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Keynote address by Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD on the launch of the National Economic and Social Council comprehensive report on *Shared Island: Shared Opportunity*

12 April 2022

Convention Centre, Dublin Castle

Thank you, Tommie.

I'm really pleased to be here at Dublin Castle this morning for the launch of this landmark report by the National Economic and Social Council on *Shared Island: Shared Opportunity*.

For decades, the Council has played a vital role in public policy, as it does today, in undertaking strategic analysis of Ireland's position and prospects.

Assessing how we could do better - in Government and wider society - on fundamental concerns: from sustainable development and climate action; to housing and well-being.

NESC has a unique voice and standing, as a body independent of Government with a membership reflecting the interacting environmental, social and economic pillars of society.

Ken Whitaker - public servant, patriot and first chair of the preceding National Industrial and Economic Council in the 1960's - later wrote of the Council's work that he had:

"No doubt that the intermeshing of cooperative study and action played a significant part in preparing Ireland, psychologically and technically" for the future.

Today's report by NESC is very much a part of that canon.

It guides us on what we need to be prepared to do to create a shared future on this island.

Is obair cheannródaíoch í seo - don Chomhairle í a dhéanamh agus don Rialtas í a fháil araon. Seo í an chéad tuarascáil de chuid an NESC a bhfuil béim thiomnaithe agus straitéiseach leagtha ar chur chuige uile-oileáin.

Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl do Chomhaltaí na Comhairle agus d'fhoireann Rúnaíochta an NESC as an taighde agus rannpháirtíocht fairsing atá déanta acu le bliain anuas chun an tuarascáil chuimsitheach seo a chur i láthair an Rialtais.

This is ground-breaking work - both for the Council to conduct and for Government to receive: the first NESC report with a dedicated and strategic all-island focus.

I want to thank the Council Members and the NESC Secretariat team for their extensive research and engagement over the last year, to bring forward this comprehensive report to Government.

Importantly, NESC is able to bring its respected, consultative and deliberative method to this work.

And an approach that respects fully the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Council's recommendations will be positively considered by the Government, across all Departments.

We will consult and seek to take forward agreed recommendations with our partners in the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government.

And we will work also with Local Authorities and civil society who make such significant and positive contributions to the shared island.

Building a Shared Island

Last October, under the revised National Development Plan, the Government affirmed an unprecedented total all-island investment commitment of more than €3.5 billion.

Including at least €1 billion to our Shared Island Fund, out to 2030.

And we set out new investment priorities, across virtually all sectors, to deploy this funding.

Our goal is to work through all-island partnerships, to invest for a more connected, sustainable and prosperous island, for all.

We are working intensively now, on a whole of Government basis, to make it happen.

My Department's Shared Island unit, based here in Dublin Castle, has a driving and coordinating role, working with all Departments and Agencies.

Last year, the Government allocated €50m from the Shared Island Fund.

To move forward with two landmark cross-border infrastructure commitments - the Ulster Canal and Narrow Water Bridge - that had been talked about for decades.

These projects will link communities and act as a lynchpin for sustainable tourism and recreation in our central and east border regions.

The Government also commenced the first ever all-island strategic rail review, in partnership with the Executive, which will be completed later this year.

This will inform how we invest in sustainable rail, working with the Executive and supported through our Shared Island Fund.

Last month, I and Minister Simon Harris announced over €37m in funding in the first awards made by the Higher Education Authority under the Government's new North South Research Programme, also resourced through the Shared Island Fund.

We are funding researchers in Universities from all corners of the island to work on exciting, pioneering projects over the next four years.

On cancer and vaccine research; enterprise and innovation; and biodiversity conservation; to mention just a few of the 62 successful projects.

And less than a fortnight ago, as part of my visit to Derry, I announced a new €5m Shared Island development funding scheme, open to Local Authorities across the island.

Local Authorities want to work together on a cross-border basis, for instance, to create tourism trails; conserve heritage; protect biodiversity; and help meet regional skills needs.

This new fund provides the seed capital to those local authorities to bring their proposals to the point where they can apply for more substantial support.

My hope is that this new initiative will empower Councils across the island to develop a pipeline of new cross-border capital projects.

That will deliver common regional development goals and our Shared Island National Development Plan objectives.

Today's NESC report sets out the particular achievement and further ambition of the North West City Region - of the two Councils and other stakeholders - to work seamlessly together across the border.

To deliver social, economic and environmental improvements for the whole region.

In Derry, I discussed with the North West Regional Development Group of the two Councils, how the Government will continue to support their impressive work and goals.

Throughout this year, Ministers across Government will be announcing more new Shared Island Fund projects.

Including for:

- EV charging;
- community climate action;
- border region enterprise development; and,
- all-island civil society partnerships.

These are the kind of meaningful actions that will bring us closer together on this island, in real terms, in the years ahead.

We also want to do significantly more with the Executive and the UK Government, to enhance the shared island for all.

Already, the PEACE PLUS programme - funded by the European Union, UK Government, Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive - will provide more than €1bn over the next seven years to support peace and prosperity on this island.

We are seeking to complement this with new, and more strategic and impactful dimensions to our North/South and East/West relationships.

I have had good engagement with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and with political leaders in Northern Ireland on how we can do that, as part of our Shared Island approach.

By working and investing together on common goals - including on climate action and sustainable transport.

And we want to move ahead this year with new all-island research hubs.

To bring industry, research agencies and institutions together to conduct world-leading r&d.

In areas of common priority for both jurisdictions like Cybersecurity, Digital Healthcare and Precision Medicine.

By combining our capacities in these and other areas, we can go far beyond what either jurisdiction can achieve separately. Enhancing the FDI offering and indigenous enterprise base of the whole island.

The Government is ready to significantly resource these Hubs through Science Foundation Ireland and our Shared Island Fund, working with the Executive and UK Government.

Looking to a shared future

These are some of the immediate priorities and prospects for our Shared Island initiative.

Significant and demanding as this investment and cooperation programme is - it is by no means the limit of our ambition.

As we map our future ambitions, today's NESC report will play an important role.

The Government wants to see a deepening of cooperation and societal connections on the island, in all areas.

Because that is how we will better know and relate to each other, across all the different communities that make up the diverse patchwork of identities and experiences that is this island in 2022.

It is how we take forward the fundamental commitment of the Good Friday Agreement to *"strive in every practical way towards reconciliation"*.

This isn't a regional concern, an option or a 'nice to have'.

Reconciliation is a vital interest for us all on the island of Ireland.

Continuing challenges in the Peace Process - including on Brexit and dealing with the legacy of the past - risk holding back the historic opportunity we have now to achieve deeper understanding, trust and harmony between and between communities on this island.

This is a moment for a mending and tending of relationships, across communities, borders and political traditions.

The horror and suffering that we see today in Ukraine, inflicted by Russia's barbaric war, is never far from our thoughts or actions at present.

It is also a stark reminder of just how precious is peace on this island.

We must sustain and consolidate it, as a priceless inheritance for our children and grandchildren.

In Washington last month, President Biden and I affirmed the unequivocal commitment of the United States and Ireland to the Good Friday Agreement and the promise of reconciliation it holds.

I also announced a further €20m commitment by the Irish Government to the International Fund for Ireland, for the next four years of its 'Connecting Communities' Strategy, to support peace-building on this island.

And the Government's Reconciliation Fund has been doubled in recent years.

As Taoiseach, my focus is on securing agreed resolutions to current challenges in the Peace Process, and ensuring that we deliver a new, positive agenda, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

So that we cultivate deeper community and political relationships, through partnerships that deliver tangible improvements for this island, and all the people on it.

NESC recommendations

That is why the Council's report today is so timely and significant.

It makes a series of major recommendations on how we can do just that.

To put reconciliation into practice, by working together on the things that matter most for people across our shared island.

Like addressing climate change and biodiversity loss; supporting good jobs; and tackling poverty.

The Council's findings are grounded in evidence and informed by broad consultation - with practitioners, policy makers, academics and experts from across the whole island.

And the report takes full account of the principles, institutions and procedures of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Council's three overarching conclusions warrant particular attention and reflection:

- There is very significant support in practice for all-island approaches on key challenges;
- Climate and biodiversity loss provide an urgent platform for cross-border action;

and,

- Factors that enable cooperation include a shared agenda and collaborative projects; resourcing; and, political certainty and support.

Political leaders, North/South and East/West, should take account of these findings.

The Government will be guided by them as we work to enhance the shared island for all.

In my view, the broad-based support in civil society for all-island approaches - which NESC have clearly identified - isn't sufficiently acknowledged in our politics.

That support has also come through strongly in the Government's Shared Island Dialogue series, which has so far engaged over 1,300 civic leaders from across this island.

People are more than ready to work together in common cause around shared concerns, North and South.

What's more, they don't view identity in simplistic, zero-sum terms, as it is too often portrayed in politics, particularly in Northern Ireland.

As Patrick Kielty said in his memorable contribution to the Shared Island Forum in December:

“The vast majority of people in the North no longer look at things through a binary prism - People are getting on with their lives, and each other.”

The politics of the peace process needs to catch up.

Today’s Council’s recommendations are most instructive on the opportunities to do that -by working more ambitiously together in our substantial common interests, in Northern Ireland, North/South and East/West, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

For instance, the Council has recommended *more investment in the all-island energy network*.

To help both jurisdictions meet our common renewable electricity commitments and reduce our reliance on imported fossil fuels.

NESC has also called for *special initiatives to tackle concentrations of poverty on this island*.

I believe both Governments and the Executive need to do far more here together - not least on improving education attainments rates, which is imperative in consolidating peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

And, NESC has recommended a *stronger basis for all-island cooperation on enterprise issues*.

This is an obvious gap that we should also bridge, as we work North and South, to enhance clustering, innovation and entrepreneurship, including of women and ethnic minorities.

In total, the Council has made 25 specific recommendations.

Taken together, they represent a prospectus of clear benefits to be gained, for both jurisdictions on the island in environmental, social and economic terms.

The opportunities are there - we need to grasp them.

The Government will consult and seek to build consensus with our partners so that that we take up these evident gains for the people of this island.

I know that today’s event is also an important part of the process of consultation and deliberation for NESC.

To hear the reactions, perspectives and suggestions from everyone attending this morning, in person and online.

And all-island civic engagement will remain central to how the Government proceeds, through the Shared Island Dialogue series and other engagements this year.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to acknowledge and welcome the level of ambition in the Council’s recommendations for what can be achieved on our Shared Island.

That is what we need at this time.

To move beyond the issues confronting us on Brexit and the Protocol.

And turn our energies to working in positive, practical ways to build a better future through the Good Friday Agreement.

In next months' Assembly election, the people of Northern Ireland will provide a new democratic mandate for the devolved power-sharing institutions.

This a consequential moment for political relationships in Northern Ireland. The progress achieved through the Good Friday Agreement over the last 24 years, must be protected and built upon.

The way forward is for all political leaders to live up to the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement, which are overwhelmingly supported by people across this island.

To see all of the political institutions of the Agreement working and delivering for people.

To reaffirm partnership, equality and mutual respect as of the basis of our political relationships.

And to work with sustained ambition in our common interests for a shared future for all.

Today's report by the National Economic and Social Council helps light the way on how we can do that.

It will significantly inform how the Government develops our Shared Island initiative in the years ahead.

Finally, I want to acknowledge one other significant launch today for the Peace Process:

The start this evening of series 3 of the magnificent 'Derry Girls', written by Lisa McGee.

Now, there's not much from earlier episodes that I can quote as Taoiseach without causing misunderstanding!

But as brilliantly funny as it is, Derry Girls also tells a deeper story.

A journey of friends, of a city and of a society:

To win peace.

To cherish diversity.

And to strive for a brighter future.

A story that we know so well.

And one that we still need to write together on this island, through the Good Friday Agreement.

I believe we will.

Thank you.

Ends