

Professor Ian Greer Introduction

- Delighted to welcome the Leader of His Majesty's Opposition,
 - Sir Keir Starmer,
 - to the **Great Hall** here at Queen's University Belfast.
- His visit is timely as we are in the **midst of significant political challenges here in NI**,
 - so we **privileged that** he has chosen **Queen's** as a venue to deliver such an important speech,
- We could not wish for a more **fitting setting**. On the walls of this room hang portraits of many leading Queen's alumni, who played a significant role in the peace process,
 - the Late Professor Lord **David Trimble**,
 - former President of Ireland **Professor Mary McAleese**,
 - the late **Baroness May Blood**
 - and of course our former Chancellor, **Senator George J Mitchell**.
- We are fast approaching **the 25th anniversary** of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.
- Queen's will mark this important milestone with a major **international conference** over three days in April.

- A conference that will not only look back but also **look forward envisioning the future of opportunity for NI.**
- We hope, Keir, that you will be able to **join us on that occasion**

- **Keir is no stranger** to this part of the world
 - Indeed, his **connection to the peace process** in Northern Ireland predates his political career.
 - It goes back to the early days of **police service reform** at the outset of the Agreement implementation.
- Shortly after he was appointed a Queen's Counsel in 2002, Keir served as a **human rights adviser to the Northern Ireland Policing Board**
 - The Board was formed to oversee the **newly created Police Service of Northern Ireland.**
 - In that role many **policing board members** benefitted from Keir's wisdom and advice.
 - These **members came from all political parties** - many of whom went on to Ministerial and party leadership roles.
- Following his impressive career as a barrister, he was **Director of Public Prosecutions** from 2008 to 2013

- Dealing effectively with **many high-profile issues and cases** during his tenure.
- He also introduced range of **new processes** to improve the legal system
- he was knighted in 2014 for his services to law and criminal justice.
- After stepping down as DPP, he **entered Parliament as MP for Holburn and St Pancras** in 2014.
- He has held a number of posts within the **shadow cabinet**
 - notably the **Shadow Secretary of State for the Exiting of the European Union**, an issue that continues to have a profound impact here in Northern Ireland.
- The **lack of agreement on the protocol issues**, and **the lack of a NI Executive and Assembly is having a profound impact** on our community on issues ranging from **Health to Higher Education**.
- We **urgently need an agreement** on the outstanding issues and the **restoration of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement institutions**

- In the **Higher Education** sector here in Northern Ireland, we are particularly concerned about the **challenges facing our students**
- The **current arrangement creates significant inequality** for access to HE, where our **young people are seriously disadvantaged in local provision and access compared to England.**

- We still **lose 30% of our young** people to GB, most do not return.
- This fuels a **shortage of skilled graduates** to meet the needs of our growing economy,
 - and risks **economic growth stalling at a time when we have invested in innovation with our City deal programme.**
- **Despite the pressing need to invest,**
 - an investment that delivers enormous return,
 - in **Queen's case an 8.2:1 benefit to cost ratio**
 - the **sector is facing funding cuts.**

- Cuts at a time when we need to find an **extra 5,000 university** places before the end of this decade, to meet increasing

demographic demands from growth in the population of 18 year olds

- Not to expand provision can only create further **disadvantage and disillusionment** over the next few years.
- **So failure to invest in our young people** will have a **deep socio-economic impact** which affects our ability to attract major employers and investors to this great part of the world.
- Clearly the issue at the top of the political agenda is a **restored NI Executive.**
- In the **room today are many political leaders,** I
- hope that the discussions we have this morning can serve to **advance progress** as you work together to find solutions
- Our community in **NI urgently needs your leadership.**
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- And now Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in **welcoming Sir Keir Starmer to the platform.**