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## Local & National

### Minister hails new era on visit to Paisley's heartland

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Wednesday, November 21, 2007

Irish Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern today visited Ballymena in the heart of the Rev Ian Paisley's constituency, without any loyalist protest.

As he met Protestant and Catholic schoolchildren involved in an Irish Government-backed scheme to tackle sectarianism in the Co Antrim town alongside its Democratic Unionist mayor Maurice Mills, Mr Ahern said the fact that he could visit Ballymena without any fuss was a measure of the political progress that has been made in Northern Ireland in recent times.

But while he welcomed those steps forward, the Fianna Fail minister stressed Northern Ireland still had a lot of work to do in addressing sectarian attitudes in society.

"It is absolutely changed times - changed times in that Dr Paisley can come down to Dublin as well and not throw snowballs or whatever at us," he said.

"Thankfully that's part of the courageous moves that politicians here in Northern Ireland eventually took as we were exhorting them to come together to work on behalf of their people. What better way than for them to organise their own affairs rather than allowing other people to do it for them?"

"I do feel comfortable here. Why not?"

"It is a beautiful part of the world. It is a part of the world where unfortunately because of the Troubles my parents did not bring me to too often and thankfully since I became Minister for Foreign Affairs I have been here a lot more."

Mr Ahern and Mr Mills visited young people at the All Saint's Boxing Club in Ballymena, where the actor Liam Neeson once boxed, to attend the launch of New Day - a peace and reconciliation initiative encouraging young people to address their own sectarian prejudices.

They also launched a scholarship at St Patrick's College in memory of one of its pupils, 15-year-old Michael McIlveen, who died after being assaulted with a baseball bat in the town in May last year.

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