

Speech by Liz O'Donnell TD to National Conference

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Good Evening Delegates. What a good day it has been. Since we last came together in Galway, the party has been going from strength to strength. By any measure, it has been a good year.

Our trade mark as a party has been keeping taxes low and competition high in the economy. Lower taxes yield higher revenues for essential services like hospitals, pensions and caring for the vulnerable and those with disabilities. The Progressive Democrats in government are planning carefully ahead for Ireland in the context of the Enlarged European Union. We embrace this new context with confidence and optimism.

We are blessed with the talented flexible workforce. We look forward to many Eastern European workers joining our workforce to take up essential jobs in our economy.

With ongoing instability in the Middle East and chronic poverty in Africa, Ireland as part of the community of nations now faces the additional and growing threat of terrorism.

As in the past, Ireland must be independent and principled drawing on our long tradition of peacekeeping and commitment to development and human rights. We must continue to be a voice for moderation, peace and justice in the world.

The Progressive Democrats will continue to punch well above our weight in government delivering good government in challenging times. Through our policies and our strategies in government we want to keep Ireland at work, to keep Ireland competitive, to sustain a caring society which respects diversity and human rights.

Delegates, it is only ten years since the genocide in Rwanda - one of the worst violations of human rights in the twentieth century. And sadly, an appalling example of how, the international community failed to save lives.

Closer to home the 1990's saw repeated and wholesale violations of human rights on the European landmass in the Balkans. In fact the last time I visited Killarney was to receive sick and bewildered Kosovar refugees who landed in Farranfore. They had come from grimy tents in Macedonia. They blinked in amazement as they emerged to a sparkling Kerry landscape and a warm Kerry welcome.

So, the last decade has taught us many lessons. The protection of human rights needs the collective will of the international community for enforcement against armed aggression on civilians. It saved lives in Kosovo. It requires peace enforcement as well as peacekeeping.

And we salute tonight the bravery of the men and women of our Defence Forces who are making peace and nation building around the world.

We salute particularly the 440 troops of the 90th Infantry Battalion in Liberia, under the command of Lt. Col. Pat Moran, and the 260 in Kosovo of the 27th Infantry Group under the Lt. Col. Michael Finn.

And we join the Defence Forces in mourning the loss of Sgt Derek Mooney from Dublin, tragically killed on duty in Liberia. Our commitment to UN peacekeeping is as large now as it ever has been, and our Defence Forces have never been as well equipped.

As a people we greatly value our sovereignty and independence. It is just over eighty years now since we in Ireland first walked the road of liberty as a free and independent nation.

Our early State was beset with problems of all kinds. In the early decades the leaders of the new nation struggled to cope with the huge social, economic and political challenges presented by independence.

The Irish State developed in an uneven way. Yes, peace and stability were achieved and solid democratic foundations were established. The new state showed itself to be a viable political entity.

But political progress was not matched by economic progress.

Performance lagged way behind potential. There was a certain fatalism and defeatism. There was too ready an acceptance of emigration as an economic safety valve. There was an unwillingness to believe that the scale of unemployment could be reduced let alone that full employment could ever be achieved.

As recently as 1989 one of our leading historians Joe Lee was able to write: *'it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Irish economic performance has been the least impressive in Western Europe, perhaps in all Europe, in the twentieth century'*.

And yet just fifteen years later all has changed and changed utterly.

Ireland today is successful and wealthy and vibrant. Ireland today is the fastest-growing economy in the developed world. Ireland today is perhaps the greatest trading nation on earth, measured in terms of exports per person.

We still have problems of course - and these are not helped by the recent international downturn.

But the fact is that Ireland is now more successful than at any time in its history as an independent state. So what happened since that caustic commentary of Joe Lee in 1989?

What revolution took place that so transformed the fortunes of a country? What change of direction delivered so rich an economic dividend? What was it that enabled us to move so quickly in relative terms from poverty to prosperity?

I believe the essential answer lies in the concept of Openness.

Early independent Ireland was isolated, inward looking and closed to outside influences. The modern Ireland is very different. It is a country not just of open markets but of open minds too.

That process of opening began a long time ago. But the most momentous development was undoubtedly Ireland's decision to join the EEC - as the European Union was then known - in 1972. We became members with effect from January 1st, 1973.

Our deepening relationship with the EU saw Ireland opening to the east - to Europe. But at the same time we were also opening to the west - to America.

Although in the market for foreign direct investment since the 1960's the pace of activity on this front quickened in the last two decades. And the overall effort was greatly helped by the direction of economic policy in Ireland itself. A direction consistently and principally espoused by this Party the Progressive Democrats. Taxes were cut sharply on enterprise, on employment, on investment.

The net result was to make Ireland a very attractive place for American investors who wanted to do business in Europe. We speak the same language in more ways than one.

This ability to act as a bridge between Europe and America has been absolutely central to Ireland's economic success story.

And it was our membership of the European Union that has helped us to build a strong and enduring economic relationship with the United States, a relationship based on mutual respect and mutual advantage.

With this also came a change in attitude, a change in the Irish mindset?

For years we had engaged in special pleading that we were on the periphery of Europe and that we were severely disadvantaged as a result. Today, far from the periphery we see ourselves strategically situated beside the busiest highway in the world - the highway that links Europe and North America, the highway that carries a billion dollars worth of goods every day.

Sometimes your place in the world depends more on attitude than latitude.

Managing Ireland's relationship with Europe and America has become somewhat more demanding of late not least as we succeeded in winning an ever-more impressive share of US Greenfield investment into Europe.

I recall joking with the late Maurice Roche in the context of the Boston v Berlin dilemma.

And how, located literally and spiritually between Europe and America it appeared we in Ireland were trying to ride two horses at the same time. Maurice would chuckle that if you couldn't do that you shouldn't be in the circus! America is important to Europe. Without America there wouldn't be a liberal and democratic Europe, as we understand it today.

But Europe is also important to America as a union of nations that shares its values, the values of decency and democracy, which define modern western civilisation.

It is a tragedy that a failure of diplomacy and a genuine difference of approach should have led to a rift in Euro/American relationships over Iraq. Those relationships need to be rebuilt.

There were also divisions within Europe, which need healing. The European Union is not a monolith. Different countries have different perspectives, and that was very evident as the Iraqi crisis unfolded.

This summer the union will complete a major process of enlargement. It will take in ten new member states and eighty million new citizens. We will then have twenty-five states and almost half-a-billion people united in democracy and prosperity.

The new states and the new citizens will bring their own distinctive contribution to the expanded union.

They will embrace Europe with the same energy and the same enthusiasm that Ireland did thirty years ago.

They will commit themselves to the European project with the same passion as the Irish. And like the Irish they will want to develop and maintain close and friendly relations with the people of the United States.

But it is vital too that the enlarged Europe and America engage with each other. The best guarantee for peace and prosperity in the world is for the two great democratic unions to work together.

We in Europe, in all our diversity, understand Islamic cultures in a way that the US cannot. We are ideally placed to navigate and nurture a dialogue between the civilisations in order to avoid a catastrophic clash of cultures between Islam and the Western democracies. Europe must be an active sponsor for conflict resolution in the Middle East. We know from our own bitter experience here in Ireland and elsewhere that a security driven response alone to political grievance and terrorism is futile.

The festering nucleus of the current threat of Islamic terrorism lies in the desperation of the Palestinian Street and in the broken hearts and limbs of Israeli victims of suicide bombers.

More people have died violently in the last three years in the Middle East than in the whole of the so called troubles in Northern Ireland. Millions in that region are living lives of despair. A spiral of violence, mutually reinforced by blame and revenge appears unstoppable. It is poisoning the world, setting Islam against the West in a catastrophic argument that has no ending.

There has never been a more urgent need for steady heads and enlightened hearts -never a more desperate need for conflict resolution, tolerance and humanity to inform international relations. Ireland, with our direct experience of colonisation, poverty, underdevelopment, famine, mass emigration have a huge amount to contribute now that we have turned a corner and face a brighter future.

The end of emigration and the growth of net immigration in Ireland have huge social and cultural effects not captured by economic statistics. People are coming here for opportunities just as millions of Irish have done in the past. Those who come have Confidence in Ireland.

Delegates, I spoke earlier about how the concept of openness was such a feature of our economic success. Another major aspect is Confidence.

Confidence is a powerful ingredient in facing challenges of the future. For a very long time we lacked confidence as a country for understandable reasons. And Confidence, as a psychological disposition among the population is not confined to economics; it affects everything from sport, the arts, education, and music - the spring in our step. This Confidence is palpable in modern Ireland particularly amongst our youngsters.

Many people are asking; can this new Confident Ireland remain a civilised place in a globalised world?

To this I say - yes.

In fact if you were to design a small country that could sustain itself spiritually, economically and socially in a globalised world I think Ireland would pass the test.? I do not believe we have lost our soul.

Irish people have a strong moral compass.

We are holding our solidarity with the poorest countries in the world through our aid programme.

We have huge credibility and clout as peacekeepers and humanitarians. We may no longer be saints, but we have plenty of scholars, poets and patriots.

In good times at home we are caring for our elderly and disabled and the most vulnerable.

To our credit, we are very mindful and indeed anguished at the dangers of our new wealth.

We grapple daily with the challenges of lawlessness, intoxication, despair and lost boys.

As a people our hearts in the right place.

We have a strong democracy.

I want to turn now and to say to the new Candidates here who have made a life altering decision to enter public life.

You have made a brave decision.

I was that soldier twelve years ago. Crossing that bridge from private to public life is a tough and lonely decision.

Disregard the sceptics and the nay-sayers. Public service is a noble cause. You will have tremendous opportunities to influence the lives of our people.

Little did I think when I was asking for votes in the Dublin Corporation Elections in 1991 that very soon I would be a T.D. - then not long afterwards in 1997 a Minister negotiating with the British Government in the multi-party talks in Northern Ireland.

Politics is exciting, scary, unpredictable, rewarding. There can be disappointments.

But there is no other job more rewarding if you are honest with the people and work hard.

They don't expect us to be plaster saints and we aren't. You are entering politics at a time of great change. I want you to do so with great Confidence. You are joining a group who have been around now for eighteen years.

A Party, whose credo has been proven right over time.

Which, for the past ten years, has been led by a woman, respected at home and abroad for her innate talents as a politician.

Who has led us into a second term in Government - She is inspirational, unmatched, and unflappable.

Delegates, I heard her say this week in the Dáil that she had been twenty-five years in Leinster House.?

She has therefore travelled an amazing journey of public life with us in Ireland.

More than any other woman she has made a mark in Irish history.

More than anyone else she has been a key driver of that Confidence which has got this country up off its knees and back to work.

Please welcome, and celebrate Tánaiste and our Party Leader Deputy Mary Harney.