

Speech: Secretary of State 'Building Peace' speech

It's a great pleasure for me to be here today, at one of Northern Ireland's two outstanding Universities, as we mark the twentieth anniversary of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement reached on 10 April 1998.

And it's a great honour as a relatively new Secretary of State to be alongside so many of the people who helped to shape history on that day, as we have just seen in the incredibly powerful video.

Let's be in no doubt. The Agreement that was reached twenty years ago was one of historic magnitude, a landmark in the history of Northern Ireland, of Ireland and of these islands.

It was an occasion when politics triumphed over the division and violence that had torn Northern Ireland apart over the preceding two decades.

So on behalf of the UK Government I would like to reiterate our sincerest thanks to those who helped make 10 April 1998 a reality.

People like John Major and Albert Reynolds who began the process in the early 90s and Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern who saw it through its conclusion in 1998.

From the United States, President Bill Clinton and Senator George Mitchell who made such an important contribution and who I am delighted to see receive the 83RD and 84TH Freedom of the City.

And of course to Northern Ireland's political leaders, people like David Trimble, John Hume and others, on all sides whose courage, vision and leadership in 1998 should continue to be an inspiration to all of us in Northern Ireland today.

There's little doubt that as a result of the Agreement Northern Ireland has taken huge strides forward in the past twenty years.

The security situation transformed.

The economy growing.

Unemployment at record lows.

Tourism booming.

Exports thriving.

And, yes, the world's most popular TV show, Game of Thrones!

So let's not be shy in celebrating the successes of the past twenty years.

But let's also be realistic and recognise that there remain huge challenges.

We still face the real threat from dissidents.

Society remains too divided.

Our economy is too dependent on the public sector.

We still need to address the past.

And, we have been absolutely clear in our commitment to avoiding a hard border and no border down the Irish Sea. We've begun discussions between Ireland, the EU and the UK on this and we look forward to making progress together.

And, of course, there is making sure that devolution here is restored so that Northern Ireland has a properly functioning Executive and Assembly so that local decisions are in local hands.

So be assured, the restoration of devolution is the UK Government's number one political priority, as I know it is of the Irish Government and Simon Coveney with whom I work so closely.

The commitment of both our respective governments to the Belfast Agreement remains steadfast.

And if there was ever any doubt as to why the Agreement is as relevant today as it was twenty years ago then we just had such a powerful reminder with the film of those young people we have just seen.

Because at the heart and centre of all that we do in honouring and implementing the Agreement is to build a stronger society and a more secure future, not just for this generation but for generations to come. Only today I had the pleasure of visiting Sullivan Upper School in Holywood and speaking to the young students, the first post-agreement generation, about their hopes for the future.

That's what motivated those who made the Agreement and it's what should motivate everyone in Northern Ireland today.

To spread prosperity and opportunity for all.

To re-establish political stability.

And to build a Northern Ireland which everyone is proud to call home.

A Northern Ireland fit for the future.