



**THE TRILATERAL COMMISSION
DUBLIN MEETING
7-9 MAY 2010**

OFFICIAL SPEECHES

**Remarks by President McAleese
at the Trilateral Commission Plenary Meeting Dinner,
RDS, Dublin, 8th May 2010**

Dia dhíbh a chairde, it's a pleasure to be here and I'd like to thank Professor Richard Conroy for his kind invitation to join you this evening. I am delighted that Ireland is hosting such an important gathering of eminent and distinguished leaders, including of course, your founding member David Rockefeller. I would also like to acknowledge the great work of Peter Sutherland as he steps down from his leadership role within the Commission to wish Mario Monti well as he takes up the baton.

You are all very welcome – especially those of you who are visiting Ireland for the first time and who have braved the caprice of volcanic ash to be here. That commitment and determination are admirable and reassuring, for right now we surely do need civic leaders who have the tenacity to keep driving forward even in the teeth of formidable problems.

The extent to which those problems were unforeseen and devastating in their consequences has sent most of us back to the classroom to unlearn old certainties, to analyse and try to comprehend new realities and to reimagine the future. The caprice of Mother Nature may be evident in the hot ash spewing from an Icelandic volcano but it is the irresponsibility of human nature that has so many people spitting indignation. They are righteously angry at both the causes and effects of the contemporary economic messes that are impacting locally and globally. In short order there has been a virtual collapse of trust in institutions which once appeared to be solid centres of gravity.

We know that the current levels of international indebtedness means that there are some levers we no longer pull on our own. But at the same time we are still fully in control of the levers of idealism, principle, communal solidarity, and national effort which are essential as we navigate our way to calmer waters. It is said that the only safe ship in a storm is leadership. That leadership is needed not solely from governments or international organisations like the G20 or EU but from every sphere of civic society and you represent a number of very influential civic spheres. You also represent a culture of voluntary public service, of pooling your diverse talents and experience, distilling it through dialogue into a wisdom shared for the greater good of humanity. That is a very powerful and necessary witness in this moment when so many people are stuck in anger mode or paralysed by fear about the future. We need people who can generate a momentum that is far beyond superficial optimism but is a hope rooted in responsible analysis and responsible action.

In Ireland, we are undoubtedly disappointed at the leaching away of a prosperity so recently obtained but it is essential to remember that this is still, when all is said and done, the most successful generation ever to inhabit this island. It has strengths of character, proven

achievement and resources which speak of a people capable of turning around this humbling chapter. And we will turn it around. Ours is the first generation in centuries to have built a stable and fair peace. The historically fraught relationships between Ireland and Britain, between Ireland North and South, between Unionist and Nationalist, Catholic and Protestant have been transformed, not by some accident or coincidence but by sheer unrelenting effort. A long-standing culture of militarism and paramilitarism has all but disappeared and a new collegiality and good neighbourliness has begun to characterise relations on this island and between these neighbouring islands.

The dividends of that sea-change are evident in a plethora of ways - the strong community support in the North for policing, the working of a power-sharing government made up of bitter political opponents, the normalisation of political, social and commercial relations on the cross-border axis and the consolidation of the North/South institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. Where once there were chasms of contempt, there are now bridges of dialogue and we can say with certainty that we are only in the opening phase of the potential that will arise from a settled peace. Those who worked on the many complex aspects of the peace agenda and I see a number in this audience, among them in particular Chris Patten, can tell of days of utter defeat, of being urged to give up, of odds that so often threatened to overwhelm. They can also tell how worthwhile it was to keep on going, and how possible change becomes, even the profoundest change, once given leadership that is courageous and unselfish.

With the recent full devolution of policing and justice powers from Westminster to Belfast and the appointment of a Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland, we have witnessed another tangible milestone in the Peace Process, one that many pundits thought highly improbable. It is a source of great pride to us that the peace-makers are now the vast majority, that they include people once wedded to violence and that Northern Ireland's peace process is being studied elsewhere as part of efforts to resolve other seemingly intractable conflicts around the world. And, of course, we are eternally grateful for the ongoing encouragement and support which our evolving peace process received from the international community – in particular from the US and the EU, as well as from Canada and Finland.

The effort expended in making peace, the willingness to compromise and change that it necessitated and generated, give me hope that Ireland can make a significant contribution to the world-wide search for answers to the current economic crisis. Where a privileged few behaved so selfishly and irresponsibly that they jeopardised our very economy, the majority of our people have adapted stoically and responsibly to the painful new reality of austerity which has reduced their opportunities, their spending power and their quality of life. They have done that even while living with considerable hurt at the individuals, institutions, culture and norms that played such a big part in our current predicament.

In an open capitalist market system it is understandable that people are incentivised towards high performance. However, there is a legitimate concern among ordinary people that the system may return to business as usual once the fuss dies down, that lessons will not be learned or culture changed, and that those in charge will prove to be recidivist risk-takers with little regard for the interests of society at large. That simply cannot be permitted to happen.

The challenge now is to embed positive behaviour and ethically sound corporate governance, joined up and long-term thinking, both in law and in practice - making it instinctive, the

default programme, and the reflex action. This will take real and very determined leadership. For many ordinary people, the operation of financial markets is an obscure and somewhat fearful mystery. They are mystified at how easy it was to create such wealth absorbing financial products that had no credible roots in actual hard cash. They are mystified at the capacity of so many educated people to do the sums on credit risk and get them so spectacularly wrong.

Our business leaders urgently need to demystify the operation of international financial markets; to make them more accessible, transparent and accountable. Our citizens will need to be persuaded that the sacrifices they are enduring for reasons that were not of their making are being matched by a determination to ensure that market sentiment is founded on sound reason, not fickle caprice, and that money works in the public interest and not in the personal interest of those who move it around. They need to know that regulation is robust enough to protect their interests and that a new culture of ethical care for citizens, their families and their futures is in the hearts of those in whose hands rests responsibility for financing our economies.

We know that leaders don't create followers; they create more leaders. Those who are in leadership positions today, as you are, both as individuals in your diverse workplaces and collectively through the voluntary work of this Commission, have a duty of care for the men, women and children who trust you because of your education, your experience, your job title, your role and your responsibilities.

Now it is up to all of us to respond to that call for leadership. That response is called public service, an honest, decent doing of all jobs which impact on the quality of life of the public with a care and a hard-wired sense of personal responsibility for, at the very least, doing no harm. It's a big ask but our own experiences in the Northern Ireland peace process have shown just what can happen when we harness the idealism, vision, talent and determination of a new generation of leaders or an old generation humbled by failure and tired of its waste of human potential.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

**Keynote Address by the Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen, T.D.,
to the Opening Plenary of the Trilateral Commission
7th May 2010**

Thank you very much for your kind words of welcome. It is great to see so many familiar faces here this afternoon - so many long-standing friends of Ireland. This is the first time that Dublin has been chosen as the venue for a plenary conference of the Trilateral Commission. I would like to extend a very warm Irish greeting to all the distinguished participants – Céad Míle Fáilte, or one hundred thousand welcomes. We greatly value the work of the Commission. I have no doubt that your discussions over the weekend will be extensive, stimulating and productive. I just hope that you will also have at least some opportunity to enjoy the attractions of Dublin and Ireland over the next few days!

China / India

David Rockefeller's vision was that the Trilateral Commission would deliver closer co-

operation and shared leadership to facilitate "keeping the peace, managing the world economy, fostering economic development and alleviating world poverty". In addressing these fundamental policy challenges for the international community, I welcome the broadening of the Trilateral Commission's membership to include distinguished experts and business leaders from the major rising economies. Countries such as China and India exercise significant economic leverage and are of growing strategic importance in today's world, along with Russia, Brazil and several others. I am delighted that representatives from both China and India are attending this meeting for the first time, not as observers, but as members of the Commission, in recognition of their weight and influence in global affairs. It is a great honour for Ireland that this very important "first" is happening in our country.

Global engagement

In today's world, we face major challenges on many fronts, whether the threats posed by climate change, scarce energy resources and environmental degradation, or the scourges of pandemics, terrorism and drug trafficking. Only comprehensive global responses to such challenges can have a real impact. Ireland is strongly committed to the goal of ever closer global co-operation, in particular under the United Nations banner.

Climate Change

The challenges posed by the "growing interdependence" of our world and the consequent need for a well-coordinated and well - led global response, are very well illustrated by the problem of climate change. In the European Union, we have already set ourselves legally binding targets to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 20% of 1990 levels by 2020 and to raise the EU's share of renewables to 20% by the same date. And the EU has shown real international leadership by offering to step up our emissions reduction target from 20% to 30% if other developed countries would commit themselves in a comparable way. To create further goodwill, the EU has offered to provide over €7 billion fast-start finance for climate change action in the developing world for the period 2010 to 2012. Having reflected on the result of the Copenhagen Summit, the European Union remains convinced that a comprehensive international agreement is the goal to aim for, and that this requires a new dynamic. We believe that this can be provided through a stepwise approach, taking the necessary time to get it right. The next Conference of the Parties will take place in Cancun in Mexico at the end of the year. If, at that meeting, we can anchor the Copenhagen Accord in the UN process and if we can address some of the key outstanding issues, such as adaptation and forestry, then we will have made important progress. Ireland and its EU partners will be working for that solid step at Cancun, along the way to a global, comprehensive and legal agreement. Our influence in crafting a solution to this global challenge will be much enhanced if our efforts can dovetail with those of other major industrial countries.

Europe

Climate change is just one example of how Ireland's global engagement has been greatly enhanced through our membership of the European Union. The collective strength of the Union has enabled us to strengthen our voice in foreign relations, while also helping to underpin our national sovereignty. The prominent role played by numerous Irish politicians and officials in the European project has also brought great credit to Ireland and I am particularly pleased to see a number of them here today.

Of course, the main issue dominating the European Union agenda in recent times has been the economic and financial crisis. In fact, as soon as I leave here this afternoon, I will go to Brussels for a meeting of the euro area Heads of State and Government. Together, we will take stock of the steps being taken to implement the loan package for Greece agreed earlier this week, and begin considering how to achieve better budgetary discipline and an improved crisis resolution framework for the future.

The recent challenges have led some to focus on what they perceive as shortcomings in the Union's operations and capabilities. I see this as a "glass half empty" analysis: for my part, I prefer to focus on the remarkable journey that the European project has undertaken. Any fair - minded assessment of the Union's politics, structures and achievements must be grounded in acknowledging how far it has come in just over half a century. It has secured its large internal market; has enlarged to 27 members with a combined population of 500 million people; and 16 of its members now share a single currency. As we all know, preservation of the economic and financial stability of the eurozone has been a major focus at EU level. The decision last Sunday to activate pooled bilateral loans to Greece, in conjunction with the IMF, is both a manifestation of real solidarity among Member States and the taking of necessary action to protect our currency. It is hardly surprising that such an unprecedented situation, involving commitment by Greece to a major reform programme as well as negotiation of the loan arrangements, should take time to put together. It is easy to characterise this as procrastination - but that fails to comprehend adequately the nature and significance of what is involved.

Looking forward, there is no doubt that we need to focus more on growing our way out of the economic crisis, but in a sustainable manner. The European Union's new strategy for Growth and Jobs - Europe 2020 - is intended to provide a framework for coordinated action by the 27 Member States and will be accompanied by stringent monitoring and governance arrangements.

I will now turn to the **domestic economic situation** here in Ireland, where we also face, and are responding to, significant challenges.

Economic situation

The word unprecedented, regularly used in the context of the global situation that we have faced, doesn't come near to describing the magnitude of the events that have occurred since the summer of 2008. These events have led us to question the very basis of the global financial system. They have led us to rethink the role of the State in relation to financial markets and markets in general. They have led some to question conventional macroeconomic theory and many to question how society and our institutions were unable to prevent a global credit-fuelled boom and bust. They have also led us to question - even more than before - the accuracy of economic forecasts!

Policymakers and analysts worldwide have been greatly challenged by what is regarded as the worst economic and financial crisis in a generation and the extraordinary scale of its impact. I have certainly never experienced the rapidity of events, the necessity for instant decision making, and the need to take risks in managing the crisis to ensure a country is not overwhelmed by it.

It has also been very difficult, in the face of understandable anger and worry, to communicate with the public about what are complex issues that must be addressed on an on-going basis.

Politics and economics have collided and must work together to get us out of this difficult period. An economic policy is not much use if it does not gain the acceptance of the public and fails to result in the decisions necessary to enable recovery. Analysts will differ on the appropriateness of various government interventions. In Ireland, we had to take risks and make bold moves to first protect and then set about resolving the problems in our banking system. We have had to take dramatic decisions in relation to our fiscal difficulties.

I believe that Ireland has been showing the flexibility to adjust quickly - even more than other eurozone economies. We have made major strides in getting our house in order as quickly as possible. This includes a stabilisation plan for the public finances consisting of consolidation measures in 2009 and 2010 equivalent to more than 7.5% of GDP. We have undertaken a series of measures in relation to banking - a deposit guarantee, recapitalisation and a National Asset Management Agency to take large property and development loans off the balance sheets of the banks. This will force the banks to recognise their losses and ensure they have sufficient capital to start lending again to viable businesses and consumers.

We are also continuing a capital investment programme more than twice the European average. This is the appropriate stimulus measure in a small open economy, where current-side fiscal expansion is prone to leakage through imports and would risk running up further deficits - as was the experience in the 1980s. Moreover, capital investment deepens our competitiveness and so balances our potential for sustainable growth. Over the past year, we also have introduced difficult, but necessary, reductions in public service pay and social welfare rates. Our swift action has been acknowledged by the European Commission and others - and is reflected in the bond markets. We have also made clear our absolute determination to take further measures in the coming years to complete the fiscal adjustment required. And we are seeing the reward from what has been painful but necessary action. The latest economic indicators are consistent with our expectations of returning the economy to growth in the second half of this year. The European Commission Spring Forecasts project that, in 2011, Ireland's GDP will grow at double the euro area average.

The Irish economy is also gaining competitiveness. The Central Bank estimates that a 4% decrease in unit labour cost last year will be followed by a further decrease of over 8% between this year and next. This is against the backdrop of an expected increase in unit labour cost of an average 1.2% per annum between 2009 and 2011 in the rest of the euro area, and an average 1.7% per annum in the UK.

But that is not enough. I, the Government, business leaders, union leaders, civic leaders, all face a responsibility to join together to put Ireland on a new path, to restructure our economy and to drive productivity growth for the future - that is what will determine where Ireland sits in the final shakeout from what has been the worst global recession in our lifetimes.

If we are to succeed in the global marketplace, against ever stronger competition from the developing world, we need to achieve high productivity driven by innovation across the entire economy. That is why this is at the core of the five action areas identified in Ireland's medium-term economic framework, Building Ireland's Smart Economy.

Our objective is to position Ireland to be the best place in Europe: - to turn research and knowledge into products and services; - to start and grow an innovative company, and - for research-intensive multinationals to collaborate with each other and with clusters of small companies.

This is ambitious but Ireland has the existing base of multinationals, the pool of talented graduates and a growing international reputation for innovation. Importantly, we also have an enterprise-friendly environment which we are determined will remain a highly attractive location for business. While the Irish economy has come through a very difficult period, and the international situation remains challenging, we have a clear strategy; we have shown a willingness to implement difficult decisions; and we have real competitive strengths which are providing the basis for an early return to sustainable growth as the global economy improves.

Northern Ireland

I would now like to turn to the Northern Ireland peace process, which, as you will appreciate, also remains a major priority for us. The achievement of a lasting political accommodation in Northern Ireland is something on which many friends of Ireland - including a number of people in this room - have worked tirelessly over many years. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all of those friends here at home, in Europe, in the United States and elsewhere, who have journeyed with us on the long and arduous path to peace. This contribution ranges from the support and, when needed, the active intervention of successive US Presidents, including most recently President Obama and his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. It includes the work of successive US envoys, including George Mitchell, who is currently applying his patience and mediation skills in the Middle East, Paula Dobriansky who is with us today and the current Economic Envoy, Declan Kelly. It also includes the invaluable economic and reconciliation work of the International Fund for Ireland, which is supported by Australia, Canada and New Zealand as well as the United States and the European Union. And it extends also to the expertise provided by Canada and Finland in overseeing the decommissioning process. We are deeply conscious of how valuable the experiences and lessons of others have been in achieving lasting peace on this island and we stand ready to share the lessons which we have learned with others.

The relationship between the Irish and British Governments has been the engine of the peace process and continues to be crucial to the achievement of progress in the North. Yesterday, the British people went to the polls and in the coming days a new British Government will take office. My Cabinet colleagues and I look forward to working with them closely in the years ahead across a range of issues but including, of course, the crucial issue of Northern Ireland.

Twelve years after the Good Friday Agreement, the situation in Northern Ireland is a stable and peaceful one. Only last month, the power-sharing institutions took another significant step forward by taking on responsibility for policing and justice matters. I know that we all wish the new Minister of Justice, David Ford, every success in his challenging new role. Authority and responsibility for policing and justice issues are now located where they ought to be: at local level, accountable to, and operating for the benefit of, all the people of Northern Ireland. As you will all be aware, Chris made a huge contribution in providing the blueprint which continues to serve as the basis for the transformation of policing in Northern Ireland. We are all deeply grateful to him for this. It is heartening that more and more it is the politics of the everyday which dominates political discourse in Northern Ireland.

The most pressing question on everyone's mind at present is, of course, the economy. Here again there is an important role for another institution of the Good Friday Agreement: the

North-South Ministerial Council. There have been over 50 meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council in the last three years, all including Ministers from both traditions in the North alongside their Irish Government counterparts. Despite a difficult economic climate, we are continuing to invest in infrastructure on an all-island basis. We have committed £400 million to an upgraded road serving the people of Derry and Donegal, a landmark North-South project. We are also examining how we can save money together, North and South, by eliminating duplication in the provision of services on the island in key areas. We know there is a lot more we can do together, including with our friends in the United States. We are delivering faster and cheaper broadband access on both sides of our border now through a new transatlantic connection, Project Kelvin. And we would like to see the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership expand into new areas such as renewable energy and telecommunications.

Unfortunately, despite the progress made, sectarianism and segregation are still very real in Northern Ireland today. We all have a part to play in ensuring that the real dividends of peace - a safe shared society - are felt in every part of Northern Ireland. There are still those small few who still try to disrupt the political process by acts of terror and violence. We say clearly that you will not succeed. The people of Northern Ireland, the people of this island, regardless of their religion or tradition, are united in their wish to move forward and to build a society which is peaceful and prosperous. The Irish Government stands with them in seeking to achieve a shared and better future for all the people of this island.

OSCE

Before I conclude, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say a word here about a major international responsibility which Ireland will be assuming in a little over eighteen months, and where we hope to build on our proud record of multilateral diplomacy and the lessons we can learn from the Northern Ireland peace process.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe is, as you know, a multilateral organisation which pioneered the concept of comprehensive security in the space from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The potential of the OSCE in the field of conflict resolution and prevention has, I believe, never been fully realised. Promising opportunities for progress arise now with the positive dynamic which is evident in some aspects of international relations, and in particular in the US/Russian relationship.

Ireland will assume the Chairmanship-in-office of the OSCE in 2012. We are honoured to have been asked to take on this role and we are preparing actively for it. I believe that there is value in exploring ways in which the Organisation's role could be strengthened, so that it could have greater impact and effectiveness. The ideas put forward by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were a particularly important contribution to the ongoing debate on security, for example in relation to strengthening of the OSCE's role in crisis prevention as well as its ability to defend and promote human rights. Ireland looks forward to the challenge of the OSCE chairmanship and the opportunity it will give us to make a tangible contribution to the promotion of international peace and security, underpinning the core values which Ireland has always supported.

Conclusion

Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, I have tried to capture the extent to which our domestic and international policy priorities and challenges are interwoven. I hope that my address has provided some food for thought for the weekend's discussions. I wish you every success in your deliberations across a very broad agenda. We are delighted that the Trilateral Commission has chosen to meet here in Dublin. I wish this conference every success.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin, T.D.
Welcome remarks at reception for Trilateral Commission
Dublin Castle (State Apartments) on 7th May 2010

Chairman, distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

You are all extremely welcome. I have no doubt that this plenary conference of the Trilateral Commission, the first to be held in Ireland, will be a resounding success. The organizers are to be congratulated on bringing this distinguished gathering together – and on doing so despite the logistical problems created by the volcanic ash crisis.

I am delighted that you have chosen Ireland as the venue for your meeting. Many of you are visiting us for the first time and you are particularly welcome. I know that delegates from China and India are with us this evening, attending for the first time as members of the Commission rather than as observers. I congratulate the Commission on recognizing in this way the major contribution which these two great emerging states are making to global affairs.

The political and economic role played by China, India and other emerging economies is expanding steadily and will have a profound impact on policy-making processes over the coming years and decades. (I look forward to a visit which I myself will be making to China in the next couple of weeks). Many other guests this evening are long-standing friends of Ireland whose friendship we value greatly and who know us and our country well.

No matter where you live in the world, and even if you have never set foot in Ireland before, you have probably met or done business with someone of Irish descent. Out of our past experience of forced emigration has developed a global Irish family of some seventy million people. Thanks in no small part to their endeavours and their willingness to remain engaged with the land of their ancestors; Ireland today enjoys a profile and level of goodwill disproportionate to its size. [Our good friend, Speaker Tom Foley, is the very embodiment of this compelling human story and I am delighted that he is with us this evening].

The Irish Government is working actively to develop a greater level of strategic engagement with our global diaspora. Last September, I convened the Global Irish Economic Forum, which brought together for the first time some of the most influential members of the global Irish community, people with a record of high achievement in business, culture and politics.

The event and the follow-up process have revealed the enormous ‘soft power’ of the global Irish. I firmly believe that, in the modern globalised world, countries such as Ireland can

achieve a significant competitive advantage through mobilising the influence available to us through the global Irish community. The Irish diaspora is an invaluable resource for Ireland which can play a key role in our economic growth and development.

Our historical experience has also included conflict on this island and a painful legacy of distrust and discrimination. One of the great success stories of recent times has been the Northern Ireland peace process. With the intensive involvement of the Irish and British Governments, and with strong support from successive US Administrations, this process has delivered deep political and constitutional reform within Northern Ireland and has put an end to three decades of violence. Particularly with the recent agreement on the transfer of policing and justice powers, we now have a framework for lasting peace, stability and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Some people in this room have played their own part in getting us to where we are and for that we are deeply grateful. The Northern Ireland peace process must be counted as one of the most successful efforts yet in conflict resolution and the overcoming of deeply-rooted divisions.

Arising from this success, we have explored whether there are lessons which can be shared with other conflict zones around the world. While each conflict has its own specific features, nevertheless there are a number of broad concepts which, we believe, may have relevance and usefulness elsewhere. The Irish Government has, for example, been engaged in a cooperative project with East Timor and Liberia to see whether the role played by women in conflict resolution in Northern Ireland can be instructive for the peacebuilding work which is underway in East Timor and Liberia. We plan to present conclusions from this initiative to the UN Secretary-General next October, marking the tenth anniversary of a Security Council resolution which addresses these issues.

More broadly, Ireland's historical experience has tended to shape our approach to international relations and to influence our foreign policy priorities. Our traditional policy of military neutrality has also been an important determinant. This policy and the values it encompasses, together with our lack of a colonial past, have enabled us to speak with a distinctive and independent voice on global affairs and to serve the international community in a variety of ways.

Among the areas of greatest importance for Ireland have been the contribution we can make to global peacekeeping efforts; a close engagement with human rights issues; a deep interest in disarmament and non-proliferation policy; and a development cooperation programme which has grown significantly in volume and reach in recent years. Our involvement in peace-keeping operations goes back for over 50 years. We served initially with the UN and more recently also with UN-mandated missions led by the European Union or NATO. Since we first sent military observers to Lebanon in 1958, the Irish Defence Forces have been deployed continuously in crisis areas all over the world. In the process, they have made an important contribution to Ireland's positive international profile and have built significant goodwill towards us in the Middle East and other conflict regions. In more recent years, members of the Garda Síochána (the Irish police force) and other Irish civilians have provided expertise for a variety of UN and EU missions.

The Irish people are justly proud of this peacekeeping and peacebuilding tradition and it will remain an important part of our international engagement.

Ireland's long involvement in UNIFIL in southern Lebanon is one of the factors which contribute to our close interest in Middle Eastern developments. The strong engagement of President Obama and George Mitchell in the search for a way forward is encouraging renewed hopes for the Middle East peace process at present. We all know the scale of the difficulties; I firmly believe, however, that the key issues are resolvable, and a comprehensive settlement achievable, if sufficient political will is forthcoming on all sides.

In Ireland, we had the good fortune to see at first hand the resolute negotiation and persuasion skills of George Mitchell. Ireland and our EU partners will do everything we can to support him and President Obama in their current efforts.

A personal priority for me has been the appalling plight of the people of Gaza. This is an issue which I have worked to highlight in the EU and elsewhere. When I visited Gaza several weeks ago, I was shocked at the condition to which much of Gaza and its population have been reduced. The continuing blockade there is inhumane, unacceptable in human rights terms and also politically counter-productive.

This week saw the opening in New York of an important conference on another issue of vital concern. Last Monday, I was one of the first speakers at the opening of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. Ireland has a long association with this Treaty, which came into existence forty years thanks in large part to the pioneering efforts of one of my predecessors, Frank Aiken. Providing the main bulwark against the spread of nuclear weapons, the NPT is an extremely important piece of international law. I hope that the Review Conference which has just begun will succeed in reaffirming and strengthening the NPT regime. One of the key objectives will be to make progress in relation to the Middle East resolution of 1995. Ireland has agreed to chair a subsidiary body dealing with this issue. We look forward to doing everything we can, in an honest broker capacity, to secure a positive outcome in this and all other areas of the Conference.

There is another important responsibility which will shortly fall to Ireland. In 2012 we will be assuming the Chairmanship of the OSCE. This is a signal honour for the country and a challenge to which we are very much looking forward. We will bring to this task the key insights gained from our experience of conflict resolution on this island together with the wider values and objectives which underpin Irish foreign policy and our evolution as a State.

In conclusion, let me refer briefly to Ireland's response to the global economic crisis. The Government has been proactive and resolute in dealing with this unprecedented challenge. First, we have tackled vigorously the imbalance in our public finances, taking difficult but necessary decisions. Second, we have introduced comprehensive reform of our banking sector. Third, we are addressing the issue of competitiveness; unit labour costs, energy costs and prices are falling. Industrial production is up, consumer confidence has improved and we are confident that our industry will be in a position to benefit from the global recovery. Fourth, we are continuing to invest heavily in research and development. And fifth, we have maintained our commitment to infrastructural development, which stands at twice the EU average.

We are already seeing some results from these actions. Irish exports are strengthening and we believe that our improving global competitiveness will provide further benefits. There are indications that the Irish economy will return to growth this year.

The European Commission projects that next year Ireland's GDP will grow by 3%. This is one of the highest levels of growth forecast for 2011 by the Commission. Current projections are that our general government debt will peak, as a percentage of GDP, in 2012 and that it will be equivalent to the eurozone average this year and next year. Indeed, the Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner, Olli Rehn, said this week that "Ireland's bold and credible measures are paying off.... [T]he worst is over and the Irish economy is now recovering."

This is our plan for dealing with the effects of the global economic crisis and our plan is working. We have also been re-positioning ourselves over the last ten years to address the long term challenge posed by globalisation. We recognise that innovation is key to productivity and that is why, as I have mentioned, we have been investing heavily in research and development.

Our strategy is based on building a "smart economy", one where Ireland will remain the most attractive place in Europe for doing business. This is not just our view, it is also that of global business – whether in the financial services, life sciences, pharmaceutical or IT sectors. We are confident that we can continue to benefit from the synergies between the leading multinationals located in Ireland and our world-class indigenous companies, drawing on the acclaimed research capacity in our third-level sector.

Chairman, distinguished delegates. I am delighted to have this opportunity to welcome you to Ireland. I wish you every success with what I am sure will be valuable and stimulating discussions over the next couple of days.

Sources: official websites