I. Introduction

1. Acknowledgements

Lord Kinnock, Sir David, Ambassador, and ladies and gentlemen, good morning and thank you for the lovely welcome. It is lovely to be here. I am very grateful to the British Council for the opportunity to be in such very distinguished company at such an early hour of the morning, and in such a venerable institute as the Institution of Engineering and Technology. It is a wonderful venue.

To the Chair of the British Council, Lord Neil Kinnock, and to Sir David Green, a very big thank you for the invitation that brings me among you and gets you out of your bed very early this morning.

2. The British Council

In another life, as Lord Kinnock has said, over a decade ago, I was for a short time a member of the British Council in Northern Ireland. Since becoming President I have maintained a very strong interest in its work, and especially its seminal role in promoting a deeper and more comprehensive and more intelligent level of mutual understanding between those who live in Northern Ireland, between those who share the island of Ireland and between those who live on these two neighbouring islands.

Twice now, in reasonably recent times, the Council has published collections of challenging and insightful essays dealing with those historically fraught relationships, under the very apt title of ‘Lives Entwined’.

II. The Changing Faces of Ireland

1. Introduction

Next door to my family home in the West of Ireland there is a derelict stone cottage which, even in its dereliction, has a tragic beauty about it. It is wreathed in brambles and ivy. At first glance, it is
as if the brambles and ivy are actually holding it together. In truth, they are insidiously and relentlessly prising the stones apart and will in the end be the death of the house.

Our entwined lives, on these two islands and within the island of Ireland, have historically had strong elements of the brambles and the ivy about them, sadly. However, thanks to the courageous work undertaken by so many people, among them those working in the name of the British Council, we are pulling back the ivy and the brambles, revealing both the beauty and the brokenness that lie beneath them, and importantly beginning the job of building anew; building better and building stronger.

With a backdrop of consolidating peace in the North, with a stellar economy in the South, and with the best relationship ever between the governments in Westminster and Dublin, I am very certain that I am safe in saying that we are privileged to meet in what really are the best of times.

2. **History of Irish Emigrants**

It is a particularly auspicious time to talk about the theme of this address which is looking at the ‘Changing Faces of Ireland, in terms of Migration and Multiculturalism’ for Ireland is living through what is probably the most exciting and certainly the most hope-filled period in its history. It is very important also to say that this is a journey which we are only really at the beginning of.

Only a few short years ago Irish life was characterised almost exclusively by journeys of a different kind: the journeys of our emigrant sons and daughters, forced by lack of opportunity at home to make their lives abroad, whether it was in the United States, Canada, Australia or here in Britain. Their going was a tragedy and that was how it was seen. It was also seen as a defeat, and that is what it was. Families were left heartbroken and communities throughout Ireland were left stagnant, as the emigrant boats and planes robbed them of their youth of their young people.

That was certainly my experience of my grandparents’ lives in the West of Ireland; a life of sadness, loneliness and great tragedy. Their family was scattered around the world. It was a common phenomenon.

The experience of being emigrants around the world was mixed. I do not think we should over-gild the lily, in many ways. It was mixed because often, although their labour was essential, the welcome mat could include signs that read ‘No Irish need apply.’

3. **A Population in Decline**

That is how it was for over a century and a half: a population in what seemed like inexorable decline in Ireland and mired in underachievement. The mood is very memorably described by Seamus Heaney in his poem ‘From the Canton of Expectation’:

‘We lived deep in a land of optative moods,

under high, banked clouds of resignation…’

It sounds an awful place to live. However, then the poem says:

“And next thing, suddenly, this change of mood

Books open in the newly wired kitchens…”
I remember the electric coming. I remember my grandfather deciding not to have it, on the basis that it was the ‘Devil’s own instrument and it would never catch on’. He could have been right about the first, particularly in these days of global warming. However, the second he was definitely wrong about.

4. Education

Those books in those newly-wired kitchens heralded the arrival of free universal second level education in the Republic at the end of the 1960s. It came a little earlier in the place that Seamus was writing about, in Northern Ireland. Those books opened up access to Ireland’s greatest natural resource: the brainpower of its own people. Thanks to education, that great foundation stone of personal and national empowerment, we began to harvest and to harness that which had for so long, and that which had been exported for so long: our own brainpower.

Higher education, which had until then been the preserve of a small and elite group, rapidly became the norm so that today, almost 60% of those who finish second-level education go on to third level. We have one of the highest participation rates in third-level education in the world.

In that same poem, Seamus Heaney indicates something of the power of this newly-educated generation. He describes them as having ‘intelligences brightened and unmannerly as crowbars.’ It us just as well as they had a lot of heavy lifting to do. They had to lift the deadweight of history. Also, with that brainpower and heavy-lifting intellectual power, in a remarkable reversal of fortune, they have successfully tackled many of the obstacles which prevented Ireland from fully flourishing.

5. Fresh Thinking

The negative impact of colonialism and the long struggle for independence had conduced initially to a culture of protectionism, which had little to boast of economically. However, then, with this newly-educated generation, came a surge of fresh thinking that brought us into the European Union, reconnecting us to our historic roots in Europe as the one-time bringers of literacy and Christianity. Of course, it did not just link us to the historic past, but importantly now linked our futures intimately with the futures of our European neighbours.

Here was a Union which we had volunteered to join; which placed us in a collegial partnership with other member states and in particular with our neighbours in Great Britain. Just as the European Union itself had mended fences between the major protagonists in two bitterly fought World Wars, so too it proved to be a crucial bridge between these two neighbouring but once not so neighbourly islands.

6. Friendship with Great Britain

It is quite remarkable, and a tribute to the power of the Union table, that the relationship between Ireland and Great Britain matured and blossomed into a firm, respectful friendship – the best historically – during the testing and tough times of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Of course that friendship, the consolidating friendship, has itself been a crucial driver of the Northern Ireland Peace Process which, after a long gestation period, is now flourishing.

Two weeks ago in Croke Park, as I think Lord Kinnock took sinful pleasure in remind us, we saw a very moving and heart-warming affirmation of the contemporary friendship between England and
Ireland. While the final score, it has to be said, was hard for England to swallow, in truth the day was a win for human decency; for moving on, for focussing on the future and on being simply good neighbours to one another.

7. Social Partnership

The problem-solving generation which gave us that wonderful, historic day out in Croke Park also gave us a model of social partnership which has underpinned Ireland’s economic growth, industrial stability and increased standard of living. It is an example of practical patriotism and pragmatism. The partnership, which is now 20 years old, involves government, employers, trade unions, farmers, and the community and voluntary sectors in regularly hammering out national agreements that cover a range of issues, including wage increases, productivity and, importantly, spending on social inclusion.

The consensus-oriented climate that the partnership has promoted, allied to an attractive corporate tax regime and an educated flexible young workforce, helped to attract many inward investors to Ireland who, in turn, created the conditions for what is now a thriving local entrepreneurship. Between them all they gave us the phenomenon dubbed the ‘Celtic Tiger’ the thing that so many people have come to Ireland to be a part of.

8. The Transformation of Ireland

In less than two decades Ireland has been transformed. A century and a half of relentless outward migration has, in one decade, been reversed. Today our young people stay home and they make good lives, for we have virtually full employment. Many of our former emigrants are returning to Ireland and Ireland has rapidly become home to tens of thousands of new emigrants, the vast majority of them from the new member states of the European Union who joined in the last four years.

9. The Contribution of Emigrants

In less than a decade, emigrants have come to make up 10% of our workforce and their energy, their skills, their youth, their dynamism, their hopes and their appetites for better lives are now an important dynamic in our continuing economic success. They are almost invariably well educated and, in our socially mobile society, they have significant opportunities to prosper.

Schools, workplaces and communities have become confluences of cultures, languages, cuisines, ethnicities, and faiths, and our country with its richly textured cultural heritage, its historic empathy for the emigrant, and its legendary welcome – what we call the Fáilte – is already the sowing the seeds of a fascinating future. It is precisely the kind of future hoped for, planned for and dreamt of by those who founded the European Union; a common homeland where people can be fully and absolutely themselves and yet share a common future, common experiences and a broadly drawn common identity as brother and sister Europeans who live happily with their own individual identity.

Today’s emigrants to Ireland, whether they come from Poland or Nigeria, China or Latvia, are helping to replenish the wells from which we will draw tomorrow’s its inspiration, whether it is for the arts, politics, commercial and social entrepreneurialism, community building, cuisine, education, and much more.
Our human links of family and friendship, with parts of the world from which we were historically, geographically and politically removed, are being strengthened day by day, helping us to build global networks of shared memories, shared children, common endeavour and mutual understanding. These are all things which build us up humanly and build up rather than diminish our world.

10. The Success of Irish Emigrants

The Irish know better than many other races how valuable the emigrants to our shores are. We know these things because of our own extensive history of being emigrants. We are proud of the contribution our emigrants have made wherever they have gone; and though the Irish word for exile is ‘deoraíocht’ – which comes from the Irish word for tears – we have lived long enough to see our emigrants and their offspring power their way into every sphere of civic life around the world; first-rate ambassadors for Ireland and effective bridges between Ireland and so many other countries and peoples.

The success of our emigrants in politics, business, education and the arts inspired over generations has helped to inspire our self-belief at home through very fallow periods, just indeed as their remittances of hard-earned shillings and dollars helped lift the quality of life of their families left at home. In every generation they have filled the wells of Ireland’s cultural heritage, bringing huge dynamism and fresh imagination.

In this generation, I think of Thomas Kenneally in Australia, author of *Schindler’s List*; Tony award-winning playwright Martin McDonagh, who writes in a quintessentially Irish fashion but with the power of London life behind him; dancer-choreographer extraordinaire Michael Flatley, who was born and raised in Chicago. He learnt his Irish dancing there and brought it back to Ireland. We recognised it as Irish dancing plus plus. He also made a new profession of Irish dancing as well as a worldwide phenomenon of it. There is a list that could wrap itself around Ireland several times of people living outside the island of Ireland, of Irish parents and Irish heritage who are contributing to this thing we call ‘Irish culture’.

I do not think it would be churlish to mention the name of a young rugby player by the name of Shane Geraghty who helped England to victory over France in Twickenham last week. At one point, my daughter heard me sing, ‘Our lads are doing really well!’ She said, ‘Mum, that is England playing.’ I said, ‘Yes. Our lads are doing very well here.’ In helping England to victory over France, he helped both Ireland and England’s chances of winning the Six Nations championship! These are marvellous and miraculous days, are they not?

11. Characteristics of Emigrants

You need courage to be an emigrant; to be a stranger with a heart-breaking loneliness for home and a very deep human need to be made feel at home in a new homeland. Many face the isolating effect of barriers of language, religion, colour, ignorance and bigotry. You need tremendous determination to transcend all these things that drain away your self-belief and, at the same time, you have to still work with determination to make a better life for yourself and your family; to keep pushing this little space you are creating to prove your worth.

This is all very familiar territory to the Irish and we hope that our distilled wisdom and experience will enable us to ensure a rapid and easy melding of our new citizens into Irish life. Frankly, of all the people on the planet we have no excuse in Ireland for getting it wrong, and a lot of work is going in to trying to get it right.
12. The Speed and Scale of Change

What is perhaps unique to the Irish situation is the speed and scale of change. We have absorbed in one decade what many other so-called ‘countries of immigration’ absorbed over many decades, if not centuries. Today, for example, a quarter of all new homes that are being bought in Ireland are being bought by non-Irish nationals so clearly many of them intend to stay. Others intend to return eventually to their homelands. That of course is much easier nowadays: to go back and forth.

If you were standing in O’Connell Street at this moment, you would see a line of buses with a big sign up saying ‘Warsaw’. Many children in Ireland will be growing up believing that Warsaw is just a bus ride down the road.

13. Contribution to the Emigrants’ Homeland

With the experience and money garnered in Ireland, and the confidence and the skill, they will take those things back and put them to good use in building up their own countries which also have an ambition to do the thing that Ireland has done and to go the journey that Ireland has done. At the same time, when they do return, we know that we will continue to benefit because they are now people with very strong links to Ireland. Their intimate knowledge of Ireland, and I hope love of Ireland, will help to close the gaps of history and geography into a new generation.

14. Welcoming Emigrants

Our newspapers, banks, cinemas, shops and media now court the newcomers by providing services in their own languages. I am regularly greeted in 20-30 languages in our schools. The shop-fronts and sounds on the street all tell of a landscape adapting to new needs and new voices. That ready understanding that we have comes very spontaneously to most of the Irish.

We understand, having ourselves had this experience, that when you are an emigrant the first thing that you probably need, apart from being made to feel welcome, is the comfort of the familiar. You need places and associations where you can meet with your fellow countrymen, speak your own language, express and continue to develop your own identity. You can express your culture as a gift to this new community.

We have done that all around the world, wherever we have gone. You will see it next Saturday in the St Patrick’s Day parades. We also understand that need to be who you are; not to have others to insist that you become who they are. We understand that. We also understand their need to belong to the wider Irish community in ways that are fulfilling and meaningful. That onus is on is to openly embrace, to offer the welcome.

15. Manifestations

Just as many an emigrant Irish musician introduced a new audience to jigs and reels, so too Irish audiences are tuning into the African djembe drums and the Chinese erhu. These are wonderful manifestations, and in a small country, the manifestations are all the louder. This week’s St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin, and indeed elsewhere in Ireland, will be manifestly multicultural events as we invite our new colleagues, friends and neighbours to join the party in their way, demonstrating who they are and what they are, and bringing to us the gift of their own identity and their own ways of celebrating.
16. **A Change in the Population**

According to the Central Statistics Office, the population of Ireland is projected to grow by 25% in the next few decades with inward migration being the significant factor in that growth. This is a remarkable thing for Ireland. For virtually all of my lifetime, the population has been declining.

Ireland is a youthful country, unlike so many of our European neighbours. It is a country of easy social mobility where hard-working well-educated emigrants, hungry for personal advancement, as the vast majority of our newcomers are, will rapidly broaden and deepen their contribution to every aspect of Irish life.

As they change their own lives, they will also change our lives. They are already reshaping our political, social, economic and planning discourse. We see the first of them already elected to the local councils. This is going to be an interesting decade or two ahead.

17. **Welcoming Migration**

Surveys show that a majority of Irish citizens think that this diverse ethnic mix enriches the national culture. That is a healthy starting point for, as several important reports on migration have reminded us recently, in pursuing the vision we have of a society that is comfortable with diversity, governments only hold some of the strategic cards to be played. Private interests, whether it is business, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, churches, and the public at large, civic society, individuals hold the rest.

The role of civic society is absolutely crucial in welcoming and integrating newcomers because that is the first point of contact. It is in the schools, on the streets, in the supermarkets, at the doctors, in the workplace, that human experience of being an immigrant has its most human impact: the smile and the handshake that reassures or the snub that drives you into despair.

18. **A Civic Welcome**

We are a small country of very strong communities with a history of active citizenship and a tremendously long history of volunteer endeavour with clubs, churches, residents groups, and support groups. It is wonderful to see how they are now mobilising in a kind of national response to these changing circumstances to be the vehicles of civic welcome.

19. **Fáilte Isteach**

Just two weeks ago, I launched a new voluntary organisation called ‘Fáilte Isteach’, which means ‘welcome in’. It is a simple organisation through which senior citizens, many of them retired, offer language classes to emigrant families locally. It is a no cost, huge benefit initiative, because not only does it help bridge the language barrier but it directly introduces emigrant families into local life, local lore and certainly to a lot of local characters.

20. **The Workplace Experience**

If the experience of being actively welcomed into a community is essential to the process of settling down in a new country, so too of course is the experience within the workplace.
message is clear in Ireland, as it is elsewhere in Europe and the law tells it: every worker is entitled to be treated equally. We have extensive structures and mechanisms in place from robust equality legislation to the Equality Authority and Equality Tribunal.

21. **Towards 2016**

Our most recent social partnership agreement entitled ‘Towards 2016’ – which is a reasonably long-term plan – commits us to developing a comprehensive new framework for migrant integration, and it illustrates just how important the social partnership is as a forum representing the Irish workers and people who work in Ireland.

22. **Equality**

There is work to be done, for while emigrant workers are overwhelmingly positive about their situation in Ireland, the case work of the Equality Authority shows that race is now the largest cause of complaint in relation to discrimination in employment. We have work to do. In this, the European year of Equal Opportunities for All, we are working to get the message across loud and clear and in as many languages as it takes, that there is an obligation to deal fairly with each other, native and migrant alike. Also, that there are and will be tough mechanisms to vindicate peoples’ rights.

Here too we see a very encouraging mobilisation of effort, with trade unions and employers involved in the annual Anti-Racist Workplace Week, company workshops on best integration and anti-racism practice organised nationwide by our Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), a raft of publications and outreaches to businesses, including outreaching; going to the countries where the migrants are coming from to tell them of their rights and to prepare them for the journey in Ireland. It is part of the national endeavour to get the migration experience as right as we can.

We are smoothing out the obstacles on many fronts, whether it is in schools, policing, Naturalisation and Immigration services, accessing social services. It is all part of a process of rapid adaptation to this changing Ireland.

23. **The Two-Way Process**

We know of course, at policy level, that our economic migration policy must be both responsive to different stages of our economic development and to our labour market conditions. We know it must support the thrust of Ireland’s economic development policy into the future. These things are about numbers and structures, but at the simple human level we have an obligation and an ambition to meet the righteous desire of our newcomers as individuals – people with hopes and ambitions and dreams and needs – to meet them in a way that helps them to live within our communities humanly and decently.

These must be places where they feel accepted; where they feel they can get mobilised to make their contribution very quickly. They must also be secure within their own identities; that they have come to a country where we do not want to take anything from their identity. At the same time, we know that they have made their option to come to Ireland so there is an expectation of course that they will be respectful of the ambient culture and the system to which their choice of new homeland has committed them.
That is the two-way process. Getting that two-way process right is a very important element for us in trying to create the conditions that will make Ireland a very comfortable, multicultural environment.

24. Opportunity

Typical emigrants want the chance to prove themselves and to improve themselves. They are hungry for opportunity. Most of them have sacrificed an awful lot in order to access that opportunity. They have surrendered a lot, in terms of the comfort and support of home, leaving family and friends behind.

We are the fortunate first generation of Irish men and women to have the opportunity to share this extraordinary opportunity we now have at home. We have an abundance of opportunity for the first time in our history. In some way, we are the sacred stewards of this tremendous time of opportunity.

It is a time to be treated with great care, but also with great generosity. It is not just about us and our own economic needs. There is an obligation to be good committed Europeans, which we take seriously. We must be people who live the Treaty of Rome and the founding principles of those treaties.

25. Obligation

We have an obligation to the poor and developing nations, particularly in Africa which, though benefiting from the remittances of their citizens working abroad, are also severely understaffed in crucial areas like healthcare and education as a result of emigration.

Ireland has a long and distinguished history in the field of Development Aid and through that work we are helping to bring, especially to the African countries, many of the stabilising resources of good education and healthcare which are essential if those nations are to address their own outflows and their own endemic problems; and give them the chance that the people of Ireland now enjoy: a nation that is flourishing. Healthy and educated people are taking their place among the nations of the world.

III. Conclusion

1. An Emerging Ireland

Just as Irish men and women brought their energies and talents to their new homelands; wherever they were, they brought their music and dance, their faith and their food, their stories and language; and just as they made new lives and good lives, so too will emigrants to Ireland. They will do it with Ireland, and they will do it for themselves and for Ireland.

Just as our emigrants gave birth to American, Australian and English children, so emigrants to Ireland will give birth to children who will to say me, as they already do, ‘I am Polish-Irish,’ ‘I am Latvian-Irish,’ ‘I am Chinese-Irish,’ ‘I am Iranian-Irish.’ It is fantastic. Very often they will tell me that in Irish; they are so proud to be able to speak the Irish language.

They will carry dual passports; they will carry dual identities in their hearts and in their souls; they will wonder who to cheer for on the cricket field, the soccer or the rugby pitch. They will play
Gaelic football and hurling. They may even play for some of the counties that could currently be doing with a fresh infusion.

They will talk Irish politics in one breath and Polish politics in the next. They will sing songs from their old homelands and take Irish songs and set them to different beats. Together we will renew the face of this extraordinary emerging new Ireland.

2. **Pride**

Drawing these newcomers deeply and happily into every facet of Irish society is one of the most important social issues and one of the greatest challenges that we face over the next few decades. The Irish came to this city, to London, in droves. Some of their sons and daughters are sitting in this audience. Their lived experience has taught us much, both negative and positive, so much that we are able to distil wisely and intelligently and can put now to effective use.

As one of the world’s great exporters of people, as a culture steeped in the emigrant experience, we have both the challenge and the chance to make the emigrant experience in Ireland something to be truly proud of.

3. **Assurance of Dignity and Freedom of the Individual**

We have a written constitution in Ireland which pledges us to assure the dignity and freedom of the individual. It guides and informs us in formulating the vision that we have for our country; a place where it is possible to love Poland, China, Latvia, Nigeria, Somalia and to love Ireland too; to be at home though far from home; to live comfortably within Irish culture and yet be free to showcase and express one’s own culture.

4. **Expressing One’s Own Culture**

Ultimately these are the great gifts that each newcomer brings to us. First of all, they bring their very difference and diversity, and then their curiosity about their own potential in their new homeland and about this new homeland. Our gift in return has to be our welcome for the very otherness of others and our acceptance of each one of them as our equal.

Even a generation ago who could have foreseen this Ireland: rooted in peace, propelled by prosperity, enjoying good neighbourly relations with the North and with Great Britain, and offering good neighbourliness to its many enthusiastic new citizens. This new Ireland is an absolutely fascinating work in progress.

5. **Lives Entwined**

We are now building a future of ‘Lives Entwined’ – to use the British Council’s lovely expression. I hope though, a future not entwined with bramble and ivy, of intolerance, but with the cement of mutual dependence and mutual respect which this Council has done so much, around the world, to engender, to promote, to provoke and to introduce.

6. **Closing Comment**

I want to thank the Council for the extraordinary work that they have done and the contribution that they have made to helping this new Ireland understand precisely who it is and where it is going. I
hope you are going to keep us company on the rest of the journey. It is going to be a good journey. Thank you.