

**Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D.
at the Kennedy Library, Boston
on Friday, 2 May, 2008**

Introduction

Distinguished Guests, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I want to thank Senator Kennedy for those kind words of introduction. It is a great honour for me to be back here at the Kennedy library and to mark my final stop on my last visit to the United States as Taoiseach in the company of so many good friends.

Ireland owes the Kennedy family far more than any speech could signify. We held our breath with you when President Kennedy won his famous victory in November 1960. We watched as he inspired America. We felt that inspiration ourselves, as the whole world did. We felt new possibilities open up: the re-emergence of hope and humanity in a world that had become filled with new danger.

We welcomed him with pride to our shores in June 1963. And we joined in the passionate determination felt across the globe that his vision must and would live on.

Senator Robert Kennedy took up that challenge, once more uniting courage, principle and eloquence in the pursuit of a better society and a better world. In the generation that followed in Ireland, we needed those qualities more than ever as we sought a way out of conflict. We were fortunate indeed that we had, as the representative of the United States in Dublin, someone who embodied that tradition - Jean Kennedy-Smith - whose advice and guidance was so valuable in that journey.

And through all of this, through the talks and the conflict, through the war and the words, we had the wisdom and foresight of your hometown Senator, Edward Kennedy, who walked with us on the path to peace and reconciliation. To paraphrase another famous Massachusetts leader, John Quincy Adams, there are just some people who inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more. Irish appreciation and affection for our great friend Ted will resonate in our hearts and in our history books long into the future.

When Thomas Fitzgerald left Limerick at around the time a cooper called Patrick Kennedy also packed his bags, the adventure on which they would embark in America would be shared by wives, Rose Anna Cox and Bridget Murphy, from the counties of Cavan and Wexford respectively. There could have been no realisation however, as they each left their place of birth, that, in their great-grandchildren, many generations later, they would bequeath men and women who would so inspire the peace and reconciliation which had eluded their homeland for so long.

There are of course many men and women throughout the United States of America to whom Ireland will forever be in debt. But it is right and proper today that we pay due tribute to a truly remarkable family and all they have given our now peaceful and prosperous island.

Government Funding for Kennedy Library

Nowhere is President Kennedy's legacy better sustained and promoted than here at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. An outstanding institution ever since its doors opened in October 1979, in recent years the Library has expanded its mission beyond the preservation and display of the physical and archival elements of President Kennedy's legacy.

This is now a vibrant international centre, host to a range of educational programmes and public conferences on the protection of human rights, the resolution of conflicts and the promotion of peace. I want to congratulate Caroline Kennedy, in particular, for her vision in expanding the ambitions and achievements of this Library to encapsulate so many of the ideals for which her father, and her family, are rightly renowned.

In this year, the 45th anniversary of the President's visit to Ireland, I am pleased to announce that the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum is to receive Irish Government funding of \$2 million (dollars) to support projects celebrating the shared commitment of Ireland and the United States to President Kennedy's ideals.

The projects showcase Ireland's distinctive contributions to America's modern political and cultural thought and will help ensure that the Kennedy legacy is extended to new generations of citizens and leaders in the United States, Ireland and worldwide.

President Kennedy inspired Ireland and the Irish people with a new confidence in our ability to play a key role on the international stage.

In the forty five years since 1963, we have gone on to prove the President's confidence was well founded, both at home and abroad. Ireland today is culturally vibrant, economically prosperous and at peace. The contributions Irish people have made in the United States and beyond - politically, economically, socially and culturally - fill us with pride, just as they elevate the profile and standing of Ireland internationally.

And I think the very best qualities of our Diaspora continue to be displayed in Irish-America, a culture that marries the great optimism, determination and drive of the American spirit with the creativity, good humour and generosity of approach that perhaps symbolises the essence of what is Irish.

The wonderful political and economic example of the United States of America challenges our cynicism and opens our eyes to opportunity and its power as a force for social good.

I hope, in turn, that Ireland offers a determined expression of what can be achieved when patriotism finds a home in hard work, excellence in education and an international outlook which draws from the wealth of our heritage and the values of our people.

If the best of all these attributes have found a home in our Irish-American community - and I firmly believe they have - so too will they hopefully guide and strengthen the economic and political relationship between our two countries long into the future.

The Good Friday Agreement and the Peace Process

It feels like a long time since my last visit to the Library in December 1997. Those were, of course, very different days, both here and at home. If we were laying the foundations for peace in Northern Ireland, violence had not yet receded from public memory.

At a political level, we had done much to develop contact and communication between Northern Ireland's political leaders, but relations were often still defined by distrust and detachment.

It was a difficult environment and one which made the achievements of April 1998 all the more remarkable. By that stage, of course, we were guided by the wise and careful judgement of Senator George Mitchell, a genuine hero of the peace process, and a man correctly identified as someone with the patience and the tenacity to steer us towards a settlement.

For that nomination – and for so much more – we were blessed by the wisdom and good advice of President Clinton, who remained on hand at all times to advise those who needed to be advised and to reassure those who needed to be reassured.

The Good Friday Agreement radically re-shaped relations between Ireland and Great Britain, between Ireland North and South, and between different traditions within Northern Ireland. It instilled a new ethos of tolerance and respect into politics on the island and between our islands. It promoted sensible cooperation to everyone's mutual benefit and it offered a future whereby the people of Northern Ireland were to be governed by the politicians who knew them best.

There were, of course, sacrifices made on all sides. But, for all its compromises, the Agreement represented our collective best effort at a new way forward. And the people knew it, endorsing the outcome of our negotiations by huge margins, North and South.

It was a proud outcome, and yet as Senator Mitchell reminded us, the hard work was only beginning. Over the years which followed, there were many difficult days, when it looked like our new beginning would remain just out of reach. But these were easily matched by the good days, some recorded for posterity, and others that took place outside the public glare. The news of a meeting between politicians or groups who had never before sat together or stories told about how sworn enemies were beginning to discover common ground.

The remarkable culmination of all of this was the famous day, the 8th May, 2007, when Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness welcomed Prime Minister Blair and myself to the steps of Stormont to usher in a new era of representative government for the people of Northern Ireland.

The wonderful story of peace in Northern Ireland has a cast of thousands, but there are a few for whom we must reserve special mention, including those who were generously received by you here at the Library in December 1998 and presented with Profile in Courage Awards in recognition of their work.

John Hume and David Trimble showed courage and foresight in the unprecedented days of April 1998 and we were delighted that they were rightly rewarded with a Nobel Prize for their efforts.

Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness displayed great skill in leading their movement towards peace, partnership and a place at the centre of government.

And, in later years, Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson would similarly steer their party towards compromises, agreed at St. Andrew's in Scotland, which replaced the legacy of division with a promise of prosperity.

We are grateful to all our friends across the United States, in successive Administrations, in Congress and outside, whose support and encouragement sustained us on this journey.

The support we have received from American representatives of all persuasions, Republican and Democratic, is something that has left a deep impression on me and on so many of my colleagues at home. In the unity of your support and your best wishes, so too have we been inspired to come together and prove worthy of your ambitions for us.

Nowhere has this been more true than in the personal commitment shown by the Kennedy family. I remember a speech that Senator Edward Kennedy gave in Derry a couple of months before the Good Friday Agreement. When doubters were everywhere, he stood and said, "A new spirit of hope is gaining momentum. We are building an irresistible force that can make the immovable object move." It was that kind of belief, that made us all believe, that made it true.

He has given a life-time of service and commitment to the task, intervening to great effect at many crucial moments. The senior Senator from Massachusetts has been an unstinting friend and stalwart champion of the peace process. Today, we have peace in Ireland. Ted, we could not have done this without you.

A Global Role for Ireland in Conflict Resolution

While the road to our peace was a difficult one, it taught us many important lessons about conflict and the ways in which it can be put behind us.

We believe that some of what we have learned may be relevant to conflicts in other parts of the world.

To share those lessons and to engage more directly in active peace making and peace building, we are taking forward a Conflict Resolution Initiative.

When President Kennedy addressed the joint Houses of the Oireachtas during his visit to Ireland in 1963, he spoke of his vision for Ireland's future role in the world. Ireland's destiny, he told his audience, lay "not as a peaceful island in a sea of troubles, but as a maker and shaper of world peace".

As we emerge from a long and difficult conflict and enter a new era of peace and reconciliation, President Kennedy's words seem prescient indeed.

The progress in Ireland over the past ten years has allowed Ireland's foreign policy to enter a new phase.

And the experience of our peace process has perhaps given us some tools with which we can work to fulfil President Kennedy's vision in this new era.

This is why the Irish Government has decided to make conflict resolution one of our key foreign policy priorities for the future. Our Conflict Resolution Initiative will build on our experiences from the Northern Ireland peace process and on our growing programme of overseas development assistance. It will complement our longstanding commitment to disarmament, our support for the United Nations, the promotion of human rights throughout the

world and our partnership with the other members of the European Union.

The lessons from our involvement in the Northern Ireland peace process may not translate directly to other conflict situations across the globe. Nevertheless, there are elements of the approach taken in the development of the Good Friday Agreement - elements related to issues of sovereignty, to the creation of the structures of inclusive government institutions, to reform of the police and to all-island co-operation - that, if nothing else, provide examples to show that seemingly intractable problems can be resolved and provide encouragement to those committed to building peace.

The development of our work in this area will be a gradual process. But already, we have agreed with the government of one of the world's newest nations, Timor-Leste, that we will work with them to assist in building sustainable peace in that troubled country.

Conclusion: The Outlook Going Forward

Ten years on from the Good Friday Agreement, the image of Ireland we are now able to present to the world is of an island transformed. The story today is one of peace, partnership and economic success that has been the envy of many of our friends around the world.

Much has been achieved, but of course challenges remain. That is the way with normal politics, where there are always tough

decisions ahead. The next of those, in relation to the devolution of policing and justice to Northern Ireland, is an issue that we are looking to the Executive to make progress on as soon as possible – the time is now right to take the leap.

As we build our new Ireland, founded on equality and partnership, and as we thank those who have got us to this point, we will do well, Ireland North and South, to remember the words of President Kennedy himself:

“As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

We are deeply grateful for the support and counsel of all our friends here and throughout the United States. And we will express our appreciation of your commitment to peace and reconciliation with a determination to ensure its fruits are enjoyed, to the greatest extent possible, by the generations that are to come.

Thank you.