

On Irish Tourism and Foreign Policy with Micheál Martin

MICHEÁL MARTIN

Former Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs
(May 2008–January 2011)

An Interview with Áine Doyle

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*Micheál Martin TD is the Fianna Fáil Party Leader. He has been a Teachta Dála for the Cork South Central constituency since 1989. Deputy Martin has held a number of senior cabinet positions in the Government of Ireland including Minister for Education, Minister for Health, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and Minister for Foreign Affairs. As Minister for Health and Children in 2004, he introduced a ban on tobacco smoking in all Irish workplaces (Ireland was the first country to introduce a full workplace smoking ban). As Minister for Foreign Affairs in 2009, Deputy Martin was the first Irish government minister to travel to Latin America and officially visit Cuba. In 2010, he became the first Western foreign minister to visit Gaza since Hamas took control. He was also the first Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland to successfully bid for the chairmanship-in-office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. A graduate of University College Cork, Deputy Martin published the findings of his thesis in *Freedom to Choose: Cork & Party Politics in Ireland 1918–1932* (Collins Press, 2009).*

83

Brown Journal of World Affairs: During your time as Minister for Foreign Affairs, you broke new ground with visits such as those to Cuba in 2009 and Gaza the following year. Was there ever resistance within the Irish government or the foreign service to these visits, and, if so, why did you still feel they were so important?

Micheál Martin: No, there wasn't resistance to the visits; they were facilitated by

the Irish government. In terms of the Gaza visit, obviously there were concerns around security issues. We negotiated access to Gaza through the then Egyptian government and the Egyptian Foreign Minister, so we went through Egypt, in consultation with the United Nations. I went in under the UN umbrella, a UN truck transported me in, and we didn't go through any customs in terms of Hamas, so it was very carefully planned.

The reason we saw Gaza as so important was because of the conflict there. I was very struck at the time that despite European support for Palestinians—in terms of humanitarian support through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), a United Nations relief and human development organization that provides education, welfare, and other support in Gaza, which Ireland is a significant supporter of—and also European support for Israel on a number of fronts, I felt that it was extraordinary that foreign ministers couldn't get access to Gaza during that period. Israel had prevented ministers from France and the United Kingdom from getting in at that particular point in time.

But I was very anxious to get in to bear witness to what had happened and to listen to opinions within Gaza about the ongoing conflict. I talked to human rights organizations and people in UNRWA, and I, along with a delegation of civil servants and advisors, met with John Ging, who was the head of UNRWA and happened to be an Irishman. It was very revealing and important, as I think Ireland has always pursued an independent foreign policy stance, albeit within a European context. We were one of the first countries to recognize the rights of Palestinians to a homeland a long time ago, in 1966, so it was important from a political perspective.

In terms of Cuba, the department was not resistant to that, and when I suggested Cuba, they took it onboard. I think some of the department found Cuba very interesting and were delighted with the opportunity to pursue that area. I also think the U.S. government subsequently found it interesting as well, and I was queried by them on my own perspective having been to Cuba. I felt back then, having visited Cuba, that a different stance and a different policy from that of the United States would reap better results, and I think that's what's now panning out. I think the policy of embargoing Cuba and cutting off all ties was retrograde and probably counterproductive, whereas a policy of engagement opens greater linkages, ultimately breaks down barriers, and facilitates different results. These were some of the reasons I went to Cuba.

The trip sprang from a European Foreign Affairs Ministers meeting. There was considerable debate within the Foreign Affairs Council at the time, par-

ticularly after the Spanish minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, began to develop links and pursue a rapprochement with Cuba, a different approach than that of the European Union. There were issues with political prisoners, and Moratinos felt that engagement was a better policy than boycott. I was struck by his comments. Having experienced the successful policies of engagement in Northern Ireland, I felt that Moratinos was correct, so I followed up myself with a visit.

These visits didn't cause tension between Ireland and other countries, barring maybe Israel. Israel might not have been happy with the visit to Gaza, and I had a number of meetings with the Israeli ambassador in Dublin, but it didn't cause any tensions between the United States and Ireland. I think in some respects, the perspectives and insights that we garnered from those visits were valued by the United States.

Journal: Visits like those are clearly useful in building goodwill and a willingness to engage across national borders. Do you think that tourism on a smaller scale similarly affects relations between Ireland and other nations?

Martin: Tourism isn't a hundred miles away from foreign relations. Where people go and engage, in terms of visiting, tends to act as a momentum builder or a catalyst for building better relations. For example, the people of Ireland

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go to the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries quite often. That brings an extra dimension to political cooperation and engagement on business and on other fronts. There is a strong alignment between the pragmatic consequences of a vibrant tourism market and a better relationship on a political and foreign affairs front.

Journal: As you might know, the *Journal* is based in Rhode Island, which like much of New England has a large population of people claiming Irish heritage and a growing number of Irish immigrants. You have been involved with a number of initiatives intended to strengthen links between the Irish diaspora and the nation. What role does tourism play in strengthening these links?

Martin: It plays a very important role. For example, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, I set up the Global Irish Economic Forum and led its first Summit at Farmleigh in Dublin in 2009. Essentially, we brought Irish CEOs and people

connected to Ireland from all over the world back, and then we created a Forum where we identified individuals in each country, from Asian nations, to the BRIC countries, to the United States, and so on. And we developed a network of individuals; tourism was a key part of that. Tourism agencies played a significant role in the Forum at the Farmleigh Summit, in particular.

In terms of the Irish diaspora, clearly in the United States, for example, it is critical to tourism. There is an interplay and overlap between tourism, culture, and politics, and nowhere is that more evident than in the United States. Even though I was part of many different initiatives to strengthen links between Ireland and the United States, they're all inextricably linked. Anytime I visited as an Education Minister, I served a variety of functions. Anytime I visited as an Enterprise Minister, a position primarily concerned with jobs, attracting American companies to Ireland, or promoting Irish companies in America, invariably I would be serving tourism functions as well. Likewise when I was Foreign Affairs Minister, I was serving social, economic, and tourist functions all in one visit—for example, functions for the Irish tourism agency, Fáilte Ireland.

These links are very important, as we discovered through the Global Irish Economic Forum. A lot of Irish businesspeople who had been working overseas in very high profile positions said to us that culture and literature and the arts were our calling card—we are the country of Joyce, Yeats, Beckett—and that they are what make Ireland unique, what gives Ireland its representation overseas, and that we were not marketing that enough. I think our tourist agencies began to take that into account and asked themselves, “To what degree were we marketing ourselves properly or effectively?” So, that actually changed some of the initiatives within tourism itself. And I can recall that there was also a significant increase at the time in terms of supporting arts and culture as a way, as a gateway if you like, of promoting the country and getting more people to visit Ireland based on our cultural and artistic reputation.

Journal: Related to this, St. Patrick's Day celebrations are now one of the most famous and widely celebrated aspects of Irish culture across the globe. Do you think the holiday's prominence has increased Ireland's relevance abroad and helped with the kind of marketing that you are talking about, or has it distorted and provided too narrow an image of Irish culture?

Martin: I think that, without question, it has increased Ireland's relevance abroad and it has generated more tourism. I can recall one St. Patrick's day being

out there on QVC, the television channel; they devoted an entire day to Irish products, particularly Irish crafts, which revealed to me the enormous amount of sales that were generated on St. Patrick's day. Tourism Ireland, an independent agency funded by the government to promote Ireland globally as a tourist destination, also uses the holiday in terms of marketing the country because the focus is on Ireland. In Tourism Ireland, we have worked on having greening initiatives, like the greening of the Eiffel Tower or other iconic buildings like the Sydney Opera House, for example. So St. Patrick's Day is a unique opportunity to get international attention focused on Ireland, and the various tourism agencies and the Department of Foreign Affairs, among others, use that day deliberately in a proactive way to market Ireland in a modern way. I take your point that maybe historically there was a narrative associated with Patrick's Day in terms of 'Leprechaunization' of the Irish image if you like, but I think that has diluted over time. What you are now witnessing is a much more dynamic and modern image of Ireland involving the culture and the arts, the scenery, the landscape, and a smart urban society that has a lot going for it—one that attracts people and that is still open and generous.

Journal: It sounds like you are fully in support, or at least quite approving, of the narratives of Ireland that are being presented. During your career as Minister for Foreign Affairs, did you ever have to assent to a narrative that seemed inauthentic or limited for the purposes of marketing or attracting business to the country?

87

Martin: No, I can't recall having to agree or assent to a narrative that seemed inauthentic or limited. In fact, we were pushing to promote a modern image of Ireland, particularly in economics and enterprise. As Enterprise Minister, I did a lot of marketing to the biggest multinational corporations around, in pharmaceuticals and in technology, from Apple, of course, and Pfizer, to Facebook and Google in more modern times. I met with all of their boards and presented Ireland as a young, dynamic country with a very high-skilled population, a strong premium on education, and an attractive tax policy. Essentially the skill sets in Ireland were ones that could meet the needs and demands of globally expanding companies, so we never really had to tell a false story. In our view, it was a win-win in terms of the way we were approaching the situation. There was no need to create an inauthentic vision or story; we had a lot to say and we made a lot of developments, in education in particular, and I think most companies found that when they got to Ireland, the employees were adaptable, flexible, and well educated. And I think it was a message we sold very strongly. Then in terms of

the tourism within Ireland, a lot of the attractions in Ireland have been sustained ones. They're not fly-by-night operations; some of the more iconic tourism attractions—such as the Rock of Cashel or Skellig Michael, where scenes for *Star Wars* were recently filmed—are ones that continue to attract. There were issues around making sure we're cost-competitive in pricing, particularly with regard to Americans thinking of coming to Ireland.

Journal: One goal of the Fianna Fáil 2015 publication on tourism strategy is to “increase cooperation between the tourism agency and tourism efforts north and south of the border in Ireland.” In a speech you gave to Ógra Fianna Fáil, the party's youth wing, you said that the act of commemoration does not have to be either triumphalist or sectarian; however, academics and political actors on both sides of the conflict have accused the tourism industry in Northern Ireland of embodying both of these traits in its approach to marketing itself and attracting visitors by creating tourist attractions centered on Northern Ireland's violent past. How do you view the relationship between The Troubles and tourism? How do you advise navigating the challenges that Northern Ireland's history poses to the tourism industry?

88

Martin: First of all, I think North-South cooperation through Tourism Ireland was an important initiative, one in which we took a joint marketing and promotional approach to the island of Ireland on the basis that, in international destinations and even in the United States, people do not really distinguish between the North and the South. In terms of the general attractions, in terms of the landscape, in terms of what people would say is a welcoming population, and so on, they see one island of Ireland.

Second is the context of commemoration. We're coming up with a decade of commemoration for the 1916 anniversary next year—we had the World War I centennial last year, with events like the sinking of the Lusitania being commemorated this year. A lot of us in the political world are conscious that—whereas in the past commemoration was divisive, was triumphalist, and was sectarian—there is now an obligation in terms of how we commemorate to try to be open, inclusive, more reflective, and understanding of different traditions. I think that went well with World War I last year. In terms of the manner and the tone of the commemorations of the victims of World War I—the millions who died in the war and the hundreds of thousands of Irish who died—I think it was handled sensitively and also opened up new territory and new ground.

In terms of the relationship between conflict and tourism, I think we need to be very sensitive and careful. Ultimately, my view is that the broader issues of tourism, in some respects, transcend conflict and don't necessarily need to be about conflict. Naturally in the North there has been some conflict-generated tourism where people go to various locations and sites. I would be somewhat cautious about that, but nonetheless it happens. Fundamentally what is important is that we accentuate the positives and minimize the negatives and make sure that the tourism industry is about giving people a good time in Ireland, irrespective of if it is in Northern Ireland or in the Republic of Ireland.

Journal: During your time as Minister for Foreign Affairs, concerns arose over the use of fraudulent Irish passports by suspects in the assassination of senior Hamas figures, resulting in the expulsion of a member of the Embassy of Israel in Dublin. How did the breach affect Irish-Israeli bilateral relations in the long term? Did it affect how Irish passports were received abroad?

Martin: We took it very seriously and were dismayed to see what was a significant breach of our passport regime. To have very sophisticated copying of our passports and the production of fraudulent Irish passports, and to have them used in the assassination in the manner which they were, caused us a lot of concern, so much so that I met with the Israeli foreign minister at the time, and he said that he had no knowledge of how this had happened. It did cause tensions in Israeli–Irish bilateral relations, of that there is no doubt, and there were parliamentary debates on that. The Irish people were quite shocked that this could have been so cynically engineered and executed, in terms of the degree to which our passport regime was breached. We have not seen long-term effects of how our passports have been received abroad. It did cause a review of our own security around the production of passports and a tightening up of that security, even though it had been quite a secure operation up until then. Although we equally acknowledge that some of the security intelligence entities in parts of the globe are highly sophisticated as well, and they have the capacity to do this sort of thing.

Journal: It seems that during your tenure as Foreign Minister there were quite a few issues that would have caused tensions in the Israeli–Irish bilateral relationship.

Martin: Yes, absolutely there were. During the Foreign Council meetings on

Gaza, we were consistently critical of Israel's approach. This was based on policy; obviously we are not anti-Israeli, we recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli state. We would much prefer if Israel would take a different approach in terms of its policy towards the Palestinians. Our view is that the pounding of Gaza—the relentless bombing of Gaza—is totally counterproductive and ultimately restricts progress towards a two-state solution. It exacerbates the situation, it undermines moderate opinion among Palestinians, and it supports, perversely, the extremes within Palestine. So in many ways, the blockade on Gaza did more for Hamas than it did for anybody else. Hamas made a lot of money over the tunnels, and we met many genuine businesses in Gaza that were bankrupted essentially because of what was going on.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is absolutely appalling, and that was my motivation: I couldn't just stand over what was going on, and I had to call it as I did as a foreign minister. When you bomb Gaza to the degree that it's bombed, you will kill children, you will kill women, there's no other way out of that, and to pretend you can do it in almost a precision-based, surgical way without injuring and maiming and killing hundreds and hundreds of civilians is just dishonest. And I did not want to advance that. Equally, of course, we condemned the rockets from Hamas that threatened Israeli citizens. So that was the motivation behind our approach, and Israel did not take kindly to it. And I think Israel's view sometimes seems to be that if you're not on our side, you're against us.

I don't think they accepted the basic tenets of our view that this was a counterproductive strategy. The humanitarian issues cried out for some resolution. The blockade stopped and delayed various operations, in terms of sewage, for example, in terms of housing, in terms of food, in terms of building schools, and the degree to which that was done was deeply, deeply disappointing. The European Union, in my view, has been too tolerant of all of that because we keep on—as Ban Ki-Moon said—building Gaza up and then watching it get destroyed and then building it up again. The UN and the European Union have to rebuild Gaza after every conflict. And it's an appalling waste. Many of whom I would consider the progressive forces in Palestine are not allowed to come forward, and the extremes are facilitated.

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Journal: It seems safe to say then, that the relationship with Israel is one way Ire-

land differs quite a bit from some of its European counterparts.

Martin: And I think there are historical issues in Europe as well as to why the European Union has tried to facilitate Israel, although patience is wearing thin among some of the countries at this stage. We had other issues with ships trying to break the blockade, which saw an overly aggressive approach by Israeli forces against peaceful boats that were affiliated with various organizations, particularly a Turkish boat with people onboard who were injured and killed. Some Irish people on different boats were killed as well. It was a very difficult period—it was very difficult to maintain a diplomatic approach with all of these issues going on at the same time.

Journal: Another diplomatic issue that stood out during your tenure was Ireland's rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon (Lisbon I) in 2008, the subsequent fallout for Ireland in the European Union, and, of course, the eventual acceptance of Lisbon II. What did you make of that as it was unfolding?

Martin: Well, in my first month in office there was the referendum on the treaty, and it was defeated. And then the task fell to me to rebuild the relationships in the European Union—and in particular for me to communicate to the people of Ireland that we had worked with the EU and identified the issues that raised concern, which at the time had to do with neutrality, the protocol on abortion, and the corporation tax. And despite arguments that Lisbon I would not have affected these issues, we succeeded in getting concessionary protocols. The other major issue was the retention of a commissioner for each country. The proposal was initially to dilute that and have a rotating situation where a country may be without a commissioner for a four-year period. We successfully negotiated and went back to the people about a year later. And the treaty passed by quite a good margin, as we ran a far better campaign, engaged more with the public, and also skillfully worked with our European partners in winning those concessions. And I think that's a tribute to our diplomats and the manner with which we approached it.

Additionally, I won the confidence of my colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Council early on, some of whom were going for hardheaded, reactive responses to the initial vote and issued remonstrations against Ireland. But we managed to cool all that down and say, "Well democracy is democracy, listen to the people." I think a lot of wise heads in the Council took our advice, and we negotiated a new package that we put to the people and that was ultimately successful. I

think, generally, in Europe, the danger in Lisbon I was that it created a bit of a negative feeling about Ireland in countries like Germany in particular, and we were conscious that that was important from a trade point of view and a tourism point of view. Ireland historically has always been seen as a very active, proactive, and supportive member of the European Union, and so in relation to maintaining that goodwill we felt that the passing of Lisbon II was important in that regard. And then, of course, it brought greater mobility of people, products, and trade, particularly services.

Journal: That sort of increase in the mobility of people, products, and trade is often cited as one of the biggest advantages of membership in the European Union. What sort of effect does that increase in mobility have on tourism?

Martin: It has a very strong effect on tourism and there is no doubt about that. I'm not sure that Lisbon II had a huge impact because tourism was strong already, but our figures from Italy, Germany, and France have grown significantly over recent times, particularly in the last decade. Obviously the recession caused a brief drop in numbers from 2009 onwards, but that recovered substantially, and we have a lot of German tourists in particular who love the landscape and the country. I think Lisbon II was important to maintain the sense that Ireland has been a constructive pro-European Union country. A lot of young people have been very engaged through education programs, Erasmus programs, and other programs like that, which have been very important for more and more young Spaniards and young Italians coming to Ireland.

Journal: Another issue you mentioned with regard to the Lisbon treaty was Ireland's legal stance on abortion. One of the biggest reasons that people leave Ireland for the purpose of medical tourism involves women leaving the country to obtain abortions in places with less restrictive laws. How do you think that reflects on the current abortion legislation in Ireland, and how do you think it affects the domestic, and perhaps the international, political climate?

Martin: Well, I think it has always been known that Ireland has prohibitive laws on abortion, which stems from, I think, a strong sort of pro-life ethos within the country. I don't think people would call it "medical tourism" or would use that description or definition of it. I think there's a greater understanding around the issue than there would have been in the past. When I say "understanding," I think people are less judgmental; they understand that women can be

in significantly difficult situations. But you may recall there have been various referendums on the issue; after Article 40.3.3 [the constitutional ban on abortion] was passed in the '80s, there were subsequent referendums on the right to travel, the right to information. And it's fair to say, I think, that there's more diversity of opinion on the subject now than there would have been in the past.

But it's still a very hot political topic. When I say "hot," I mean it's a difficult and controversial one. And only last year again there was the legislation giving effect to Article 40.3.3 and the Supreme Court ruling in terms of the issue of suicide, for example. That manifested itself in the Protection of Life and Pregnancy Act last year, and even that generated a lot of controversy within the House, to give another example: Fianna Fáil lost quite a number of members as a result. So the Constitution prohibits abortion, and that is the position. Historically, even before the referendum was passed in 1983, many, many women did leave, to go to Britain in particular, to have abortions. A lot has changed, in terms of crisis counseling or pregnancy counseling and so on, to try and improve the climate and improve prevention and so on, to help people in situations where they are under a lot of stress and trauma. Nonetheless, it remains a current, live issue, and there is a movement on some fronts to try and amend the Eighth Amendment. Others would be resistant to that. And in my own party, we take a pro-life stance, although we have also taken the view that it's a matter of conscience for each individual member of the party. So last year, during that debate, we had each member voting in accordance with their conscience.

93

Journal: Some have also said that the ease with which women can travel abroad, given Ireland's proximity to the United Kingdom, has served as a pressure valve, and that perhaps the agitation for change would be much higher if women didn't have that option available to them.

Martin: Well you see, it's been voted on by the people through the referendums—there was one in the 1980s, 1992, 2002. So it's gone back to the people on a number of occasions, now obviously in different presentations, and it's quite complex when you put it in the form of a referendum. In terms of travel, we've never restricted the right to travel and never wanted to, that's not something that anyone wants to do. In fairness, it's an issue of substance, and people have different views, not just in Ireland, but in the United States and elsewhere, in terms of the human life issue. Some see it from that perspective, others see it from different perspectives, from a reproductive rights perspective. But I think we have to accept that it's an issue that divides opinion—there is not consen-

MICHEÁL MARTIN

sus on it. We've had, for example, comprehensive Oireachtas committees [the legislature of Ireland] dealing with it, we've gotten experts, different agencies, and so on. So we've debated it fairly exhaustively, and I have no doubt it will continue to be debated.

Journal: Lastly, on a more personal level, it sounds like you've visited the United States quite a few times—what is your favorite city or region in the United States?

Martin: Today is a very sad day: as you know, six Irish people died in California, and so everyone is very down today. Six young Irish people, and many, many more injured. Pretty difficult to say which is my most favorite part—I love New York, and the United Nations is there; we did a lot of work on foreign affairs through the United Nations Annual Assembly, so the East Coast is very strong. San Francisco and Silicon Valley, in terms of industry and entrepreneurial needs, I think are fascinating, and there were a lot of lessons for Ireland from the Silicon Valley experience. I think Boston obviously is a great Irish city. I think I could keep going on, but I think those would be the main areas. I enjoyed going down to Indianapolis to visit Eli Lilly, a pharmaceutical company that has a facility in Kinsale in County Cork. It's a completely different experience than what you experience in New York, for example. They're big investors and have been in Ireland for 35 years. You know, I always find America open, welcoming. I was involved with the arts in New York and the various Irish festivals. I've found the connection between Ireland and America fascinating, and, of course, our writers continue to write about it, which is important. 

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