

28/05/2018

Diplomatic Reception to commemorate the 20th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and associated referenda

Dear Friends, Dear Colleagues, welcome,

Please don't worry, this will not be a long speech and I don't wish to interrupt this lovely evening but I would like to make a couple of points on this special occasion.

Firstly, thank you for joining us.

Last month was the 20th anniversary of Good Friday Agreement, bringing lasting peace to the island of Ireland, a defining moment in our history.

But this month, May, is actually the 20th anniversary of the two referenda, held on the island of Ireland, North and South, at which that Agreement was overwhelmingly endorsed by the men and women of the island.

This allows us to truly call it "The People's Agreement".

In the South, the result was 94% in favour and in the North, where the turn-out was 81%, it was 71% in favour.

Indeed, in this, as in many other issues, it seems that the people were ready and ahead of politics for some time.

And I say men and women deliberately because, of course, it is very important to acknowledge the key role of women, in this and in other peace processes and also in peace-keeping efforts.

It looks like the month of May is going to continue to be a very significant month in the history books for Ireland.

Last week, 22 May, the actual date of the GFA referenda, was also the third anniversary of the marriage equality referendum in Ireland, which we celebrated here in Brussels by screening, together with the UN, the wonderful documentary on the life of LGBT advocate, Rory O'Neill, "*The Queen of Ireland*".

And just on Friday, you might have heard, there was another referendum in Ireland, the result of which is a further example of momentous societal change.

Earlier last week, I was with the Belgian Prime Minister Michel for his first visit to Ireland and we are very grateful for the time and attention he gave to this visit. Among a number of elements in his programme, he and his team were keen to visit the border region.

It was the most beautiful day for such a visit, with the sun beaming down on green fields and mountains and the only sounds were birdsong and the constant, steady, unbroken thrum of cars and lorries passing up and down on the busy road – the sounds of peace and prosperity and how we live now on the island of Ireland - citizens getting on with their lives, their education, their businesses, in peace.

One of the Belgian journalists accompanying the PM asked “where is the border?” and my colleague pointed to the ground, where there was a slight difference in the asphalt and the colour of the road markings, that was it.

So, if the question is “what does Ireland want or need to protect the GFA?” then the answer must clearly include, “this peaceful and thriving border, its invisibility to the eye, being, ironically, one of the most visible gains of the peace process”.

It seems very appropriate that we celebrate such an historic moment for the island of Ireland here in Brussels, where Europe has provided such example, of a peace and reconciliation process, of plurality of identity and where we have found so much contextual and practical support, which endures today.

I want to also commend the invaluable contribution of the United States and in particular the dedication of Senator George Mitchell, who must be one of the most patient and tenacious men in the world and whom we all hold dear. I am delighted to welcome the US Charge here this evening.

It's also great to have here both our British Embassy and NI colleagues, with whom it is a pleasure to collaborate closely.

Indeed, tomorrow evening we are working together to bring you a joint event focused on women writers from Northern Ireland, who are also here this evening.

So, I want to warmly welcome to Brussels the Co-Editor and contributing writers to the Anthology "Female Lines", which is on sale here tonight, courtesy of Waterstones, and I'm sure they would be delighted to sign books and to talk to you about their experiences.

I hope that many of you will be able to join us tomorrow evening for readings and a panel discussion focused on this wonderful anthology at the Office of the NI Executive.

It is important to say that we commemorate the past, not just for its own sake, but for the sake of the future.

And I have noted since my arrival here that this is also the commendable Belgian approach, when it come to the lessons we must learn from history.

I don't want to pre-empt tomorrow's cultural event but, if you will allow, it seems to me that in the context of this evening, Celia de Freine's poem - "The Future" - is an appropriate note on which to send.

Celia has kindly agreed that I will read her poem in English and then Celia will read it in the Irish language, which is our first official language.

[READING OF POEM IN BOTH ENGLISH AND IRISH]

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the evening!

