Speech by Minister of State, Brian Hayes TD at
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It is a pleasure to be here with you this afternoon for this important conference. This session focuses on the subject of identity and the challenge of accommodating different traditions. It is a challenge we have struggled with on this island for many decades. But the settlement that is the Good Friday Agreement has given all of us here in Ireland and in Britain an opportunity to look afresh at our collective identity. The Agreement is much more than a political agreement. It challenges all of us to put ourself in the other person's shoes and to look at identity as a complex and multi-layered issue.

The Good Friday Agreement engaged with the issue of identity in interesting ways. This started from the way in which the negotiations themselves were conducted. The two sides reached agreement on the principle of 'Parity of Esteem', by which each of the participants in the talks agreed to accord one another the right to be listened to and the right to be respected. Even when consensus was absent, this principle of respect for opposing identities and perspectives was vital. The Agreement itself contains a number of key provisions on culture and identity.

In the previous session we considered justice and policing issues. Great care has been taken in creating the new Police Service of Northern Ireland to focus on neutral symbols and emblems that did not favour one set of traditions over another.

The Agreement also recognised the important and sensitive role played in the public space by language. It provided for the establishment of a North-South body responsible for promoting the Irish language and the Ulster Scots language.

Understanding history is never easy. As we know history is written frequently from the perspective of the victors. The dominant or majority tradition frequently demands that its history and its culture become dominant in whatever country.

The great northern historian ATQ Stewart describes the whole of Irish history as a challenge. He says that Irish history is too important to be left to Irish historians, since they all seemed to agree more or less on its general outline and where it was heading. The success of the Good Friday Agreement gives us an opportunity to also begin to tell those bits of the story that often confuse the general outline. Our recent experience and journey together, gives us the confidence to discover even more about each other.

In examining history, we can see that there is potential for these to be exploited to incite division, mistrust or fear. Prof Ronan Fanning's essay, "The great enchantment; uses and abuses of modern Irish history", should be compulsory reading for anyone attempting to understand these events. In it he highlights T W Moody's 1977 advice: "all nations have their myths, which affect their corporate lives and do so strongly in times of strain or crisis or unresolved conflict".

I would like to talk to you today about how we commemorate the past in Ireland. We are at an important juncture on this island. This year marks the start of a decade of sensitive anniversaries and commemorations. Some of these events and their anniversaries are important to the Protestant unionist community while others are cherished by Irish nationalists. Many of them were central to the creation of the Irish state itself. Even some of these events highlight the division between Irish nationalism, a division that is frequently misunderstood north of the border and can sometimes be described as a conflict between the parliamentary tradition, and that of the more militant republican tradition. Yet all of this needs to be exposed in the pure sunlight of commemoration, not just for ourselves, but for those who look on from afar.

Remembrance is an extremely complex social and psychological phenomenon. Why remember at all? What do we choose to remember and what would we prefer to forget? What social function does remembrance serve? Each country and every society has its own stories.

And each generation retells and reshapes old stories in the light of current thinking. And of course each generation creates its own stories. During the last ten years Ireland has been forced to listen to some new and very disturbing stories from its own past which challenged, in a very fundamental way, our own self-image. I am sure every country in Europe has its own dark stories. And I think perhaps we learn more if we have the courage to listen to and face the dark stories of human history. And of course, the first half of the last century was one of the darkest periods in European history. The physical and human destruction was on a truly tragic scale. Historians have estimated that in the first 50 years of the last century approximately 80 million people died violently in Europe.

In particular, the coming decade will see the centenaries of a number of key events in Irish history, events which led to independence from Britain and the partition of this island. The decade from 1912 – 1922 shaped the history of Ireland, and our relationship with Britain, for the following hundred years. At the start of the decade, Ireland was fully part of the United Kingdom. By the end, Ireland was an independent state, albeit part of the Commonwealth, and the island of Ireland was partitioned north and south The events of that period affected the lives of every person on this island.

In the years following the partition of Ireland in the 1920s, the past – both in terms of events of centuries past, and more recent history – was commemorated on both sides of the border in ways which could be seen as exclusive and triumphalist. The majority identity prevailed as the true national identity on both sides of the border. There was very little room to accommodate difference. Minority expression, on both sides of the border, kept its head down while the majority celebrated in gusto fashion. It was all very comfortable and very exclusive. And those who saw themselves as both British and Irish were often seen as a complicating factor to the prevailing national identity. This served, on both sides of the border, to consolidate a particular majoritarian view of national identity, excluding national minorities from the public sphere.

What I believe is totally overlooked is the impact of Ireland joining the EEC, as it then was, in the early 1970's. Suddenly Ireland and Britain were members of the same club. We became Europeans in a very public way. We could all sit around the same table and vote as equals. We could agree or disagree with each other. And do that grubby thing that politicians call 'deal-making'. Suddenly, the outcome of solutions were not exclusive to Britain or

Ireland. The European identity, which many people under 40 in this country have a strong association with, has helped us to overcome some of the inferiority complex that goes with living next to a big country. Frequently we totally underestimate the experience of Ireland and Britain as co-members of the European Union in helping to look at identity in a totally new way. The reason why the British-Irish relationship developed so significantly since the mid 1980's was in many respects down to Europe and our combined membership.

Depending on how it is done, remembrance of the past can, therefore, serve to bring people together as much as divide them. It is for this reason that the coming centenary commemorations represent a unique opportunity to deepen understanding and foster reconciliation between the different communities on this island, and between Ireland and Britain.

For this reason, the Irish government has committed to basing its programme of commemorative activity on the principles of tolerance respect and inclusiveness, recognising the all-Ireland and East/West shared nature of the decade. The challenge facing us will be to acknowledge the legitimacy of differing interpretations of our shared history, as we examine the past events which have defined us.

One particular anniversary which has, in the past, served both as a source of division and, more recently, in the process of reconciliation, has been that of the great tragedy of the early twentieth century, the First World War. The War hangs like a shroud over the entire period and there will be few – if any – in this room whose own histories have not in some way been shaped by it. Over 200,000 men from both traditions on this island, fought in the Great War and over 40,000 of them never came home. The War has particular resonance in Ireland coming, as it did, in the middle of the great struggles for and against Irish self-rule.

The significance of the Battle of the Somme, for example, in the historical memory of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland cannot be overstated. Thousands of Unionists joined the British army at the outbreak of the war, notably in the 36th Ulster Division, but also in other regiments. These men fought and died in their thousands in the opening days of the Somme, and their sacrifice came to be seen as a debt of honour owed to their community by Britain.

However, many thousands of Irish nationalists also joined the British Army in the course of the War, believing that their loyalty to the Crown would be repaid in Irish self-government when the fighting was over. What is frequently ignored is the astonishing connection between the British army and literally thousands of Irish Nationalists who joined it not just in the First World War, but also in the Second World War, when this state was neutral.

It is unfortunately true that we in the South for many years failed to recognise the extraordinary contribution of the Irishmen who fought and died in both World Wars. I am glad that that has changed substantially in recent years, and remembrance of these men will be a cornerstone of commemorative activity in the years ahead.

Last year we witnessed Queen Elizabeth and President McAleese paying their respects to those who died in the First World War and in the struggle for Irish freedom at the Garden of Remembrance and at the National War Memorial Gardens in Dublin. This reminded us of the important milestone in 1998, when together with King Albert of Belgium, they opened the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines.

These sites of remembrance are important. Take for instance the site of the Battle of the Boyne. This battle site is of great importance to the history and sense of identity of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland. One of the outcomes of the peace process was a commitment to develop this historical site in a way that tells the story of the events that took place there, and enables all the people of this island to benefit from it.

This was a major political as well as historical undertaking. I have asked Dr. Eugene Keane of the Office of Public Works to talk to you later this afternoon about the Boyne site and how it was developed in consultation with the Unionist community.

The visit last year of Queen Elizabeth, and the joint nature of the commemorations that both she and President McAleese engaged upon, has in my view established a new gold standard in the way in which we must commemorate events together. If we have asked the parties of Northern Ireland to share power, to solve problems on a joint basis and to provide a community-wide response to the issues of the day, it's only right that we as sovereign governments should follow that example in how we approach the thorny issue of commemorating the past. We need to ensure that these events are embraced within our

community. Leadership matters. When the Heads of State of both jurisdictions commemorate together it sets a standard for everyone else and challenges everyone else to look upon these events differently.

Of course there are enormous dangers in this. We must remain alive to the dangers presented by remembrance of the past. There are a number of small groups who wish to undo the progress we have made. They must not be allowed to succeed. We should not accept any narrow claims of true ownership of any historical event. Rather, if we are to use the opportunity afforded by the decade to foster reconciliation, we must learn to view the past as a shared space, where each of us has a right to our own views, but where we can come together in shared remembrance and commemoration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The question of identity was one of the most challenging issues faced in the Northern Ireland peace process, and continues to pose questions of how best to accommodate and respect different traditions today. I hope that, in opening this session, I have provided a sense of how we continue to engage with these questions. While the Peace Process is an extraordinary success and gives us all hope, not just here in Ireland, but in so many other places of conflict across the world; we must not take it for granted. It must be worked upon and people must always be challenged by the underlying objective of peace and reconciliation here in Ireland. It is a means to an end. And that end can only be built on with genuine respect and tolerance in a shared society of shared nationalities.

And let me finish on a personal note. I have been involved in politics for more than 20 years. I have actively supported the Peace Process in Ireland, and the ongoing work of reconciliation between all the people who live on our two islands. I am also a committed European. I do take a strong interest in Irish, British and European history. And history also teaches me that within all human societies there are ideas and actions and language which serve to strengthen the ties that bind human societies together. But history also teaches me that there is a dark side to humanity, which generates powerful destructive forces. We must never take for granted stability, security and the human pleasures of a decent life, lived in peace. We all have an obligation to strengthen the ties that bind us together and drain the poison from the forces that try to pull us apart.

Thank you.