

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE  
AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS  
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**“IRELAND AND BRITAIN - OLD NARRATIVES AND NEW”**

Chairman and Members of the Council and Court of Governors of the LSE, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and thank you for that warm and generous welcome. Thank you too for inviting me to share this evening with you and to reflect on the changing narratives in the story of Britain and Ireland.

The London School of Economics plays an interesting part of both narratives, from your still new, distinguished Chairman, Peter Sutherland to your co-founder well over a century ago, that famous Dubliner and Fabian, George Bernard Shaw. Shaw's passion for this place is all the more remarkable given his legendary contempt for formal education and for teachers. Today his imprint is evident in many ways but most particularly in the famous stained-glass Fabian window which he designed and which appropriately adorns your Shaw Library.

The story of relations between Shaw's two homelands, Ireland and Britain, could keep an academy of historians busy for the rest of the century. Just recently a television documentary on Oliver Cromwell showed up some of the difficulties we encounter when we attempt to talk about particular aspects of history but from very different perspectives.

To many here in Britain, Cromwell is a reforming and heroic figure, the first republican and a visionary in terms of his thinking on the separation of church and state. In Ireland, Cromwell is seen as a violent and hate-filled oppressor. What is true of attitudes to Cromwell is also generally true for, though our narratives are deeply interwoven, they are not the same. The coloniser and the colonised do not tell the same story nor have they the same story to tell. Sometimes our geographic closeness and our regular engagement with one another create a false impression that we do know, or at least should know, each other's story intimately and well.

It's a dangerous impression for, in truth, we have often been incomprehensible to one another, the light from one prism blinding the light from the other. And yet nothing stays the same, not even righteous resentment at the long, sorry mess of colonialism and plantation. It was Irish historian, Oliver McDonagh, who said of us, *“The Irish do not forget and the English do not remember”*. Yet in this generation that is not quite as true as it once was. In recent decades, at political and people level we have both struggled courageously to revisit our respective narratives, to look more curiously and respectfully at each other's narratives and to

develop much warmer relationships as a bulwark against the violence and contempt that were history's bitter legacy.

There have been many episodes which showcase that new mood: the remarkable work of reconciliation taken on by the parents of Warrington victim, Tim Parry who was killed by an IRA bomb along with Jonathan Ball; the welcome accorded to the English rugby team and the respect accorded to their national anthem at Croke Park last year, a place where, in 1920, British troops fired on both spectators and players at a football match causing the deaths of fourteen including two youngsters not much older than Tim Parry.

There is possibly no better showcase of the new dynamic between us than the way in which remembrance of Ireland's long overlooked but very considerable contribution to the First World War has been brought into contemporary focus. This hidden history has refused to settle for its place in shoeboxes in the attic - a place it was conveniently consigned to by both Irish Nationalists and British Unionists, for it contradicted both their desired narratives. In recent years, thanks to the work of a number of very passionate champions, both Ireland and Britain have been successfully reminded of Ireland's considerable contribution to the so-called Great War and, in the retelling, we have rediscovered a set of shared memories capable of aiding the work of reconciliation and of ending sectarian division.

Ten years ago, an Island of Ireland Peace Park dedicated to the Irish who died during that war to end all wars was opened at Messines in Belgium by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, King Albert of Belgium and myself. There has been a beautiful restoration of Dublin's memorial gardens first laid out by Lutyens in 1931 in honour of those same men and, only a few weeks ago in Castlebar,

County Mayo, I opened a fine new memorial to the 1400 Mayo men who died in that dreadful war. From a small island of just four million whose youth had haemorrhaged relentlessly away for generations through poverty, Ireland sent 200,000 volunteers, not conscripts, of whom almost 50,000 never came home. The vast majority were Catholics from south of what is now the border and they fought side by side with Southern and Northern Protestants, and Northern Catholics and Dissenters. They were, in the main, Irish Nationalists who believed that in serving with the forces of the British Crown their desire for Home Rule would be conceded. Meanwhile their Unionist counterparts hoped their service would be rewarded with the withholding of Home Rule. Thomas Kettle, a great Irish nationalist, poet and scholar who died at the Somme wrote.

*"Used with the wisdom which is sown in tears and blood, this tragedy of  
Europe may be and must be the prologue to the two reconciliations  
of*

*which all statesmen have dreamed, the reconciliation of Protestant Ulster with Ireland, and the reconciliation of Ireland with Great Britain”.*

Regrettably, that reconciliation so heartfully desired took many more decades and many more lives before it began to be accomplished. Thankfully we can say we are now well on the road to those twin reconciliations though we can see it is a process rather than an event and so needs our careful attention and nurturing. One of the most crucial chapters in that process has been the growing collegiality of the relationship at a political level between Britain and Ireland. At the everyday level, our two peoples have always mixed and matched and got on very well together despite some unsympathetic mutual stereotyping.

Among Ireland’s citizens there is today a very substantial group of people born in Great Britain and the reverse is also true. The lived lives of these men, women and children have created a vast human network of family, kin, clan, friendship and mutuality which keep us deeply in each other’s orbit. At the political level, what was once a fraught relationship has, thanks to exemplary leadership, become warm and manifestly successful if one is to judge by the Northern Peace Process.

The psychological and practical impact of manifestly cordial and respectful mutual relationships at the highest level cannot be over-stated for they undoubtedly helped to create the climate in which the Good Friday Agreement and later the St Andrew’s Accord were successfully negotiated. It has been fascinating to note just how powerful a tool for change has been the increasingly sensitive use of language, the evident awareness of the otherness of others, especially around their most neuralgic issues and the efforts made to be inclusive of all rather than rigidly partisan. These things have contributed to opening up the space in people’s hearts and minds that allowed the seed-idea of compromise to grow and prosper along with the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. These things helped us to move on individually and collectively. They allowed for ‘*the triumph of common interests over inherited divisions*’ to quote former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern in his historic address to the Joint Houses of Parliament in Westminster in May last year.

Today, thanks to our partnership in Europe and our shared commitment to peace in Northern Ireland, and thanks to the agreed legal structures which support those interests, the paradigm within which we address each other and deal with one another has altered beyond recognition. It has matured sufficiently to allow us live comfortably with the inevitable areas of difference that will occur among sovereign states, without the threat of breakdown and without interrupting the valuable work we do best together, whether on the global stage or closer to home. The straightening out of our relationship with Great Britain was a necessary prelude to straightening out those other very skewed relationships, the

cross-border relationship on the island of Ireland and the cross-community relationship within Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement has set up structures in which those relationships can be helped to grow more healthy and more mutually beneficial. On the cross-border axis, we have been witnesses to increased dialogue and cooperation exemplified by the meetings between former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern and former First Minister, Dr. Ian Paisley, most notably their exchange of friendly banter at the Battle of the Boyne site where less friendly exchange of fire over three hundred years ago had driven a massive wedge between the island's Catholic and Protestant populations that was to last through to the present day. Let's hope the good seed scattered by that more recent visitation of the Boyne enjoys as long a shelf-life.

It was always going to be the case that relationships within Northern Ireland would be the most difficult to set to rights. Years of conflict, loss and hurt had created within both communities a deep sense of victimhood and of mutual distrust. It was never going to be easy to overcome deep-rooted sectarian attitudes, seeded many centuries ago with toxic seed which has an astonishingly long shelf-life. Yet here again, the courageous and long-standing reconciliatory efforts of many people from both communities are supported and encouraged by the raft of civil and human rights protections within the Good Friday Agreement and ancillary legislation.

Through them, it is made crystal clear that all citizens of Northern Ireland are equal and entitled to equal dignity and vindication regardless of their politics or their religion, regardless of whether they see themselves as Irish or British or neither of the above. But as Shaw remarked *"Peace is not only better than war, but infinitely more arduous."* A unique system of shared government is in place which has made partners of the most bitter of enemies. They have clearly not found it easy to transcend the many differences between them; what coalition government has? They are grappling with some of the most contentious political issues like education reform, support for the Irish language and devolution of policing and justice, the ongoing failure of Loyalists to decommission, the worry of dissident republican violence, not to mention the things which are also absorbing other neighbouring governments like rising unemployment, recession, the fault-lines in the global economy and the international financial system.

Theirs is a challenging agenda. They know only too well what things were like before these miraculous days of peace and just how painstakingly this peace was crafted by the immense will of the people and the equally immense efforts of politicians. This new dispensation has been hard won. It is not only an important buffer against a return to violence in a

recently volatile society, it is where every citizen's hope currently resides for a decent future where neighbours of differing perspectives see the fruits of working shoulder to shoulder and not the wasteland of going toe to toe.

Here in Britain there is a lot that can be learnt from the stories of the many Irish emigrants who made their lives here, contributing richly to the civic, economic, political and cultural life around them, maintaining their love of Ireland but growing to love their new homeland. They teach us something about identity and its sometimes false vanities. Today their grandchildren grow up with mixed identities, comfortably compatible rather than uncomfortably confused just as children of English parents in Ireland are also doing. Today, instead of ransacking history exclusively to find evidence of each other's perfidy, we try to build a store of new shared memories and to gather up our old shared memories to fill in more accurately the jigsaw puzzle of our relationships.

Our people have been weaving a shared tapestry for millennia but its most exciting and colourful panels are being crafted in this, the most egalitarian and educated generation in both our countries. I won't rehearse the Irish in Britain's contribution to literature, sport, to music, film, education and to commerce which are as vibrant in contemporary times as at any time in the past but, in deference to that other great love of Shaw's, the world of politics, I will point out that there are over 100 MPs in Westminster of Irish background and they follow in the footsteps of Irishmen in Britain who were the outstanding European and international statesmen of their day. Daniel O'Connell, champion of Catholic Emancipation but whose broader contribution to steering Britain along the path to egalitarian democracy is so often neglected; Wellington, whose short period as Prime Minister and whose understanding of his Irish homeland, helped bring about Catholic emancipation with its far-reaching consequences for the growth of a rights rather than a concession-based concept of the dignity and equality of the human person; Edmund Burke whose maiden speech in the House of Commons was so eloquent that William Pitt the Elder said he had "*spoken in such a manner as to stop the mouths of all Europe*"; and Parnell, described by Gladstone as the most remarkable human being he had ever met.

In truth, we have always been significant investors in one another and as near neighbours will long continue to be, economically, culturally, socially and politically. George Bernard Shaw intuited the changes that were, even in his far-off day, working their way through the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland. He observed, '*We belong to a very fortunate generation, for the complications of history which have so often in the past bedevilled relationships between Ireland and its closest neighbour, have begun to mature into a collegial and respectful friendship.*' This man whose life spanned post-Famine Ireland and post-Second World War Britain was perhaps just a little bit premature in his

judgment but no more than that, just premature, not mistaken, for changing the direction of the juggernaut of history takes time and effort. This generation has invested both and we can say with some justification that we are now the fortunate generation.

Here, in this place of scholarship with its motto "*rerum cognoscere causas*", "*to understand the causes of things*", where the wording above the Fabian window exhorts us to "*remould [the world] nearer to the heart's desire*", we can say that your one-time founder would be happy to know that we are much nearer to his heart's desire for the much loved land of his birth and his equally loved adopted homeland.

That collegial, respectful relationship once so absent from the sweep of our intertwined histories is the single most salient characteristic of the present narrative. It is also the energy resource which harnessed well will allow Ireland and Britain to construct their best shared narrative yet.

Thank You.