

Speech on the implications of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chief Executive, Richard Burge, to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce.

To be delivered at the Embassy of the Republic of Ireland in London

May I thank the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and the Irish Embassy for welcoming me today.

The links between Dublin and London are robust – with our business, cultural and academic ties.

As capital cities in these islands, our respective business communities are critical in driving job creation and prosperity across the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Dublin is a vibrant, dynamic and contemporary European city which is outward looking and is positively embracing change.

For this reason and many others, it is no accident that Big Tech firms want to be in Dublin. There is much, on this side of the Irish Sea, that we can learn from the Dublin business community and the Dublin Chamber of Commerce.

As well all know, our respective Chambers are incredibly important for bringing together businesses in the UK and Ireland. No other business representative organisations in the United Kingdom or Ireland has the capacity to operate at a local, regional, national and international level.

We have begun initial discussions between our chambers to strengthen our relationship and I hope we can soon welcome Dublin Chamber members to take advantage of the great facilities that we have around central London.

But there is a shadow that is hanging over our twin business communities in Dublin and London – and that shadow is the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill.

I and the London Chamber could stand aside and avoid controversy by not mentioning this Bill, but the actions of the UK Government must be called out if it leads, by misfortune, to a trade war between the United Kingdom and the European Union. At a time of Putin's war in Ukraine, the recovery from the pandemic and global inflation worries, businesses in London can ill afford a trade war.

The British Government, though, are right to be concerned about the future of Northern Ireland. I have been to Northern Ireland when human safety was the top priority; economic safety is now the key issue.

For, as we know, treaties are hard won – sometimes off the back of suffering and violence, sometimes as a consequence of changes inside a nation, but always the result of painstaking and diligent negotiation.

They are the mainstay of civilization; they convert war into peace, suspicion into conciliation, poverty into shared prosperity. The treaties that stand the test of time are ones that are ever watchful of reversion into historic conflict; where changes

come through the voluntary and mutual agreement of the signatories (not the unilateral action of one), and where the underlying principles of trust and confidence are based on a desire of all parties for the whole of the treaty's benefits to be greater than the sum of the value to the individual signatories.

And this cuts to the nub of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and why its continuation and development is so important. It was achieved on the back of sacrifice and loss; it required individuals to come together despite grievous personal harms; to stand back from historic injustices and to seek reconciliation with generosity and trust.

So we can talk about the trade benefits of treaties, the social improvement that comes with the departure of conflict, the prosperity of individuals and cities and countries.

But in doing so, we underplay at our peril the foundation of treaties; they require nations to show the same understanding as their citizens have had to show; they require nations to remember in the same way as their citizens do not forget; they require nations to share the ambition that their people took in laying down the gun. At its heart, a treaty is about assuming the goodwill and positive intent of the stranger who is now a friend, and the former enemy who is now an ally.

This may sound very highfalutin but I do not apologise. I am not embarrassed as a business leader to set out the issues that are far more important than commercial profit and loss.

I have spent a good deal of my life in rooms persuading individuals whose personal loss and pain has made reconciliation and forgiveness almost impossible. I recognise the sacrifice and humility such steps require.

I know the consequences of not seeking agreements, and once secured, of not sticking to them. I was at Euston station as a young boy returning to boarding school after the summer holidays on 12 September 1973; I was on the last DLR train that left South Quay station in Docklands on the 9 February 1996; I have walked through the green line of Beirut. I have sat at tables with Arabs and Israelis, and Turks and Armenians. I have seen the human consequences when agreements are broken or simply taken for granted.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is a model and an inspiration to all of those who through the pain of blood spilled and treasure lost seek reconciliation, peace, and prosperity. It is a precious jewel not just for the British and the Irish but for all of Europe and for the world.

We have a clear problem. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol are incompatible. Both the EU and the British Government took their eyes off the ball in their hurry to complete a process with both sides obsessed more about proving they were right and the other was wrong than in creating a meaningful relationship for the future based on the treaty commitments of the present. To paraphrase Shakespeare, we have almost lost a pearl richer than all our tribes.

We are where we are. All the analysis and rage and accusations about the recent historical events that have got us to this position will make absolutely no difference; it is merely sound and fury signifying nothing.

What we need to do is decide what do we want for the future of the UK and EU relationship; how do we create an agreement which is greater than the mere sum of our individual strengths? How do we use the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as the platform for better days, and not treat it as a constraint on our ambition? How do we use this difficult and complex negotiation as a way of demonstrating the importance of international collaboration based on mutual benefit and the selfless observance of international law.

In short, despite our current dispute, we must not let it reinforce our fractured world but instead focus on the importance and value of respect and mutual endeavour; with trade and commerce as a means to achieve a greater end.

The legacy of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was helped in no small part by the diligent work of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and chambers of commerce in the Republic of Ireland - putting the needs of business and social inclusion first. This should be recognised.

It is at this point that I need to emphasise the potential negative economic impact of this Bill on London.

If, unintentionally, this Bill leads to a trade war between the United Kingdom and the European Union, I know that Northern Ireland businesses will be the worst affected of all regional business communities in the UK. That must never be forgotten. After Northern Ireland, however, comes London.

London contributes over 20% towards UK GDP. This is primarily because London is a global, outward looking city with the necessary international links to grow the British economy.

A trade war would inhibit the ability for the UK's capital city to act as a global city. That is not just bad for London – it is bad for all of us across the United Kingdom. The repercussion of this trade war would also reverberate across Dublin. We must do all that we can to avoid this scenario from ever happening.

A trade war would damage the levelling up agenda here in the UK, which the London Chamber strongly supports.

As it happens, the Institute of Fiscal Studies found, before the pandemic, that 22% of people across the UK were in relative poverty. In London that figure was 28% - so London needs levelling up too!

The position that all of the UK nations and regions needs levelling up is unarguable and I pay tribute to the British Government for making the commitment to do just that. We would argue that a stronger London means a stronger Britain – but a trade war would undermine the Government's critical levelling up work by weakening London and weakening the UK economy as a whole.

Throughout my career, I have seen how vital it is for the United Kingdom to abide by international law and I have seen how global firms want to trade with the UK as Britain is known for abiding by international law. Once that bond is broken it is very hard to get that reputation back again – and that can only damage businesses in every nation and region of the United Kingdom.

This does not mean that I do not share the frustration of many in this room and across these islands at the red tape that now exists between Great Britain and Northern Ireland because of the Northern Ireland Protocol. I and the London Chamber believe in the unity of the UK internal market.

I know that business representative organisations in Northern Ireland have come up with proposals that would address what are clear deficiencies in the Protocol without breaking international law. I trust the judgement of business leaders in Northern Ireland.

My main message today is the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry can not stand by and let the British Government and the European Commission sleep walk our business communities into a trade war. Businesses are already stretched by uncertain economic circumstances and high energy prices caused by Putin's war in Ukraine. A trade war may be the last straw for a number of these businesses.

I also fear that the UK internal market is threatened by this Bill. There is a risk that if a London firm in good faith sells a product to Northern Ireland and, for whatever reason, that product is later sold into the Republic of Ireland or another EU member state, then my members could – in theory - be at risk of prosecution for colluding in illegally breaking into the EU internal market.

My members are businesses – not customs officers. These kinds of provisions, if unattended to, could damage links between GB and Northern Ireland businesses. Nobody wants that.

Let me say a few words about the European Commission before I end my remarks. I know that some of you in this room may feel that the European Commission have been playing politics on this issue. I share those concerns.

I believe the politicians should follow the example set by Chambers of Commerce across these islands and around the world – get round the table, sort out these issues and let us in business carry on with business. Chambers know that discussion is the key to solving disputes, and we should be calling on our politicians to do the same.

In recent weeks, there has been media reports that the UK's new Prime Minister may now reach a deal with the EU on the Protocol. I very much hope this speculation is realised, especially as next year, we will mark 25 years since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. 25 years of jobs across these islands, 25 years of growing prosperity, 25 years of young people growing up without the fear of violence – but, instead, with hope and ambition for their future.

I urge my Government not to sacrifice 25 years of peace and prosperity for the mistake that would be the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill.

As we know in the Dublin Chamber and the London Chamber, in good times and in tough times, business works together.

I hope the new Prime Minister will work with all of us so that we can focus on what we do best – business.

Thank you.