

Spring 2009 Issue



President Barack Obama with First Minister Peter Robinson and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness

Northern Ireland Ministers Meet President Obama

In the midst of a global economic crisis, and foreign policy issues such as North Korea, Afghanistan and Iraq dominating the agenda, President Obama set time aside on St Patrick's Day to meet with the First and deputy First Ministers.

This first meeting between the leaders of NI and the United States continues a tradition of engagement that began with President Clinton, carried forward by President Bush and remains a priority for the Obama administration.

There was an immediate chemistry among the three men and the President wasted no time in engaging with the Ministers. For the observers in the room it looked as if they had known one another for years. The President's first remarks to the Ministers were ones of support and praise for the leadership they had shown to all the people they represent.

Mr Obama listened attentively as the Ministers talked about their plans to improve the economy and their re-

cent success in promoting investment from film producers on the West Coast.

The President spoke about the economic and security challenges facing the United States and of his plans to put policies in place that would jump-start the economy.

He also talked about his forthcoming visit to London for the G20 Summit and of the other European cities that were included in his itinerary.

Martin McGuinness reminded him of an earlier meeting in Chicago when the President was a young state senator and relatively unknown outside Chicago. The deputy First Minister recalled their conversation and how impressed he had been by the young senator's rhetoric, skills and enthusiasm.

It was one of the most informative and productive meetings of the tour. As the conversation developed, it was clear that the President had a keen interest in political and economic developments in Northern Ireland and asked many questions about events in recent weeks.

At the conclusion of the meeting the Ministers extended the President an invitation to visit NI whenever his schedule permits. He will no doubt receive a warm welcome and the hospitality afforded to the First Minister and deputy First Minister will surely be reciprocated.

The First and deputy First Ministers departed the White House in true Washington fashion, as part of the Presidential motorcade which took them from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other for lunch with the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Throughout the week, President Obama continually referred to his meeting with the First and deputy First Ministers as a beacon of hope for other regions of conflict. If first impressions are everything, NI has certainly left an indelible one on the new American President.

Northern Ireland Bureau Reception Kicks Off St Patrick's Day

As cherry blossoms begin to bloom in Washington, it is usually a sign of two things: spring is coming, and St Patrick's Day has arrived. What was once a day marked by shamrocks and green beer has evolved into a day of high-level political engagements for Northern Ireland in the nation's capital.

With the recent election of President Barack Obama, the significance of this year's meetings rose exponentially as Northern Ireland's Executive Ministers and politicians descended on the city to meet with their respective counterparts to discuss the global economic crisis and political developments in Northern Ireland.

While the day is filled from sunrise to sunset with events, the centerpiece for Northern Ireland is its annual business breakfast, which was held this year at the United States Chamber of Commerce. With more than 400 politicians, diplomats, business leaders and academics in attendance, this forum provided guests with the opportunity to network, to learn about the ever-evolving state of affairs in Northern Ireland, and to enjoy a traditional Ulster breakfast.



First Minister, Peter Robinson, MP MLA speaking at the Northern Ireland Bureau St Patrick's Breakfast event at the US Chamber of Commerce

Given that there have been significant changes in the administrations in Washington and Belfast, the objective of this event was to redefine the relationship between the United States and Northern Ireland. While Northern Ireland has relied heavily on US investment, political support and goodwill in the past, this new relationship will be built upon a foundation where principles of mutual benefit prevail. This event also served as the premiere

for Northern Ireland's new video presentation that reflects this comprehensive and multi-faceted partnership between our two countries (This video can be viewed at www.nibureau.com).



deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, MP MLA addresses the audience at the Northern Ireland Bureau St Patrick's Breakfast event at the US Chamber of Commerce

The Director of the Northern Ireland Bureau, Norman Houston, kicked off the official program by referring to the tragic violence that struck Northern Ireland the week before. He cited the perseverance of the people of Northern Ireland and the ongoing support of the United States that has always been instrumental in supporting the region to overcome any challenge. Mr. Houston went on to introduce the First Minister, Peter Robinson and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness who each touched upon these events, but declared that no one would derail the peace process that they have undertaken on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

Guests were visibly moved by the remarks of the two leaders of the Northern Ireland Executive, as they stood shoulder to shoulder during a particularly difficult time. McGuinness and Robinson then pivoted to one of the most pressing issues of the day, reviving the global economy and the role Northern Ireland would play in that recovery. Despite the current economic climate, Northern Ireland remains an attractive destination for American companies who wish to tap into a well-trained workforce that provides convenient access to the European market. The Ministers suggested that it was important for them to deliver that message in the United States because "while the economic crisis began in the US, the recovery will begin here as well."



Guests at the Northern Ireland Bureau's St Patrick's Breakfast at the US Chamber of Commerce

Guests were also treated this year to tremendous musical entertainment provided by St Cecilia's Grammar School. This ensemble featured the talents of more than 40 young people from Northern Ireland who came to the United States on a multi-city tour.

Looking at the young people of Northern Ireland standing alongside their political leaders, there was a renewed sense of hope for the future of the region set against the backdrop of the capitol of the United States.

As St Patrick's Day approached this year, there were those who questioned whether there was still any rele-



St Cecilia's students with First & deputy First Ministers

vance to these engagements now that the peace process is firmly in place. However, it is clear that this event answered that question with a resounding "yes." The United States now has an equal partner in its relationship with Northern Ireland, and St Patrick's Day offers the region an opportunity to highlight just how relevant it is.

Speaker of the House Hosts St Patrick's Day Lunch

There are many long standing traditions in the US Congress including the State of the Union, roll call, and, marathon debates, but another tradition has gained prominence in recent years.

Each year, the Speaker of the House hosts a St Patrick's Day lunch in honor of the Prime Minister of Ireland and also welcomes leaders from the US and NI.

It was President Obama's first Irish event since taking office and he was joined by the First and deputy First Ministers, Taoiseach Brian Cowan and around 40 members of Congress at one of the most sought after invitations in Washington.

The First and deputy First Ministers arrived at the Capitol with the President's motorcade to be met by a pipe band and a crowd of well wishers who had gathered to see the arrival. The spectacle of a Presidential Motorcade traversing Pennsylvania Avenue towards Capitol Hill is enough to raise the interest of even the most jaded Washingtonian.

On arrival at the historic venue, the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, greeted the distinguished guests and said how honored she felt welcoming the Northern Ireland delegation to the lunch. She was effusive in her praise of the First and deputy First Ministers for the leadership they had shown after the killings in Antrim and Craigavon.

The Ministers were seated at the VIP table alongside the Speaker of the NI Assembly, William Hay and Governor O'Malley of Maryland who is also an accomplished musician who regaled the guests by singing the national anthems. The Governor hosted a visit by the Ministers in December 2008 to Maryland's public service reform unit and they had the opportunity to renew his acquaintance.

There are few other events in Washington that attract as many politicians as the Speaker's St Patrick's Day lunch. In addition to the American politicians, every local party was represented and the message to the lawmakers on Capitol Hill was very clear: Northern Ireland is moving forward under the leadership of its two senior Ministers who are determined to advance the economy and create a better future for everyone they represent.

Ministers Make Maiden Voyage to the Golden State

In March 2009, the First Minister and deputy First Ministers made a historic visit to Los Angeles for a series of commercial and political engagements. This visit marks the first time the leaders of Northern Ireland's power-sharing government embarked on an official visit to the state of California, but given the outcome of this visit, it will certainly not be the last.

Upon arrival in southern California, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness delivered speeches at the residence of British Consul General Bob Peirce, before more than 100 assembled guests. This business reception afforded the Ministers the opportunity to present the best of Northern Ireland to leaders from the film, technology, financial and tourism sectors. Given that this was the Ministers' first visit to Los Angeles, this event provided a perfect backdrop to building the Northern Ireland network on the West Coast of the United States.

Following a series of meetings to promote potential film locations in Northern Ireland, the Ministers served as keynote speakers for a luncheon hosted by Tourism Ireland. With airlines exploring more direct flights from Los Angeles to Ireland and tour operators searching for new and exciting destinations for prospective clients, the First and deputy First Ministers riveted the audience with vivid descriptions of what they can expect upon arriving in Northern Ireland. Building on the momentum of the *Lonely Planet* naming Northern Ireland as a "must see" destination, guests at this lunch were clearly convinced of the tremendous tourism potential that exists in Northern Ireland. With over one million tourists visiting last year alone, Ministers sought to use this event to bolster those numbers even further.

On the political front, the Ministers were warmly welcomed to the City of Angels by the President of the City Council, Eric Garcetti. Mr Garcetti invited the men to his district office in the heart of Hollywood, and discussed some of the pressing social issues that plague his constituency. With poverty, drugs and crime proving to be a significant challenge in parts of this city, Mr Garcetti offered his advice and expertise as Ministers contend with some of the same challenges back home. McGuinness and Robinson would spend

the remainder of their visit looking at the social and criminal aspects of this large city in search of potential lessons as they prepare to undertake policing and justice responsibilities in Northern Ireland.

The Ministers began with elementary school children in a crime-ridden section of Los Angeles, to look at an after-school program called LA's Best, which provides education and a safe environment for young students during the hours between the end of the school day and the time their parents arrive home. Unfortunately, many of LA's youth do not have access to these types of programs and, instead, turn to crime and gang activity.

This led the Ministers to the Los Angeles Police Department, where they received a comprehensive briefing on crime and prevention from Police Chief William Bratton. The Ministers recognized the parallels that exist between gang activity in Los Angeles and Northern Ireland. Chief Bratton offered tremendous advice for the two ministers as they consider how best to tackle this challenge in Northern Ireland.

The Ministers concluded their program with a visit to Homeboy Industries in downtown Los Angeles. This organization provides job training and hands-on small business experience to former gang members in Los Angeles. From T-shirt shops to bakeries, the various enterprises pioneered by this project provide an innovative example for dealing with the difficult problems of poverty and crime.



While the First and deputy First Ministers spent only three days in Los Angeles, they came away with a plethora of contacts that will serve Northern Ireland well as it positions itself for a long term relationship with the state of California.

Ministers Visit the US Department of State



Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton with First Minister Peter Robinson and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness at the US Dept of State

Hillary Rodham Clinton has spent a great deal of time and effort in Northern Ireland, so it was not surprising that she issued an invitation to the Ministers to meet with her when they were in Washington in March.

For Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness this visit was an opportunity to renew personal friendships which goes back to the Secretary's time as First Lady during the Clinton years. No other First Lady visited Northern Ireland as often as Mrs Clinton or knows as many local people, from all walks of life, as she does.

This was one meeting where the discussions needed no warming-up. Secretary Clinton was on top of the issues and the Ministers knew her well enough to get down to serious discussion from the outset. After the meeting, the Secretary invited the two men to join her in the historic Treaty Room where they conducted a press conference which was attended by leading print and broadcast journalists from the US, UK and Ireland.

As they stood on each side of the Secretary of State answering questions from some of the most influential journalists in the United States, the First and deputy First Ministers wasted no time in presenting a modern and positive image of Northern Ireland. In diplomatic terms, the level of access which the Ministers received was on a par with that afforded to heads of government of important foreign countries. It was clear that Secretary Clinton wanted to make a statement about the strength of support which she had for the Executive.

Belleek China is Again at the Top Table

President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi all have one thing in common – they have each recently become the owners of truly original pieces of Irish craftsmanship – Belleek China.

The First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, presented pieces of Belleek China to the US dignitaries on their recent visit to Washington DC during the St Patrick's celebrations. The gifts of Belleek traditional fine parian china were seen as a most fitting way to acknowledge the unique relationship that exists between the US and the NI administrations.

The china is made at the world famous factory at Belleek on the banks of Lough Erne in County Fermanagh using materials and techniques handed down from generation to generation. No two pieces are ever the same – every handle, flower and brush stroke is lovingly applied by hand to create the look and feel that is uniquely Belleek.

Craftsmen and women have been making china at Belleek since 1857 and the pottery holds a very special place in the culture and commercial heritage of County Fermanagh.



Brendan McCauley and The Prisoner of Love

An Audience with the Governor

In addition to the First and the deputy First Ministers, Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development also undertook an extensive week-long visit to the US which included New York, Maryland and Washington, DC. The Minister was keen to establish and forge stronger links with the US administration and to renew a number of important relationships at federal, state and city levels and in taking forward her Shared Future agenda.



Governor Martin O'Malley of Maryland with Minister Margaret Ritchie, Department of Social Development

During her visit to Annapolis, Maryland, the Minister met with Governor Martin O'Malley who welcomed her to the magnificent State House located in the picturesque and historic town.

As introductions were made, the Governor explained the history of the building and spoke passionately about his ancestral links to the village of Cong in County Mayo. During their meeting, they had a very useful discussion on political developments in NI and the Ministers responsibilities, including her particular interest in public housing and in establishing a shared future for all.

As the Minister and Governor concluded their meeting, the room was filled with the lilt of Irish voices as a group of students (and teachers) from across the City of Derry prepared for an audience with the Governor. The students had been invited by the Governor to play at the St Patrick's Day celebrations in Baltimore and their excitement was obvious as its not every day that you get a personal invitation from a State Governor to perform and to meet him in person.

Governor O'Malley was clearly moved with the warmth of the welcome and spoke enthusiastically to the teachers and students about their trip and his links to Ireland.

Minister Ritchie was also delighted to have the opportunity to meet the group as her Department had played an important role in providing funding towards the trip and they expressed their appreciation to the Minister for all her support. The students performed a selection of ballads for the Governor and he was most appreciative and joined in a duet with the students (after some gentle persuasion).

This drew to a close a truly unique experience in Annapolis. In bidding the Governor farewell, the students travelled to Washington to perform at the Bureau's breakfast and had the honour of meeting the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton at the State Department.

Throughout her visit to the US, the Minister gained access to key individuals and organizations at the highest level in the administration.

In New York, the Minister had a series of very useful meetings with key influencers in the Big Apple including the Speaker of New York City Council, Christine Quinn; the Chair of the American Ireland Fund, Loretta Brennan Glucksman and the Deputy Mayor of New York City, Kevin Sheekey.



Governor Martin O'Malley with Minister Margaret Ritchie and students from St Cecilia's College

In Washington she met with Secretary Shaun Donovan's Senior Adviser, Bruce Katz in the Department of Housing and Urban Development to discuss a range of issues on the housing and urban development front. She also met Professor Alice Rivlin, Director of Research at the Brookings Institution, President of the US-Ireland Alliance, Trina Vargo, and leading politicians on Capitol Hill. This concluded a very successful visit for the Minister.

Tinseltown Comes to Titanic Quarter

On a recent visit to Los Angeles, First Minister Peter Robinson, and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness met with senior executives at Universal Pictures and Home Box Office (HBO) to discuss the prospect of bringing film and television projects to Northern Ireland. Last month, the Ministers' efforts came to fruition with the announcements of Universal's "Your Highness" and HBO's "A Game of Thrones" to begin production at Belfast's Titanic Quarter in 2009.



Paint Hall in Belfast's Titanic Quarter

The film, *Your Highness*, will shoot entirely in the Paint Hall, Northern Ireland's premier studio facility. It is expected that filming on location in Belfast could bring as much as £10m (\$14.6m) into the economy, employing hundreds of cast, crew and extras from Northern Ireland. The film will be directed by David Gordon Green and is written by Danny McBride and Ben Best. McBride and James Franco will play the lead roles. The comedy follows two spoiled and arrogant princes in a medieval fantasy setting. When an evil wizard casts a spell on their father and kidnaps the older prince's fiancée, they're forced to go on a quest to save their family and the kingdom.

Jimmy Horowitz, Executive Vice President of Universal Pictures emphasized the unique opportunity Northern Ireland provides. He said, "Filming *Your Highness* in Northern Ireland allows us to capture the extraordinary beauty and topography which resemble the Medieval European backdrop in which this story takes place," Mr. Horowitz continued, "It also makes good financial sense given Northern Ireland's film incentive program, the favorable exchange rate and a local infrastructure that is well suited for this type of project. We appreciate the opportunity to work in Northern Ireland."



Later this year, HBO will begin production of the most elaborate and expensive television program ever produced in Europe. The show 'A Game of Thrones' is based on the book of the same title, which is the first of seven planned novels in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, an epic fantasy collection by American author George R. R. Martin that is often compared to *Lord of the Rings*.

During recent interviews, Martin anticipated that HBO would adapt all seven of his books with each one covering the span of an entire television season. While only the initial pilot has been "green lit" for production in Northern Ireland, the tremendous interest expected from viewing audiences could turn this initial run into a long-term presence in Belfast.

Richard Williams, Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Screen, reacted enthusiastically to the HBO news. He said, "HBO has been responsible for some of the most dynamic and successful TV series ever broadcast, and we are absolutely delighted to welcome the HBO team here. We are really looking forward to working with them on such an exciting project. This is a real coup for Northern Ireland and further cements our reputation as a leading center for film and television production, as we continue our rapid growth into what is one of the most powerful and vibrant industries in the world."



HBO has an enviable reputation for offering high quality, original programming, receiving critical acclaim for its productions including *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *Band of Brothers*, *The Wire* and, of course, *The Sopranos*. This will be the company's first foray into Northern Ireland, but with limitless possibilities for producers and actors alike, it should not be the last.

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Connswater Community Greenway Reaches International Audience

Majora Carter, one of America's biggest names in environmental and community pressure organizations, visited Belfast recently as part of her 'Promised Land' radio program which goes out across over 200 radio stations in America.

The program seeks out extraordinary yet everyday people and reveals their dreams and struggles – what inspires and challenges their work and their lives. From neighborhoods in East Belfast grappling with a polluted river to kids interviewing for Green Jobs Corps in East Oakland, The Promised Land promises a steady stream of powerful radio.

Majora, a leading light behind the regeneration of the South Bronx River in New York is the founding member of Sustainable South Bronx (SSBX) and has been listed as one of Essence Magazine's 25 most influential African-Americans. She was in Belfast to see at first hand the work planned for the Connswater Community Greenway Project, a £31.8m (\$47m) project to reconnect green and open spaces in East Belfast and provide 19kms of cycle and walkways from the Castlereagh Hills to Victoria Park.

In what were a busy few days for Majora and her production team, they walked part of the proposed route of the Greenway from the Hollow at Elmgrove down through Connswater Shopping Center to Victoria Park, meeting and interviewing members of the community involved with the project and hearing about the plans and aspirations of the Connswater Community Greenway.

Throughout her three day visit, Majora visited a number of different parts of East Belfast, met with local politicians and community activists and appeared on local radio programs. This was not Majora's first visit to East Belfast or, indeed, the Connswater Community Greenway as she visited previously about three years ago during the project's initial development and has provided advice and guidance on how best to deliver a project that has real meaning for the local community. She is particularly interested in the community nature of the Connswater Community Greenway and how the people of the area are contributing to the transformation of their community through the project.



Majora Carter with Wendy Langham of the Connswater Community Greenway Project

With 43 new bridges, new civic space, high quality paths and board walks along the Knock, Loop and Connswater Rivers, the Connswater Community Greenway will create a safe, welcoming and open public space for residents and visitors to East Belfast. From what was once a real community asset used by parents and grandparents for recreation and leisure, the rivers and their surroundings have, due to decades of underinvestment, become underused, inaccessible,

unsafe and unconnected to the communities.

Following her meetings and interviews with Majora, Wendy Langham, program Manger of the Connswater Community Greenway Project said "We are delighted to welcome Majora and her Promised Land Radio program to East Belfast. The work of Majora and her community in regenerating the South Bronx River area in New York was a real inspiration to us at East Belfast Partnership and showed us what can be achieved when a community works together in real partnership to achieve a shared goal."

(Courtesy of Connswater Community Greenway Project)