

Remarks Following a Meeting With Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland
March 20, 2012

President Obama. Well, it is my great pleasure to welcome once again *Taoiseach*, Mr. Kenny, who has done, I think, extraordinary work during a very difficult time. Over the last several years, we've been able to strike up a friendship. And you'll notice that even though technically it is not St. Patrick's Day, we like to prolong the party around here. Technically, most of the Americans who celebrate St. Patrick's Day aren't Irish anyway—[laughter]—so we shouldn't go on technicalities.

I want to thank the *Taoiseach*, his lovely wife, and all of the people of Ireland for the extraordinary hospitality they showed Michelle and I when we had the chance to travel there recently. It was a magical day. It was too short, so I provided assurances that we will be returning. But the warmth and the good will that was expressed towards us I think was really representative of the deep bonds that exist between the United States and Ireland, bonds that are almost unique among two countries around the world. And the impact obviously that Ireland and Irish American—that Irish culture has had on the United States is almost unparalleled.

We have had a terrific discussion about a wide range of issues. Obviously, for both of our countries, one of the biggest priorities is getting the economy moving in the right direction and putting our people back to work. And the *Taoiseach* described to me the steps that they've taken to try to stabilize the banking system there, to get control of their budget, and to be in a position to grow in the future.

And it is important that both the people of Ireland and the American people understand the extraordinary benefits of trade, commerce, and investment between our two countries. We are obviously an extraordinary contributor to investment in Ireland, and that's something of great importance to the people of Ireland. Conversely, Irish businesses invest and employ huge numbers of Americans as well.

And so we are continuing to identify and describe additional areas where we can strengthen those strong economic bonds. And I expressed to the *Taoiseach* my confidence in not only his government's ability to get Ireland moving again, but also we consulted on the broader issue of how Europe can begin to grow again, which obviously has an impact on our economy.

I also had an opportunity to thank him for the continued exemplary efforts by the men and women in uniform in Ireland who contribute to peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts all around the world, from Kosovo to Lebanon. As I've said before, Ireland punches above its weight internationally and has a long history rooted in its own experience of making sure that not only is peace a priority, but also that the human needs of—on issues like hunger are addressed. And even in the midst of a relatively austere time, Ireland has continued to step up internationally, and we greatly appreciate that.

I'm pleased to see that progress continues to be made with respect to the agreement in Northern Ireland, and we discussed how the United States wants to continue to be supportive on that issue as well.

So once again, *Taoiseach*, welcome. We are always pleased to see you here. And the expressions of affection that I experienced when I was in Ireland I'm sure you are experiencing in return while you are here, because the American people have just an extraordinary affinity and fondness for the Irish people. And we are looking forward to you having a very productive visit, and we look forward to going over to Capitol Hill well—where even when it's not St. Patrick's Day, everybody claims to have a little bit of Irish roots.

Prime Minister Kenny. [*Inaudible*—]pleasure.

The President. Thank you.

Prime Minister Kenny. Could I say, first of all, I want to thank the President and the First Lady for the accommodation last evening. It's always good to have a place to stay in Washington. And it's a signal honor to be allowed to stay in Blair House, but also to come here to the Oval Office and have this conversation this morning.

I'd just like to say that I've given the President a rundown on the decisions taken by my government in the last 12 months to stabilize our public finances and to put our own house in order, but also to play a part, clearly, in the European Union, which is so important in a global sense. And from that point of view, I gave the President a rundown on the changes in the structure of banks, the decisions taken by government in relation to public sector numbers, the forcing down of costs and therefore the increase in competitiveness, and to report to him signs of confidence returning to the Irish economy. But we still have a very long way to go. Otherwise, we've made a good, solid start but clearly there are challenges ahead.

I also reported to the President that the conversation around the table of Europe in the last 10 months has shifted from one of being just austerity to being one of good budgetary discipline, but also where clearly the agenda for growth and jobs will now be central to every European Council meeting.

I gave the President an outline of my views in respect of the fiscal compact treaty and how I will expect the Irish people, in their pragmatism and understanding of what the future holds, to vote strongly in favor of the treaty and that this represents a real insurance policy both for the country and for the next generation of children, but also not to allow any future government to run riot with the people's money as has happened in the past.

We discussed the question of the development of the European economies and how other countries are making efforts aligned with our own to have that as a central issue for the time ahead. We also discussed the trading links between the U.S. and Ireland. I pointed out to the President my interaction with the American Chamber of Commerce and the chief executives of multinationals in Ireland. We discussed the question of the possibility of semesters, either way, for young people involved in innovation and research and education, which is so important in the context of what multinational companies are actually looking for.

As well as that, we discussed the issue of Syria, and I gave the President a rundown on the last discussions at the European Council meeting. We also discussed the question of Iran and what the U.S. has said very clearly about this and the short time window that there is in that regard.

We referred to the possibility of an opportunity to travel again to Ireland, and the President has confirmed that in due course. Obviously, he's got a little matter to attend to here in America between this and then. But I just wanted to say to you that it's a reestablishment, if

you like, and a redefining of the absolutely unique relationship that there is between Ireland and the United States.

I pointed out to President Obama since my visit here to Chicago, his home city, the extraordinary outpouring of enthusiasm and exuberance in the streets of Chicago on Saturday and my visit to Notre Dame in South Bend and the opportunities that we had in New York to meet with Irish American business, with American investment business, the Ireland investment day in the stock exchange.

And here in Washington for the past 2 days has been simply outstanding. And it confirms my belief that the reputation of our country has been restored internationally and that the unique relationship that we've always had with the United States for so many reasons is exceptionally strong. And I told the President of the great work being done by Ambassador Rooney, but also that Ireland respects America for what it does, both in our own context, but also to keep the world a safer place for the hundreds of millions of people who look for real leadership in this regard.

I thank President Obama and his Government and his First Lady for all they do for so many people around the world. And as I say, it's a privilege to be here in the Oval Office to represent our country and have this opportunity on St. Patrick's week. [*Laughter*]

Thank you.

President Obama. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:09 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Fionnuala Kenny, wife of Prime Minister Kenny. Prime Minister Kenny referred to U.S. Ambassador to Ireland Daniel M. Rooney.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Ireland, Prime Minister Kenny.

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