

## **Speech by Jimmy Deenihan Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht**

### **Launching the JFK Homecoming Exhibit - National Library of Ireland**

**Thursday 20 June 2013**

Director, Caroline, Edwin and your family, Jean, members of the Kennedy family, members of the Diplomatic Corps, and ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honour to be here today to mark the opening of the JFK Homecoming Exhibition.

This exhibition - and a range of other events which are taking place this month - have all been organised to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the visit of US President John F Kennedy to Ireland.

This visit left an indelible mark on Ireland, and still remains in the consciousness of those who were there to experience it.

In 1963 we were a young Republic. John F. Kennedy was a young President. And - because of his background, his family, and his ancestry - the Irish people felt the strongest possible affinity with, and warmth for, President Kennedy - then a leader amongst leaders on the international stage.

The impact of the Kennedy visit to Ireland was seismic. To put it very simply, President Kennedy was both loved and respected by the people of Ireland. Because of the affinity that the people of Ireland felt for John F. Kennedy they had cheered him to the White House in 1961. Two years later, they cheered him wherever he went in Ireland.

John F Kennedy's election as President in 1961 was a seminal moment too in the history of Irish America. To many within that community, he represented all that they could become and gave them hope for the future. He made them proud to be part of the

Irish American community. It was as if the Irish had finally 'made it' in America after years of struggle.

He changed the image of the Irish in America. From then on, being Irish was a badge of pride, and his achievement made people feel equally proud of being both Irish and American.

By 1963, Ireland had experienced tremendous turmoil in its short history, as first a Free State and then a Republic. The decade before the visit had seen Ireland lose a generation through emigration. Half a million people had left Ireland over the course of the 1950s.

The people who came out to cheer President Kennedy, in their thousands, had sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, spread across the globe - especially in America.

They welcomed President Kennedy like a returning son.

John F Kennedy himself underlined the depth of his feelings for Ireland which he referred to as "not the land of my birth, but it is the land for which I hold the most affection."

That affection was enthusiastically returned by those who came out to see him. As the Taoiseach of the day, Sean Lemass, said:

"It wasn't so much the enthusiasm of the crowds, the cheers, the general outpouring of welcome to him as what he sensed in them...they weren't asking for anything; it was just enthusiasm for himself as a person."

Today, over 70 million people worldwide claim Irish ancestry. Many of them reside in the United States. The 80,000 people who lined the streets of Dublin to welcome President Kennedy in 1963 were echoing this link. They were also remembering all those who had departed from these shores but who had never forgotten their links to home.

Indeed, in his address to the Joint Houses of the Oireachtas President Kennedy said;

"And so it is that our two nations, divided by distance, have been united by history. No people ever believed more deeply in the cause of Irish freedom than the people of the United States. And no country contributed more to building my own country than your sons and daughters."

President Kennedy also noted Ireland's growing place on the international stage in his address:

"From Cork to the Congo, from Galway to the Gaza Strip, from this legislative assembly to the United Nations, Ireland is sending its most talented men to do the world's most important work - the work of peace.

In a sense, this export of talent is in keeping with an historic Irish role - but you no longer go as exiles and emigrants but for the service of your country and, indeed, of all men."

President Kennedy's visit therefore came at a time when Ireland was growing in confidence as an independent Republic. It also marked a key point in the developing cultural and political ties between the then, relatively young, Republic of Ireland and the United States.

These are ties which have grown over the years. And, indeed, the ties between Ireland and the Kennedy family have remained particularly strong.

His sister, Jean Kennedy Smith, served as US Ambassador to Ireland from 1993 to 1998 and her supportive role in the Peace Process should be acknowledged by all here today.

His brother, Ted Kennedy, who served in the United States Senate for almost 47 years, was a long time friend to Ireland, and also played a key role in the Peace Process.

And, today, we are delighted that John F Kennedy's daughter, Caroline Kennedy, is here on this important occasion.

As a boy, I have a very vivid recollection of President Kennedy's visit and the national sense of pride and joy that it fostered. That visit instilled a new confidence in an Ireland trying to find its way in the Cold War world of the early 60s. It was undoubtedly a great boost to Irish self esteem.

One of my abiding memories from the visit was the address by the then Mayor of Limerick - Frances Condell. At the time in Ireland, few women were in positions of political power. It was important for many people to hear Mayor Condell welcome the President, in the articulate, humorous and moving way that she did. John F Kennedy described her address as 'the best speech that he had heard since coming to Europe.'

The role that she played, and the speech that she made, struck a chord with me, and with many people, and stayed with me ever since.

President Kennedy was a visionary in many things - he was a staunch supporter of the space programme. This sowed the seeds for many of the new technologies that have been developed since and that we use in our daily lives.

And, even 50 years ago, he could clearly see the serious issues that obesity and overweight would cause if left unchallenged.

As an aspiring athlete then, with a keen interest in all sports, President Kennedy's clear concern about fitness resonated with me.

This he set out to challenge through the President's Council on Physical Fitness.

But it is his vision for the arts that I want to particularly refer to today. President Kennedy's love of the arts shone in his presidency, and indeed in his speeches before entering the White House.

In his oft quoted Harvard address in 1956 he said 'If more politicians knew poetry, and more poets knew politics, I am convinced the world would be a better place in which to live.'

He went on to utter some of the most visionary words ever said by a politician about the arts, words that resonate to this day:

"...the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may. In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation.

And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man, the fate of having "nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope."

It is therefore with immense pleasure, on the occasion of this exhibition and in the presence of our honoured guest Caroline, that I wish to inaugurate the John F Kennedy National Library of Ireland Poetry Scholarship.

Under this scheme, scholarships in poetry will be awarded to young students each year.

With the comments that John F Kennedy made about poetry and the arts during his time as President, I can think of no better way to mark this important occasion than through this scholarship programme.

And, now - in closing - I would like to make a presentation to Caroline. I quoted earlier the famous comment that President Kennedy made, when he referred to Ireland as "not the land of my birth, but it is the land for which I hold the most affection."

Of the millions who left our shores over the centuries, the Kennedy family is certainly one of the most famous - and more loved - of all.

Ireland took great pride in John F Kennedy - and we continue to take great pride in the many achievements of the Kennedy family.

Today, to mark the 50th Anniversary of the visit to Ireland by her father, I am delighted to present Caroline Kennedy with this special edition Certificate of Irish Heritage.

John F Kennedy described his visit to Ireland as the happiest days of his life. I hope - Caroline - that you will have a similar experience during your visit.

Thank You.