country is of more economic importance to Ireland than the United Kingdom. Two-way trade between us amounts to more than €50 billion each year.

The British market is especially important for Irish-

owned companies, with 40 per cent of their exports going across the Irish Sea. In the food and drinks sector, some 40 per cent of what we export goes to our neighbouring island. In tourism, Britain is by far Ireland's biggest market, with almost 3 million British people visiting Ireland each year.

Economic ties between our two countries create considerable mutual advantage. For example, Ireland is the UK's fifth most important export market and the biggest market for British food. We are also substantial investors in each other's economies. Britain is also the most visited destination for Irish people travelling overseas with 10 per cent of all visitors to Britain coming from Ireland. Overall, it is estimated that our economic ties sustain 200,000 jobs in each of our countries.

As our economies recover from the recent recession, there is potential for our ties in trade, tourism and investment to strengthen further. The President's visit will place our economic relations in the spotlight and facilitate their further evolution.

*Two connected peoples:* The Irish and the British are two deeply connected peoples. Generations of emigration mean that Britain is home to the largest Irish-born community outside of Ireland and to a huge number of people of Irish descent.

Irish people are to be found in every walk of life in Britain and have made an enormous contribution to their host society. The State Visit provides an opportunity to recognise that contribution as well as the importance of the Irish in Britain to relations between our two countries.

There has never been a better time to be Irish in Britain. Having come through difficulties in the past, the community is now well respected and fully integrated into British society, while also proudly retaining its Irish identity.

*The programme for the State Visit:* The programme for this historic State Visit reflects the depth and diversity of our ties. With events focused on political ties, cultural interaction, the Irish in Britain, economic links, science and technology, health, young people and food and agriculture, the programme highlights the various strands that make up a unique neighbourly partnership that has gone from strength to strength in recent times, and retains great future potential.