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Remarks by the Taoiseach to the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, Philadelphia, March 11th 2017

President Heenan, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honoured and very pleased to be with you in Philadelphia tonight at this historical dinner, which is one of the most famous of the annual celebrations of St Patrick in the United States.

The fact that this is the two hundredth and forty sixth dinner highlights the unique, pioneering and steadfast leadership this organisation has given in nurturing the kinship between Ireland and the United States of America.

Your leadership has been historic for Ireland. Thank you for that leadership and for the vision you have kept alive for this and future generations.

The Friendly Sons and the Irish of Philadelphia have defined the story and identity of the Irish here in the United States.

You have anchored our story in our best selves.

Our shared Irish American values of solidarity, equality, of community, human dignity, freedom and democracy. Your mission and noble purpose endures.

Ireland's Economy

At home Ireland continues to emerge from our recent economic difficulties with renewed strength and confidence.

While there may be troubled waters ahead with the decision of our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom, to leave the EU, I am confident that we are prepared to withstand the challenges ahead.



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There are more than 2 million people now in work – the highest level since 2008. Unemployment has fallen by almost 2% alone in the past 12 months which is fantastic progress.

Last year our economy grew by an impressive 5.2% which outpaced most of our European partners.

The significance of trade and investment for Ireland is nowhere more clearly seen than in our bilateral economic relationship with the United States.

The US also continues to be Ireland's largest source of inward investment, accounting for around 70% of all inward FDI, employing up to 150,000 people in more than 700 operations in Ireland. In the other direction, more than 700 Irish companies employ close to 100,000 Americans across all 50 States.

We look forward to seeing more and more Irish companies set up operations here in the US and strengthening the US economy.

As a result of these new ties more Americans than ever before are visiting Irish shores. Last year, we welcomed 1.6 million visitors from North America. 1 in 10 of all American visitors to Europe now visits Ireland.

Immigration

I also want to particularly thank the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick for supporting the outstanding Irish Immigration centre in Philadelphia for the work they do to protect the rights of Irish emigrants in our own times.

It will be no surprise to anyone here that one of my absolute priorities in meeting Vice President Pence, President Trump and other senior political figures this coming week is to renew the strong case on behalf of the hard-working, tax-paying Irish people in the United States who for too long now have been living in the shadows, and want nothing more than to continue making their contribution to this great country.

We all understand that immigration reform is a politically sensitive issue. However, I truly believe that a US immigration system that addresses the needs of the undocumented Irish, and provides for future legal flows, will be of huge benefit to America.

Ambassador Anderson

Of course a very significant priority for Ambassador Anderson during her time here has been to address the plight of the undocumented Irish.

I was delighted last year that your pioneering Irish American spirit and commitment to equality lead you to the historic decision to admit women members.

I salute that decision.

It is a just and courageous step forward. You chose to honour our great Ambassador to the United States by conferring the honour of Anne Anderson being the first ever woman member.

I am very grateful that you did so - her record of service to Ireland is stellar and in honouring our Ambassador you honoured the leadership of all women.

I'm confident that your decision strengthens the Friendly Sons and your capacity to do even more good in these challenging times.

Friendly Sons of St. Patrick

Since its founding in 1771, the Friendly Sons have had exceptional leadership starting with the Society's first President, Stephen Moylan, George Washington's Quartermaster General and now today with Joseph P. Heenan and the Board.

When the Society was formed, many members had fought in the Revolutionary War and were some of the most active and influential patriots of the country.

Easily the most prominent of the early Friendly Sons members, however, was a military man and gentleman farmer from Virginia who became an honorary member in 1782.

In his membership speech, he said, "I accept with singular pleasure, the ensign of so worthy a fraternity as that of the Sons of St. Patrick in this City, a society distinguished for the firm adherence of its members to the glorious cause in which we are embarked."

This was in 1782, seven years before George Washington would go on to become President of the United States.

John F. Kennedy

Tonight I follow in the footsteps of another great President. John F. Kennedy, who, as a Senator, spoke of the "emerald thread" that runs between Philadelphia and Ireland when he addressed the Friendly Sons 60 years ago.

Of course, in just over two months time we will commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of John F. Kennedy.

His inspiring words and vision continue to offer an example to all of us in public life, and I know this anniversary will be widely marked across Irish America and in Ireland.

Conclusion

We will continue to cherish the bonds we have here in the United States. We thank you for your support and love of Ireland.

Beannacht Lá Fhéile Padraig go leir!

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