MARR:

It may seem strange, but almost a century since the fight for Irish independence there has never been a state visit to this country by the President of Ireland. Tomorrow all that changes. There will be lots of pomp... but many serious issues for the two countries to talk about as well. The Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, spoke to me earlier. How crucial is the symbolism of this visit, I asked?

TAOISEACH:

I think it means an enormous amount to the people of Ireland but also to the people of Britain. Symbolically it’s of enormous importance but also practically in that it brings the relationship between the two countries and the two peoples to an unprecedented level; this was unthinkable twenty years ago.

MARR:

Taoiseach, another significant event coming up will be the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising when rebel forces rose up against the Crown to win independence. Are you really expecting the Queen or a senior Royal figure to attend the commemorations in 2016?
TAOISEACH:

It should be possible for members of the Royal Family to visit Dublin during those Centenary commemoration ceremonies in 2016. It would be another er, another event in the continuing closeness and er closer relationships between both our countries.

MARR:

During the state visit this week, the Queen will be hosting a banquet for the President of Ireland. Are you expecting, or would you encourage, Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness to attend that dinner?

TAOISEACH:

Well Martin McGuinness as Deputy Force Minister in the er, in the Assembly of Northern Ireland has been very forthright and very pragmatic in what he’d been doing here; I don’t see why he shouldn’t, why he shouldn’t attend, of course. This is all part of the building of relationships between the two countries and people’s on both side of a divide.

MARR:

Critics of your government say that you have you aren’t focused on the real political problems still prevalent in Northern Ireland. As a result, they say there’s a dangerous vacuum for extremism to flourish again -- partly because you’ve dropped the ball.

TAOISEACH:

No, I disagree with that completely, actually there are more meetings being held between ministers and officials and various agencies on either side of the border than ever before. We contribute very constructively to issues in Northern Ireland in terms of infrastructure, education, health, cross-border activities, these things are at an all-time high level and we want that to continue.

We’ve got to move on and not be blocked by the past. When the Queen herself spoke in Dublin Castle, which was the symbolic head of the British Empire in this country for several hundred years, she said of course, if you looked at history there are some things that you
might do differently and some things that you might not do at all and her contribution in Dublin, three years ago closed a circle of history.

President Clinton put it very well in Derry when he visited there recently when he said look, the parties in Northern Ireland have a responsibility, a democratic responsibility to finish the job, we cannot finish it for them but we don’t want a situation where there is a blockage connected only to the past.

MARR:

Britain’s trade links with Ireland are greater than its trade with Brazil, India and China combined. So there’s plenty of attention being paid here to the stability of your banking sector and how that could impact on Ireland’s economic health. Just how robust are your banks?

TAOISEACH:

Well, erm, Ireland got into a catastrophic economic situation. Britain was the first country to offer assistance in terms of financial loans. We were the first country to exit the Bail Out programme last December. We’re back in the bond markets, the interest rate is down from 15% to just less than 3 on ten year money last week, so we’re recovered in that sense. Yes the public debt is too high, er, yes private debt is too high, but we had a primary surplus in last year’s budget. We’re happy that our banks are sufficiently well-capitalised to deal with any elements of those stress-tests.

MARR:

You’re sometimes tipped as a possible leader of the EU. What is your view of David Cameron’s attempts to negotiate a new relationship for Britain in Europe and are you sympathetic -- have you discussed this with him?

TAOISEACH:

Well, yes and I’ve spoken to Prime Minister Cameron on many occasions about this. I believe that the European Union is far stronger with a strong Britain in it. I agree with David Cameron very strongly about the single market. I agree with David Cameron about the extent
of the digital capacity; we have to deal with the energy system, we have to eliminate for the red tape, we have to get the transatlantic trade talks in operation. Business and trade links are of such importance; so Europe will be very much weaker without a strong Britain in there, and we do hope that the potential of the 500 million market is eminently understood by British business; it’s something that we would consider would be very much in Britain’s interest but that’s a matter, obviously, at the end of the day for the British people.

MARR:

Taoiseach, many thanks for talking to us this morning.

TAOISEACH:

Thank you indeed Andrew, and bless you.

INTERVIEW ENDS