

Remarks by Minister of State Seán Canney T.D. for St. Patrick's Day Reception.

Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens: Thursday 14 March

Ministers, Ambassadors and Guests,

I am delighted to be here in Athens on my first official visit to Greece, our European partner and friend. We may be separated by geography on each side of Europe, but undoubtedly we share much in common: as partners in the European Union for over 40 years, bound by ties of history, and inspired also by the unique gifts that Greece has given to the world.

Indeed the famous Greek cartographer, Claudius Ptolemy, created we believe to be the most reliable map of Ireland around 140 A.D. It is remarkable for its accuracy even then, and historians have noted the precision of place names and the identification of towns and rivers in my native county of Galway and the west of Ireland in those ancient records, based on the charts and diaries of Greek sailors and others from this region. These records in turn were used centuries later by famous Irish explorers such as St. Brendan the Navigator, reminding us of our shared maritime and migrant history.

This year in Ireland, we are marking 100 years of the First Dáil, our Irish Parliament, and we were pleased that the Deputy Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament could come to Dublin to mark this occasion last January.

We are mindful too of the more recent challenges experienced by Greece, and stand in solidarity with you as Greece moves in to a new chapter of its history and, we hope, into a brighter future. Following on the State Visit of our President to Greece last year, we are keen to increase our exchanges of bilateral visits, to promote business between Greece and Ireland and to sustain our programme of Irish cultural events, which I am delighted to hear has increased significantly in Athens and beyond.

So from its very beginning, the Irish State has had a global outlook. At the first meeting of the Dáil, the Irish Parliament - which celebrates its centenary this year -, the decision was made to send envoys abroad to foreign capitals. Ever since then, Ireland has continued to support and advocate for the fundamental values of democracy and international cooperation.

Ireland is seeking United Nations Security Council membership in 2021-2022, with the election to be held in 2020. Our candidature reflects Ireland's continuing engagement on issues of international importance and the centrality of the UN to our foreign policy.

I am pleased to know that so many members of the Greek-Irish Society are here tonight and want to recognise also all that you and your families do to promote Irish culture as well as the special friendship between us. I hear that there is a very active programme of events throughout the year and all involved deserve great praise for its success. St Patrick's Day has special meaning for our Diaspora. It is their opportunity to express their deep pride in being Irish, to recall the contribution of past generations of Irish emigrants to the communities and societies in which they forged new lives.

For many years, Irish people have visited and returned to visit this beautiful country and 2019 will be no exception as Greece welcomes a record number of tourists here this summer. I hope that the images of Ireland around you tonight will encourage also more visitors from Greece to Ireland.

This year, we commemorate one hundred years since the start of our War of Independence while in 2021, here in Greece, 200 years of Independence will be celebrated. I feel sure that that over the two years ahead, we will find more opportunities for doing business and to increase our exchanges at many levels, as committed and pro-European Member States.

We are grateful also to the Greek Government for their steady support in relation to Brexit. In the context of Brexit, it is important to underline Ireland's membership of the European Union. That membership has been one of the keys to our successful development. It has been an enabler for Ireland, projecting our voice and our values around the world in a way that would have been impossible without the European Union.

Our continued membership is understood by the Irish public and strongly endorsed by it. Whatever the outcome of Brexit, Ireland's future is as a member of the European Union. We are fully committed to our membership of the European Union and its standing in the world as a beacon for human rights, free trade, for collective efforts to tackle global

problems, and for support for the international order and rule of law.

Now, in a world of rapid change and uncertainty, the EU is ever more necessary as a bulwark of peace, stability and international cooperation. Ireland will continue to work to shape and influence EU policy and its impact in the world.

I want to acknowledge also the recent success in relation to the Prespes Agreement. In Ireland, we are well aware of the challenges around questions of identity – certainly a key challenge for us in the period leading to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. This outcome is an impressive success in Athens and Skopje, as well as for the broader European family.

The continuing absence of vital institutions of the Good Friday Agreement is a source of deep concern for the Government, as it is for the British Government. The two-year absence of the devolved institutions cannot be allowed to continue. The Government will continue to do everything in its power, in accordance with its responsibilities as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions.

Restoring the institutions of power-sharing in Northern Ireland and North-South relations on the island remains a priority of the highest order for the Government. Brexit poses additional challenges but that has only deepened our determination to restore the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.

As green lights encircle the globe and illuminate famous sites for March 17th, we witness a deeply felt expression of a truly Global Ireland by our kin and friends around the world. I am delighted also that we are seeing the first “Greening” here in Athens at this distinguished building.

The story of St Patrick is emblematic of the many aspects of migration. He personified this and became, rightly, a symbol of the Irish that has echoed down the centuries of Irish history. Through our Diaspora, the story of St Patrick has further influenced the histories of many other countries around the world.

I look forward therefore to my meetings in Athens tomorrow with Government leaders and also to meeting as many of you as possible this evening.

Thank you for joining us to celebrate our National Day and have a very enjoyable evening. In our own first national language I wish you Lá Fhéile Phádraig - Happy St. Patrick's Day.

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