

**Mr Seán Ó Fearghaíl, Ceann Comhairle (Speaker),  
Houses of the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament).**

Mr President, Fellow Speakers, Honourable Friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure for me, as Speaker of the Irish Parliament, the Houses of the Oireachtas, to address a few words to this distinguished company today.

The theme of our discussion is inter-faith dialogue for the promotion of peace and good will. By chance, I hosted a dinner last week in our parliament for the leaders of the religious and faith groups of Ireland. This was the first such informal gathering between parliament and religious leaders in my political memory, and what struck me the most about the event was that the religious leaders spoke of the lack of engagement they have on a day-to-day basis with those other faith leaders they met that evening in our Parliament. There was no malice or ill-will involved in that lack of contact, but it took a small gesture like this relaxed dinner invitation to start what I hope will be a long and meaningful dialogue between the Irish parliament and our country's faith leaders.

Ireland has had a long and often deeply troubled experience in faith expression. This is to be regretted, but it is also something that we are moving away from in recent years. It derived from a lack of trust and lack of understanding of the other side's lived experience.

Ireland is a changed country in many respects since first I entered politics. We are now a post-Catholic country and, indeed, we could possibly be seen as a post-Christian country. We have also welcomed many more non-Irish to our shores to live and work among us. This creates challenges as well as opportunities. Up until the end of the millennium, our dialogue at inter-ethnic and inter-faith level was largely at a remove from our own lived experience within our communities. Ireland was a country looking out from a relatively mono-cultural perspective, a fixed view of the world within a religious context. The gentle sprinkling of so many nationalities into our urban and rural communities powered our economy but forced us to recalibrate what it was to be Irish, and to redefine what our multi-cultural and multi-faith community has evolved into.

As a personal example, when I was in primary school in my small, rural community, the most exotic arrival in my childhood classroom was the son or daughter of a returning Irish emigrant from the United States, the UK or Australia. In that same school in 2017, there are now 30 different nationalities being educated there.

In an international context, I am enormously proud of the work Ireland has done to foster and promote human rights in its broadest sense.

At the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, to which we were members from 2013 to 2015, Ireland has consistently called for the rights of religious minorities to be respected. Most recently, at the general session of the Council held in September, Ireland strongly condemned

all forms of persecution and violence committed on the basis of religion or belief, and raised concerns about the persecution of religious minorities.

Within an EU context, Ireland has played a leading role in promoting and protecting those who face persecution for defending the rights of others, the human rights defenders. Similarly, during Ireland's presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2004, one of the key human rights priorities for us was the adoption of the EU guidelines on human rights defenders.

And I am enormously proud of Ireland's role in UN peace-keeping throughout the globe. As a small and neutral country, we are respected for hitting above our weight in our important contribution in this area, most notably in recent times which have seen our naval service assisting those in distress on their perilous journeys across the Mediterranean.

For promoting peace, the education of our children is one of the keys to success. Children are not born Islamophobic; they are not born homophobic; they are not born to think that one skin colour is better than another. These poisonous hates and intolerances seep into them over the course of their lived childhood and early adulthood. As parliamentarians, living among and representing our communities, we must remain active in challenging these hatreds, this ignorance of our new or well-established neighbours. Dialogue in 2017 has become more complicated with the huge advances in social media. Nowadays we are often guilty of hearing when we should be listening, watching when we should be seeing.

Social media is a wonderful advance in human experience and allows for greater dialogue, but a dialogue of a different nature to what went before. We must also be mindful of its limitations and defects and it should be prevented from spreading the poison of intolerance.

Instead, like all meaningful dialogue, it should serve to weave the rich tapestry of our shared lived experience, our shared concerns and the challenges facing us nationally and internationally. As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to ensure free, open and honest dialogue, to challenge those seeking to limit that dialogue. As we gather here in the historic city of St Petersburg, let us strive to listen and engage more at parliamentary level to ensure that dialogue is allowed to be nurtured and to grow to the benefit of all our communities and citizens, to foster a tolerance and understanding which respects the dignity of the individual, the inhabitant of that global village it is important for us to protect and nurture to reach his or her full potential.

Thank you.