



INTERACTION COUNCIL

Established in 1983

Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony 34th Annual Plenary Meeting

“Ireland’s Message to the World –
Interdependence, not Isolation”

by

H.E. Bertie Ahern

Former Taoiseach of Ireland

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Excellencies

Distinguished colleagues

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted, today, to have this opportunity to speak before you. It gives me great pleasure to welcome the InterAction Council to Dublin on the occasion of the 34th Annual Plenary Meeting. This is the first time the Council has made the journey to Ireland and I hope we will have a productive meeting here, that we will enjoy our conversations, and that you all will find lasting friendship from the people of Ireland.

The InterAction Council was created by statesmen who in their wisdom recognized the role that they could play when free of political constraints. They realized that they might counsel and mentor new generations. Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, Lord Callaghan. The list of names is long and it is a list of legends in international affairs. The statesmen that created this Council also helped shape our world.

It makes me wonder what they would think today as some of the values and institutions that they spent their lives nurturing and building are under attack.

You likely all know one of Ireland's poets, William Butler Yeats, who in similar times famously wrote,

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed on the world”

There may not be total anarchy today, but there's no doubt that there is tension. Ireland is a small country, but we have a long history. As a former Taoiseach, I think some of Ireland's history and experiences may apply to today's tensions.

In Ireland, we know about violence and terror, but we also know how to turn away from it and move towards peace. I am deeply saddened by the terrorist attack in Manchester last week. It was the ultimate act of cowardice to strike children and young people. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their loved ones.

We must strongly condemn all forms of terrorism and hold those responsible to account. Since early 2015 terrorist attacks attributed to the Islamic State have killed over 300 people

and injured nearly 1300 people in Europe. Effective policing and counter-terrorism operations are key. But so are socio-economic measures – youth unemployment drives young men to armed groups. Peace processes are needed in the hotspots that are apt recruiting ground for terrorists. And we must convince the communities that turn a blind eye to those who harbour, train and finance terrorists to renounce violence.

A turning point in Irish history was the negotiated peace settlement, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It was both an ending and a new beginning—an end to sustained conflict in Ireland and the end, too, of many years of long and intensive negotiations. It also marked a new beginning, a new era of peace and mutual respect. Like so many of the conflicts in the world today, the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement took place against a backdrop of sectarian violence. We had to remove the causes of the conflict, overcome the legacy of violence and heal the divisions of the past.

One lesson from the successful conclusion of the agreement is that all parties to a conflict must be involved in its resolution – no one party or interest can be ignored or isolated. In 1998, we organized an inclusive process that accepted a new ethos that it was necessary to compromise – to accept unpalatable elements of the agreement in recognition of their importance to others. The United States played a very constructive role in helping all parties accept that such a new ethos was required. The Irish agreement of 1998 shows that the international community should not stand by and let conflict fester.

Standing by and letting conflict fester leads me to Syria.

The Syrian Civil War is in its sixth year. We have all seen the harrowing images of victims of the conflict: the traumatized little boy sitting in an ambulance covered in debris from an air-strike; the women, men and children suffering after chemical attacks; and the body of Alan Kurdi, the three-year old boy drowned on the shores of Europe. The war has killed over 400,000 and forced over five million Syrians to flee their country.

And migration is a serious challenge around the world. According to the UN Refugee Agency there are currently over 60 million forcibly displaced people in the world, the highest number since the Second World War. A vast majority of them are displaced in their own countries and 75 per cent of those who flee their countries are hosted by developing countries.

Ireland also knows about tragedy, migration and the movement of peoples. During the Great Famine of 1845, a million Irish men and women died and a million more emigrated, causing Ireland's population to fall in half from eight million to four million.

We are thankful that The United States did not turn their back on the Irish in 1845. And now, we cannot turn our backs on those in desperate need of a safe harbour.

The international community must urgently address the ongoing tragedy of Syria. We owe it to the Syrian people to push the international community to broker peace in Syria, despite the clear political differences in the Security Council.

Peace in Syria is also fundamental to the future of the Middle East. It will require a common approach and a will to move forward in good faith. Just two weeks ago the moderate Hassan Rouhani was re-elected as President of Iran. Rouhani stated that Iran is willing to engage with the West, but will not tolerate threats. We must continue to engage with Iran in good faith and in accordance with the Iran nuclear deal. Remember, it is an agreement carefully brokered by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Germany, and the European Union that reduces the threat of nuclear non-proliferation.

The world also faces other serious threats, perhaps not as explosive as in Syria, but with equally devastating effects if left unattended. Climate change, threats to our water systems, food production, global health, and ultimately planetary health pose threats to the very existence of humanity on this planet. Last year in China, the InterAction Council began working on a Charter for Planetary Health and I look forward to a successful conclusion to that initiative at this Dublin plenary.

Irish history also shows that isolation is as bad for your economy as it is for your foreign policy. By accepting and embracing high technology and artificial intelligence, Ireland transformed its economy for the better. We focused on the future and did not pine for the past. The InterAction Council is taking the same approach, and in last year's Baku plenary, we began work on the role of artificial intelligence and its impact on global employment. The Council intends to offer recommendations on how to use this technological breakthrough to improve the lives of millions of people on our planet while mitigating the negative impacts on employment.

As important as Ireland's embrace of high technology, is our rejection of economic isolation in favour of joining the European Union. Being part of the rich legacy of the Treaty of Rome has benefitted Ireland enormously. There is hardly any area of economic or social life in Ireland that has not progressed thanks to our membership in the Union. That lesson of Irish history leads me to the subject of Brexit.

Last June, the British shocked the world by voting to remove their country from the European Union. I believe in the EU and I am deeply disappointed that Britain will leave the EU. This is the first time a member state has prepared to withdraw from the European Union. There is no precedent; there is no doubt, too, that Brexit will be disruptive on a financial, legal and human level.

Britain has stated that it will not stay in the Single Market, but would like to negotiate a trade deal with the EU. Forty-four percent of all British goods are sold into the EU today. Sixteen percent of all EU products are exported into the British market. Agreeing on a trade agreement between the EU and Britain will be one of the most difficult challenges. This is because trade in the EU is not only based on the absence of tariffs and customs charges or bureaucracy. It is in fact based on legislation that mandates non-competition rules and specific requirements for products such as toxicity levels for food products.

The EU's impact on our lives and politics is far broader than trade. There is legislation and joint policy on migration, foreign policy, higher education, agriculture, judicial cooperation, law enforcement, security, environment, energy, fisheries, and health – just to name a few.

The EU has stated that it stands ready to create partnerships with Britain in areas unrelated to trade, in particular the fight against terrorism and international crime. This is a goal one can easily support.

Britain and Ireland joined the European Union together 44 years ago. Brexit marks a crossroad where we will go our separate ways in European politics. Britain will withdraw from the EU while Ireland will remain. Seventy-seven percent of the Irish population is supportive of the EU according to a 2016 EU barometer poll.

For Ireland there must be two important goals with the Brexit negotiations. First: there can be no return to a hard border on the island, between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Second: a common trading area between Ireland and Britain must remain in place.

The withdrawal of Britain from the EU will make Britain a third country and the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland an external EU border. In theory, this would require a reinstatement of a proper border with customs and passport checks. There are 200 crossing points on the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, with 30,000 people cross every day, and 1.85 million crossings by cars every month. Reinstating a border would not only affect people and impede business - it could also be a setback to the peace process.

That is why I welcome the recognition of Ireland's unique position by both parties to the negotiations. Britain's Prime Minister, Theresa May, has expressed that no hard border on the island of Ireland should be reinstated and that the peace process must not be jeopardized. The EU's Brexit Guidelines also state that the EU aim to avoid a hard border while respecting the integrity of the Union legal order. This is crucial as free movement between Ireland and Britain predates the EU membership of these countries. It is by no means unreasonable to demand that it continues after Brexit.

Britain is Ireland's largest trading partner. Any future restrictions on goods and services between Ireland and Britain would have a negative economic outcome. Every week one billion euros worth of trade is carried out between Britain and Ireland. Britain is Ireland's most important market. For example, it is our number one export for food products, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of all Irish food and drink exports, including prepared consumer goods. Trade in services is increasing, in particular in the fields of clean technology, electronics and engineering. Annual trade from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland, alone exceeds 1.5 billion euros.

The withdrawal negotiations between the EU and Britain are set to begin in a few weeks. The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, will negotiate with whomever will become Britain's Brexit Secretary after the early general elections on June 8th.

The Brexit negotiations ahead will be very difficult but they are not insurmountable. When I was president of the European Council, we welcomed ten new member states, including eight central and eastern European states into the EU. Those negotiations were complex and difficult, but we succeeded. The Brexit negotiations must similarly be handled in a positive manner and in good faith. Mutual respect and a resolute determination to achieve agreement must underpin these forthcoming political negotiations.

I have already mentioned the Good Friday Agreement and we are grateful that the European Union has consistently supported the Irish Peace Process. Its regional funding and peace funding strengthened the development of Northern Ireland and the border region. The financial and political support has been paramount to the success of the Peace Process.

The EU itself is a peace process. It is first and foremost a union built to secure peace on a continent that had been scourged with three violent wars between 1870 and 1945. Therein also lies its biggest success: its role in keeping the peace in Europe for over seventy years.

In these times of political attacks and criticism against the EU, we should never forget the virtue of its biggest success. We should not allow ourselves to forget how remarkable and important peace is and how fragile it can be. What greater success could you demand from a peace union than achieving and keeping the peace? As long as there is peace in Europe, there is no failure large enough to tarnish this success.

The European Union is not perfect, but it has been a success. Sometimes the strongest thing you can do is recognize your weaknesses. And the world needs a strong, vibrant and unified Europe more than ever before. Europe must stop being on the defensive and step-up it's game in promoting the values on which the Union is founded. These include respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and plurality.

So, we face many challenges, both in negotiating Brexit and ensuring that Europe continues to be a positive force. I began by quoting one Irish poet who worried that the centre could hold. Let me conclude by quoting another, Seamus Heaney, who suggested a more optimistic view that current world leaders would do well to follow: "even if the last move did not succeed, the inner command says move again."

I thank you for your attention.