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REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR CHARLES H PRICE, II, AT THE NORTHERN IRELAND
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY LUNCH TODAY.

First of all, I'd like to thank Captain Henderson, the President of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, for hosting this luncheon. I think most of you know that, since becoming Ambassador in London, I've been conducting a not so secret "love affair" with Northern Ireland.

In fact, this is my fifth visit to the province and three of them have been at the invitation of the Chamber. So, if I have become somewhat biased in favour of this fabled Isle, you must bear most of the blame.

In my brief remarks today, I'd like to tell you about some of the hopeful changes I've noticed over the past five years in the province. Then - inevitably - I'd like to leave you with a bit of advice. We've become such friends over the years that I feel free to do so. First, though, I want to tell you why I've become such an avid and outspoken supporter of Northern Ireland.

The first, and most compelling, reason is that the people - folks such as yourselves - are proud, hardworking, and uncommonly resilient. I hope you will excuse me if I mention one in particular, who happens to be here today - Sir Kenneth Bloomfield. I know of no-one who better personifies the strength and courage of the people of Ulster.

Sir Kenneth has worked tirelessly to find a political solution to the problems of the province. He has devoted himself to bridging the gap between the two communities and has been genuinely concerned with the plight of those living in Ulster's most economically deprived areas.

His accomplishments and his leadership of the Northern Ireland Civil Service reflect the special character of so many of the people who live here. I would therefore like to salute you, Sir Kenneth, and your lovely wife, Lady Elizabeth.

Now, I'll turn to some of the positive changes I've seen here. Sometimes it's a bit easier for an occasional visitor like me to measure the pace and scope of these things. And I've seen some rapid and profound changes. Let me describe a few.

As I walk along the streets of Belfast, I am impressed by the economic growth and spirit of hope that prevails here. New restaurants, modern shopping complexes, well-conceived public housing, a new city hospital, and imaginative plans to redevelop the waterfront all testify to your commitment to the future of Belfast.

Then there is the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Under the leadership of my good friend, Jack Hermon, the RUC has become one of the best police forces in the world. While not flawless - no police force is - the RUC is coping effectively with the challenge of well-organised terrorist groups while, at the same time, providing fair policing in a divided community. That's no mean accomplishment.

I also see the Government doing its part. It is working to improve the quality of life in a number of different ways, especially for the province's poorest citizens. One example is the recent proposal in the Queen's speech for legislation to strengthen the existing law against religious discrimination in employment.

To be successful, that legislation will need the support of the private sector. And I am encouraged to learn that those in business, including many of you here today, are co-operating with the government to see that it works in the way it is intended.

There is also the development of integrated schools. While I am under no delusions about this being a panacea, I do regard it as a giant step in the right direction. Just seeing Catholic and Protestant children studying and playing together, as I did this morning at Lagan College, makes me more optimistic about your future.

Another change that bodes well for the province is the International Fund for Ireland. I've taken a personal interest in the Fund because my Government has contributed over one hundred and twenty million dollars to it. And we have done so during a period of acute budget stringencies.

In my opinion this support will continue under the Bush Administration. I accompanied the Prime Minister on her visit to Washington last month. I was able to talk to a number of individuals who will advise President Bush. They all assured me of their concern for the people of Northern Ireland and their commitment to doing everything appropriate and possible to be of help.

Why have we contributed to the Fund, and why will we continue to do so? Well, we hope that it stimulates economic regeneration both here and in the Republic of Ireland. We also hope it will encourage reconciliation between the two communities who share this island.

On this trip I have had the opportunity to visit one of the Fund's projects, where I could see the dedication and enthusiasm of all those involved, from the workers to the leaders. I have special words of praise for the chairman of the Fund's Board, Charles Brett, who has performed his difficult work in a resourceful, intelligent manner.

Moreover, I note with pleasure that the IFI Board recently approved a project submitted jointly by your very own Product of Northern Ireland and the Irish Goods Council. This will involve a £280,000 programme of North/South trade promotion. I am hopeful, as I know you are, that this imaginative campaign will sustain and create jobs in the province.

One more point about the International Fund - it has been successful in attracting American investment to Northern Ireland. A US company, Neotech Ltd, recently opened its doors at the Antrim Technology Park. Within a few years it should employ some two-hundred workers. That's exactly the kind of progress we Americans were hoping for when we decided to support the Fund.

Speaking of America, you all know that I have long been an ardent proponent of increased bilateral trade between my country and Northern Ireland. When I get home and return to the business world some time early next year, I promise to spread the good news about the province.

But let me be frank: this will be no easy task. Northern Ireland has an unfortunate image in the United States. Many Americans look at the endless, senseless sectarian violence and feel intimidated. You and I know that this image is exaggerated and distorted. But until all the people of the Province learn to get along, to resolve their differences in a peaceful manner, we will not be able to erase this commonly held negative perception.

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Now, as I promised at the start of my remarks - or should I say threatened? - I'll leave you with a couple of suggestions. First, I and other outside supporters can only do so much in promoting Northern Ireland, especially given the unfortunate image I just described. So it is up to you to do the rest. You can speak from experience and with authority. If you don't, few others will.

Don't be bashful or hesitant. The province has a lot to boast about. Go abroad and tell the rest of the world about the favourable industrial environment you've created, about your well-educated workers, about your determination to set things right.

Second, you, as businessmen, must play an important role in the larger community. I'm talking about politics. Now, I know that politics is often considered a dirty word, both here and in the United States. But, unless businessmen are prepared to involve themselves in politics, unless their commitment to the community goes deeper than economics, then the political situation is unlikely to change.

You can help make it change, because you are tangibly committed to the future of Northern Ireland. With hard work and dedication, your involvement may be able to bring the various and competing groups together. Then, at long last, your goal of a peaceful and prosperous community will be within reach.

We Americans share this goal with you. And, like you, we have many urgent problems of our own that we must address. The important thing, though, is that both you and we are tackling our problems.

When I return home, I intend to make Americans aware of that fact. I hope it will help to put Northern Ireland into perspective so that it can attract the kind of investment and good press that it deserves.

I wish you luck and thank you sincerely for having me here with you today. You've made my last official visit to Belfast memorable, instructive, and, not least, a lot of fun.