

Speech by President Michael D. Higgins, on the occasion of a visit to the Valentia Transatlantic Cable Foundation, Valentia Island, Saturday, 17th, February, 2018

A Aire Stáit,
A Chomhaltaí de Bhord Stáisiún Cábla Thrasatlantaigh Dhairbhre,
A Chomhairleoirí,
A Aíonna Uile,
A Chairde,

Ar an gcéad dul síos is mian liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le Bhord Stáisiún Cábla Thrasatlantaigh Dhairbhre as a as a n-cuireadh chuí dom cuairt a thabhairt ar cheann de na láithreacha is tábhachtaí i stair na cumarsáide domhanda.

May I just say to the minister, the public representatives of the County Council and representatives of different organisations, it's a great pleasure to be here and I am delighted to have the opportunity to visit the site of one of the most important developments in relation to global communications.

I think the project of achieving if you like the full recognition of what has been achieved represents a very interesting and very valuable co-operation between Kerry County Council and the Valentia Island Development Company and all of the researchers and other people who have been assisting, as you have heard, this very exciting story. It is a story of endurance if you like in a project that is attempted, and does not succeed, and is attempted again and again.

I'm very pleased to see so many people here, it's an opportunity, may I say, as well, to thank somebody who has been travelling with me abroad, Martin Shanahan. Recently, in my recent speeches, people talk about the importance of entrepreneurship, in a rather general way, but I believe, very specifically is, after we came out of our difficulties in 2008, the fact that we have at this stage an entrepreneurial agency that can seek investment, and help us export, and to use our exports to exit from the difficulties we were in, is very much something to which Martin has given fantastic leadership and I congratulate him on that, publically.

I think that in relation to the cable traversing the 1,686 nautical miles between Valentia Harbour and the small Newfoundland fishing village of Heart's Content 152 years ago, it was an extraordinary achievement, again, that showed, if you like, the importance of enduring, in what you think is a project that is valuable, it had after all been regarded as technologically impossible and not to be recommended task by no less a person than Samuel Morse and I think, therefore, it is an example of human ingenuity and also something else as well, the vast potential of the new science and technology of electricity which humankind was only then beginning to deploy. It's very interesting, as well, about in 1866, it was a time when Ireland was emptying itself out of its people. So many would in fact go to North America. I think what's very interesting as well, is that it's within 50 years of some great technological developments taking place in Britain and that was very important. It enables me to say that I hope that after 2019, that cooperation in science and technology

between ourselves and our larger neighbour will continue. It's a very valuable cooperation that has existed for a very very long time.

To lay a single cable in a depth had not yet been measured, to get a vessel that could carry a cable, of such extent, was in fact an incredible achievement in itself. The Atlantic Telegraph Company, indeed Cyrus Field, Charles Bright, and the Brett Brothers were people of long vision. Looking at my notes in preparing to come down, a word occurred that I hadn't heard for a very long time - that I heard in County Clare as a young child in the 1950s. I am constantly reminded of how long ago, just recently, but the fact is it was the word the gutta-percha. It was, people used to speak about it, long before people got North Pole type activity in relation to what you wore and so forth, gutta-percha was a word that was quite used. Another word, which I researched some time ago, I wrote some pieces on it, was joanna, which was of course, a very, very important is the fertiliser, which, if you are trying to understand what happened to Irish soils immediately after the famine. In any event, the making of the cable in such a way that it would survive, which involved a whole series of different use of covering copper in such a way, and then binding it in hemp and covering it in tar, and then using galvanised iron wires..[...] the galvanising of the cable itself was an important finishing component of what was eventually going to be successful.

It is right to refer to it as the first globalisation, it's important about words like globalisation, to realise what is real and what is not real. What is real is the contribution of what happened here, in Valentia, was such an important contribution to communications. That is real globalisation, and it was very, very important.

I think that what is more important as well, for those who described it, it created a great excitement in its time, the first words across the ocean. Stephens writing about it in 1892, "only with this discovery has the relationship between time and space undergone the most decisive change since the creation of the world". Now, all of us, in recent times will be familiar with financial scandals, of one kind or another, and I am not going to go into that today, but there are some associated with the capacity, because in particular in 1929 you had the great crash in the United States and the information became very valuable. There is quite a literature on some of the information that passed through Valentia, which enabled fortunes to be both sustained and developed.

I think that what is more interesting too, is that while it broke ground in relation to the laying of cables because from the four years between 1869 and 73 no less than 40,000 kilometres of additional cables were laid linking major cities in Europe, Australia and the Americas. I think that maybe what we do know and last year in 2016, I think when I was down in Banna strand, I think I must have addressed nearly 600 events during the year. [...] The fact of the matter was that, of course, John Devoy heard of the 1916 Rising from Tim Ring. Tim Ring and his brother Eugene were arrested and detained by the British Authorities for that act of defiance, which was giving details about what happened in Dublin to John Devoy. The cable station has had a profound effect, not therefore, not only on this island and on the county. It is important because it changed everything really.

I really think as well, the period when it established, between 1856 and 1921, which is 70 years approximately, four and half million people left Ireland. I think that we came to see where we are today, that by 1900 there were more Irish people living abroad than that were living in Ireland itself.

I think to understand the achievement, and the significance of, and its impact on the country at the time, as I said, at the time one people were flooding out of the country, to actually have a major achievement like this is singular. I think as well as that, I think it was a period when true technology, a number of important things were happening, in other forms of communication in particular railways. In the 1850s you have the different Great Southern Railways that are established, including the Killarney station in 1854. What is very important, I think, sometimes...I was in Belfast, for example, just recently, that the industrial heritage of our cities is not sufficiently given attention. Recently, which was when I was paying tribute to our newest Nobel Prize winner, from Ramelton in County Donegal, in the area of medical science, I said we really don't honour enough perhaps the great, great scientists who made contributions to the history of science who are Irish, including Boyle, and all of the others, but also the people who took science and its application, which was something that came out of the British Industrial Revolution, and applied it in this way. The great and brave people who made achievements such as the one we're celebrating today. I think they share in today, that when something happens like this, no more than I've just come from where the weather station, which has, of course, has been granted centennial significance by the World Meteorological Association and what was happening there, as well, was feeding into not just what was valuable to us, but into Europe and the World. But releasing a weather balloon that will go 20 kilometres into the sky, and that will in fact acquire information that will enable us to be practical about implementing our commitments in relation to climate change, help us in relation to sustainable development but on that station you have people from several branches of science, working together, not only working together, but sharing their information globally. People in Ireland should be proud of that wonderful Irish ability. Here again, in this case, I so very much am in favour, and support, those who are seeking recognition of that connection between Valentia Island and Heart's Content, by those people you have heard about, as UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This cable station, and as I came in, it was described to me the significance of the architect who designed it. It is significant in itself, and in relation to how the world connected its peoples. I think that maybe the significance of this globalisation is that it was very people centred, in every sense. Sometimes the word, globalisation, is used almost as if it was exclusively about something that was very modern, in relation to the flows of speculative capital, to which the politics of the world is tested in its regulation. I think that, this is, what was most interesting, indeed as it was introduced very well, was in relation to the idea that having seen something, that would change the world, of having sticking with it, and achieving it, is very, very important.

I think the new communications technologies are very interesting, as I have said, I've already paid tribute to Martin, but it is one of the challenges that faces us. When I was in politics, very early in my early days, in the 1970s and 80s, before the mobile phone became widely used. It has revolutionised the lives of people in Africa. For example for those from remote distances travelling to the marketplace they know what is available and they know the prices that are prevailing.

Even more important, in relation to what Irish people are doing, I was in Malawi only two years ago, and there one could see an oven, an energy efficient oven, made from mud, in a

particular way, not only can be used with just a few sticks, but also on the top of it there was a new invention from Trinity College Dublin that can use solar energy to charge mobile phones and so forth. But also in relation to saving, for example, women didn't have to travel long distances to gather wood to keep the fires going but also the issue of safety for young women, girls and others so forth. So how technology is used, it has the capacity to make the world better, to achieve all those things we have not yet been able to achieve, in eliminating global poverty and achieving sustainable development. Why I mention Africa, is because all the younger people, including the young people outside, will be alive when in 2025, 40% of the younger people of the planet will be on the continent of Africa. Therefore we have to do new things in new ways, not with the old models. The kind of people is the man who decided that he was going to put a cable across, linking here, Valentia and Newfoundland, was a person who had that kind of vision, told by leading theorist at the time it could not be done and perhaps shouldn't be attempted, and he prevails on maybe the fourth attempt and then it continues to be improved. Therefore we must look at how in fact we deal with these problems globally that we haven't solved and do it with new models and with new ways. The most exciting thing about Ireland is, and the difficult times we came out of since 2008, when I give speeches at Martin's invitation abroad or elsewhere, and I point out one of the advantages we have, people often say why people come and locate in Ireland, of the European Union countries, we have the largest number of people under the age of 23, who are attending and getting certified at Universities or Institutes of Technology. The largest number of people who go on after that for further research, the issue for us is in fact is being able to give as many of these people employment, to have a very brilliant technologically informed socially responsible population living in Ireland so the people who worked on the cable, were early forerunners of making things possible for us in the future. We will be challenged in the same way, we'll be challenged perhaps as I mentioned earlier in linking economics, ethics and ecology together in a way that people would have told us up till now that was impossible. It is possible and the new people who are coming with endurance will be able to deliver that.

Here I am in Valentia, it's very interesting to those who work in taking risks, who work in science and technology and those that assist them to know that they have the support of the community. It is a marvellous thing to think that the people of Valentia want to celebrate these great insights of the mind, the contributions of where I have just come from, the contributions made by those, who you point out correctly, linked up the people of Europe and the people of America, and that was a great, great advantage.

I think there is a very strong case for securing UNESCO World Heritage status for the cable station and bringing its story, and its story of achievement, something that had not been done, something that we had said could not be done and yet was achieved, out of this place to North America. What you are saying now, which is important, is that you have reason to be proud, to be proud of it, and the community spirit that is very valuable to those who are in institutions who are co-operating to advance the project. Kerry County Council, and all those who are involved to wish them well. I think there is something else in it as well is that when people look back on things, some of the people who you know are attending Davos, I looked and I saw that 90 people have earnings as much as a third of the people alive on the planet, and it doesn't seem to be doing some of them a lot of good really. I am sure it's a very lonely experience to be the 12th richest person in the world. One of the things that I do know for sure, from different parts of the world I have been in, when communities achieve

something they can talk about and share with each other, and particularly hand on as an achievement in memory to hand on to future generations that is a very satisfactory feeling and it is a satisfactory feeling I hope that you have when you succeed in getting UNESCO designation

Mar fhocal scoir, guím gach rath oraibh go léir agus sibh i mbun oibre leis an Stáisiún a chaomhnú don phobal ar fad. Gan amhras, comhoibreoidh sibh go léir le chéile le bhúr n-aidhm roinnte a chur chun cinn mar aon leis na daoine a bhunaigh an Teileagraf sa naoú haois déag.

I feel confident that with all of your cooperation, working together, you will achieve what is a very fine project, not just for the people of Valentia and Kerry, but also for Irish people who are proud of science and technological achievements.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.