

Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne T.D.

**25th Anniversary Conference of the Centre for Irish-German Studies in the
University of Limerick**

Keynote Address

Professor Fischer,

Professor Holfter,

Professor Mey,

Verehrte Gäste,

Meine Damen und Herren,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and privilege to deliver this address today.

At the end of August, I had the opportunity to experience first-hand the extraordinary warmth of the relations between Ireland and Germany during my visit to Berlin to represent Ireland as the Country of Honour at the Citizens' Festival, hosted by Federal President Steinmeier.

I was able to show the President and his wife, Elke Buedenbender the best of Irish culture, food and drink, and President Higgins's State Visit to Germany in 2019 featured prominently in the exhibition in Bellevue Palace, President Steinmeier's official residence.

The ties which bind our two countries – historical, cultural, political and economic – are extraordinarily strong and vibrant ones. We greatly value Germany's unwavering support throughout the Brexit process as well as its understanding of both the necessity and challenges involved in maintaining

peace on this island. We are equally exceptionally proud that we were able, as then EU Presidency, to play a key role in facilitating German reunification by presiding over the European Council in Dublin when the EU lent its support to the reunification process.

Since we launched our Strategy for Germany in 2018, we have built upon this long-lasting partnership to bring our relations to a new level and increase our presence in Germany. Significant progress has been made in implementing its recommendations, including the opening of our Consulate General in Frankfurt, inaugural cross-Departmental consultations at Secretary General/State Secretary level, and the agreement of a Joint Plan of Action by the then Tánaiste and the then German Federal Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas. A new specialist Cultural Officer was appointed and an umbrella organisation for Irish community groups, the German-Irish Council, was established. Next month we look forward to hosting in Dublin the next formal session of State Secretary/Secretary General level consultations which represent one of the innovations and important elements of the Joint Plan of Action.

In 2019 we celebrated 90 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries. That year saw Ireland open our first Consulate General on mainland Europe, in Frankfurt. Earlier this month the cabinet decided to announce the opening of our new Consulate General in Munich, again another major deliverable arising from our Strategy for Germany. Our leaders meet frequently and work closely bilaterally and on pressing European issues of common interest.

In my conversations last month with President Steinmeier and Ms Buedenbender, they warmly recalled their visit to Ireland last October, during

which they met with the founders of the Centre for Irish-German Studies, Professor Joachim Fischer and Professor Gisela Holfter.

There are many ways in which we can further develop this relationship. One is through the academic study of Irish-German connections, to which the Centre has made an impressive contribution, underpinned by the wonderful Gottschalk collection here at the Glucksman Library. Another crucial thread is the person-to-person links, in particular the role of universities in giving students the chance, through Erasmus+ programmes, to immerse themselves in fellow European cultures.

Relations between the peoples of Ireland and Germany continue to be exceptionally warm, with a genuine interest in one another's culture.

In 2019, before COVID, 728,000 visitors came from Germany to Ireland, the third largest source market for tourism. Irish people too continue to visit Germany in large numbers each year and many have made Germany their home.

These links between our countries are incredibly rich, especially on a local level. This remains the lifeblood of relations between Ireland and Germany.

We see this in a special way through the 23 town twinning initiatives between our two countries. These twinings continue to go from strength to strength and I know that the city and county of Limerick has had a productive relationship with Hohenlohekreis in Baden-Württemberg for well over 20 years now. I also understand that over 100 people will travel from Newbridge in Co Kildare to Bad-Lippspringe in a few weeks to mark the 25th anniversary of their twinning.

Our economic relations are thriving, with combined two-way trade in goods of almost €25 billion in 2021, making Germany Ireland's second largest

export market within the EU. Ireland and Germany are like-minded when it comes to European trade policy: as trading nations, both have open economies and support a fair, rules-based multilateral trade system.

Ireland and Germany also now face the common challenge of finding new energy sources that are climate friendly and contribute to energy security in Europe. I am confident that this is an area of particular potential to further deepen and enhance our trade and investment mutual interests: Ireland, which is not short of potential access to extensive wind energy, and Germany, Europe's industrial powerhouse, can work together to achieve this.

The German-Irish Chamber of Commerce is laying important foundations for this through the German-Irish Hydrogen Council. Germany and Ireland were among nine EU coastal states that in September signed the Dublin Declaration that commits them to create enough renewable wind energy to supply 10% of the Union's needs by 2050. These developments show that there is extensive potential for Ireland and Germany to further deepen and strengthen links in trade, investment and innovation.

In this same vein, Ireland and Germany are strong partners in research and innovation. Under the EU Horizon Research Framework Programme, Germany is Ireland's second largest partner, with over 4,000 research and innovation collaborations. Ireland's Embassy in Berlin has highlighted many examples of these strong research links during Berlin Science Week in the past two years. I am very pleased to know that these included projects involving the University of Limerick and German partners in the areas of hydrogen and autonomous driving. In the area of agriculture, Ireland and Germany are working on a three-year bilateral research project "MEDICow",

with joint funding of €1 million, where the focus is on dairy cattle health and welfare.

As we approach the German Day of Unity on 3 October, it is worth looking to the future. On the first of January 2023, Ireland will celebrate half a century since we joined the European Economic Community, as it was then known. At that time Germany was divided by the Iron Curtain and the island of Ireland was experiencing its worst period of conflict in 50 years, while being hampered by persistently high levels of emigration and weak economic performance.

Since then Ireland has flourished in all aspects, be it socially, economically or culturally, and despite our geographic location we see ourselves as being at the very heart of Europe and the European project.

Ireland's rich cultural heritage plays a central role in its relationship to Germany and Europe, with great artists such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett making the continent their home and personifying the European artist.

These days, more Irish artists than ever reside, tour, and collaborate in Europe, and between Ireland and Germany a mutual appreciation for each other's arts and culture deepens our bond even more. For example, the Creative Pathways university-associated arts collaboration programme, initiated by the Irish Embassy in Berlin, sees students from the University of Limerick collaborate with students of German art universities (this year with HGB Leipzig).

In Ireland, the positive dynamism of EU Membership has resulted in consistently high support for the EU, with 88% supporting Ireland's membership in the most recent poll in May 2022.

During his State Visit to Ireland in October 2021, German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was able to experience for himself this enthusiasm for Europe, right here at the University of Limerick, as students debated with him and President Higgins how Europe could act for a 'stronger economy, social justice and jobs'.

Despite the huge challenges our continent faces following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the impacts on cost of living and energy supply, Ireland's experience in the EU tells us that we, as European partners, will come together and that external pressures will strengthen our resolve of purpose and our unity to protect and promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In concluding, I would like to pay tribute to the founders of the Centre for Irish German Studies. Professor Joachim Fischer in whose honour we gather for this conference, and to Professor Gisela Holfter, who I know has worked tirelessly in organising it. As I have said, the Centre has made an impressive contribution to research on Irish-German relations since its foundation in 1997. For all of the work that has been done in the quarter century since then, you have my heartfelt thanks. Danke schön. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.