

Close and complex ties

By **H.E. DOMINICK CHILCOTT**

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DOMINICK CHILCOTT is a career diplomat who joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office thirty-two years ago. He has served as High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Maldives (2006-7), Deputy Ambassador to the United States (2008-11), Ambassador to Iran (for six weeks only, in late 2011 – the posting was ended by the attack on the embassy) and now as Ambassador to Ireland.

On Tuesday, 8 April, Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall will be driven to the Irish Embassy in Belgravia. They will be going there to greet the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, and his wife, Sabina, and to accompany them to Windsor. It will be the first act of what should prove to be a very special as well as an historic State Visit.

The historic nature of the visit is clear. This will be the first time that a serving Irish president has made a State Visit to Britain. There have been many working and official visits since Mary Robinson broke the mould and became the first serving Irish president to go to Britain. But until this April, no Irish president has been accorded the full panoply of pomp and ceremonial and the access to the highest circles of the British establishment that a State Visit brings.

The special character of the visit comprises a lot more than the fact of its being an historic first. The richness and complexity of the ties between the people and institutions of the two countries mean there is so much more important content to this State Visit than normal. That's why it is four days long, rather than the more usual two or three days. And it's also why Her Majesty The Queen hosted a reception at Buckingham Palace on 25 March for the Irish community in Britain in anticipation of the visit.

President Higgins' visit is sometimes described as the return State Visit for the one made by Her Majesty The Queen to Ireland three years ago. The two visits are, of course, connected. The Queen's visit was a catalyst for a great improvement in relations between Britain and Ireland. The confident expectation is that President Higgins' visit will consolidate that progress and give the relationship further momentum in a positive direction.

In terms of diplomatic protocol, a State Visit is the highest form of engagement one country can have with another. It is the most formal way of showing how the ties between two countries are valued. President Higgins' visit will draw attention to the state of contemporary British-Irish relations in a number of important ways. This article identifies seven.

First, the visit will show, more completely than anything else could, the respect that Britain feels towards Ireland as a sovereign, independent country. That may seem an obvious point but it is one worth

underlining given the turbulent events that led to the creation of the Irish Free State and the, at times, difficult nature of relations for much of the previous century. The concept of 'parity of esteem' was a critical component of the peace agreements in Northern Ireland. A similar sense of maturity in relations will be a feature of President Higgins' State Visit.

Second, the close inter-linkage between the British and Irish peoples will be evident throughout the visit. Some ten per cent of the residents of Great Britain have or had an Irish grandparent; nearly half a million were born in Ireland. We are more than just neighbours; ours are lives entwined.

Third, the itinerary of the visit will draw attention to the huge amount the two countries have in common. Our business connections will be celebrated in the City of London at The Lord Mayor's banquet. Some 50 Irish companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange. More than 50,000 directors of British companies are Irish, the largest number of foreign directors from anywhere. The UK is Ireland's biggest trading partner. Ireland, despite its small size, is Britain's fifth most important market for exports. More than US\$1 billion worth of trade crosses the Irish Sea each week. Our two economies are increasingly seen as inter-dependent.

Beyond business, our shared English language culture will be highlighted by visits to RADA and the Royal Shakespeare Company. London's leading role in fashion will be celebrated when designers from Central St Martin's, including many from Ireland, are invited to lunch at the Irish embassy with Mrs Higgins.

The variety concert at the Royal Albert Hall will include many UK-based performers of Irish music. The musical connections across our islands are too numerous to list. Horses are another huge shared interest. The racing and bloodstock breeding industries are world class in both our countries. Many Irish jockeys and trainers are household names in Britain. So the President's visit to a stable yard is very apposite.

The President will also go to The Royal Society, drawing attention to the science and research collaboration between the UK and Ireland. Agriculture and food and drink are important sectors for both countries. The President will be shown a sustainable British farm, which exports produce to Ireland. Ireland is the largest overseas market for British produced food.

Fourth, the level of cooperation between the two governments in London and Dublin is unprecedentedly close these days. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach set out their vision for our work together in a communiqué in March 2012. When the President calls at No10 Downing Street, he and David Cameron will be able to review, with some satisfaction, the progress being made in joint trade promotion, in recognising each other's visas to make travel between our two countries simpler for foreign visitors, in marketing our two countries as a joint destination for long haul tourists and much more.

Fifth, the President will lay a wreath at the tomb of the unknown warrior in Westminster Abbey. This is part and parcel of the reflection taking place in Britain and Ireland on the 100th anniversaries of the turbulent events that took place in the early part of the 20th century. We are carrying out commemorations together in many instances, recognising that our perspectives on some events will be different. But that difference should not deflect people from noticing the openness and inclusiveness of our present reappraisal and the friendly spirit in which it is being carried out.


Sixth, although Northern Ireland is a largely peaceful society these days, sectarianism and identity politics have not disappeared. The British and Irish governments continue to work together to advance a just, equitable society in the province. Her Majesty The Queen will host a reception in Windsor Castle for people involved

in consolidating the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Seventh, last but not least, the President's visit will be able to do something that the Queen's visit to Ireland could not. It will allow the contribution of the Irish in Britain and their descendants to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated sur place.

There was a huge wave of migration from Ireland to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these people came from the West of Ireland. They helped reconstruct Britain after the damage of the Second World War. That cohort of immigrants is now elderly; some of them remained single throughout their working lives. Concern for their welfare will be highlighted when the President visits a dementia ward at a London hospital. Of course, many Irish immigrants have done exceptionally well in Britain, reaching the top levels in all walks of life; their success in Britain will be a feature of the visit too.

Nowadays, migrants from Ireland are likely to be young and well-educated, drawn to cities like London and Manchester by the excitement of the opportunities they offer. Many of them may see themselves as having one foot in each country and a big stake in both.

That is good for Ireland and the UK. And it is a state of affairs – our people cooperating to their mutual benefit, comfortable in their own skins and confident of their nationhood – which provides all British and Irish men and women something significant to celebrate when the President of Ireland comes to Britain in April. 

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Photo: Irish Defence Forces

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II inspects members of the Irish Defence Forces during her State Visit to Ireland in 2011