

## **SPEECH - MINISTER OF STATE NOEL AHERN TD**

### **INTRODUCTION**

First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased to be here today to take part in this Conference on this interesting and important topic. I have a deep personal interest in the peace process and in the quest to ensure that a lasting peace takes hold on this island. There is also a great deal of interest from our European colleagues in the peace process and this is reflected in the significant role the EU has played, and continues to play, in supporting peace-building in Northern Ireland and the Southern border counties.

While there have been many actors who have contributed to the Peace Process, today, we are here to acknowledge and pay full tribute to the role of the European Union in supporting the North and border counties of the South.

### **EU CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE IN IRELAND**

From the outset, following the cease fires in 1994, our European partners showed a substantial commitment and generosity in supporting the peace process. In September 1994, the first programme – which became known as the PEACE I Programme - was agreed between the European Commission and both the Irish and UK Governments.

*Its stated aim was to “reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing cross-border co-operation and extending social inclusion”.*

It is evident that much progress has been made across all of these areas and such progress would not have been possible without the sustained and substantial commitment from the European Union.

This special support continues apace - only a couple of weeks ago, my colleague, the Tanaiste, Mr Brian Cowen TD, formally launched the PEACE III programme with Minister Peter Robinson and Commissioner Danuta Hubner.

In all, the EU has provided funding of over €1.3 billion for the Peace I and II programmes, benefiting over 22,000 projects in the eligible region. This is testament to the ability of the Peace Programme to reach out to communities across the breadth of Northern Ireland and the Southern border counties.

It should also be mentioned that in addition to the PEACE funding, the EU has also contributed €274m to the International Fund for Ireland since 1989, once more supporting the development of many worthy projects which otherwise would not have gotten off the ground.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

I spoke at an event in Brussels last October with my Northern Ireland Executive colleague, Minister Margaret Ritchie, on the lessons learnt from successive Peace programmes.

One of those lessons, indeed a key lesson, is that the European identity of the funding has a particular value-added, in that it ensures that it can operate on a truly cross-border basis and attract participants from throughout the eligible region, and from all communities. The increased engagement and trust between the two main communities in Northern Ireland and the border region is the bedrock upon which further progress can be made and successive Peace programmes have been most important 'enablers' in this regard.

The EU has provided support when it was needed most and in doing so has made a significant contribution towards embedding a delicate process of peace and reconciliation on these islands.

## **CROSS-BORDER DIMENSION**

I believe that the cross-border programmes in Ireland can help to change the mindset of people on both sides of the border. They help to forge links between different communities and encourage tolerance for diversity.

Research undertaken in relation to the impact of the Peace Programme has shown that, when compared to members of the general population, Programme participants had higher levels of contact between the two communities, were more likely to have a greater number of neighbours and friends from the other community, and had a greater feeling that most members of the other community would try to be fair and helpful.

Indeed Programme participants, through their positive engagement with their own communities, often in leadership roles, are in a great position to further break down barriers between the two main communities on this island

Evidence also shows that projects are impacting on the most marginalised sections of society, by developing activities for individuals and groups such as victims of the conflict, older and vulnerable people, the disabled, victims of domestic violence, ex-prisoners and the young unemployed.

Jobs have been created, training has been offered, people have gained new qualifications, have met new people and have grown in confidence in themselves and in each other.

These are things that will benefit each and every one of us not just now, but for generations to come.

**SPECIAL EU PROGRAMMES BODY (SEUPB)**

We have always believed that the work of the Special EU Programmes Body and the Peace Programmes in particular are an integral part of the overall peace process, offering practical assistance on the ground to support reconciliation and to help the region move towards being a more peaceful and stable society.

The fact that PEACE II is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body, or SEUPB, a cross-border body, is, I believe, a key factor in its success. The North-South bodies are a distinctive partnership approach between the two Governments. The SEUPB is able to work closely with Government departments, North and South, and with social partners from throughout the eligible region, establishing strong working relations with all.

We have seen the fruits of this type of collaborative partnership in the form a new Peace Programme that received early approval from the European Commission and, I am reliably informed, is progressing well.

### **PEACE III 2007-2013**

The new Peace programme, with its focus on reconciling communities and contributing to a shared society, offers the potential to bring the Peace process on to a new level – to move towards the normalisation of society to the point where spaces are shared, relationships are deepened and common problems are met by common solutions.

That we believe that such an objective is within our grasp is testament to how far we have come on the journey, since the inception of the Peace process.

The new Peace programme will have a more strategic focus. Priorities within the Programme will be specifically targeted on areas and groups that have been affected by the conflict and experience particular problems of segregation, marginalisation and isolation.

It is only right and appropriate that one of the particular target groups will be victims and survivors of the conflict. Implementation of the victims and survivors elements of the PEACE funding adds to the effectiveness of policy initiatives in both jurisdictions and supports a necessary healing process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thank you for inviting me here today to be part of what I'm sure will be a stimulating and interesting discussion.