

Address to Ireland-Canada Chambers of Commerce Edmonton Chapter St Patrick's Day Ball

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, dia dhaoibh a dhaoine uaisle.

It is a great honour for me to represent the Embassy of Ireland here this evening at this wonderful event. I'd like to start by thanking our hosts, the Edmonton Ireland Canada Chamber of Commerce, for their hard work in organising this St Patrick's Day celebration. Thanks also to all of you for the very warm welcome you've given me on my first visit to Edmonton.

I'm here tonight to speak to you a little bit about current events in Ireland, and about how we at the Embassy hope to continue to work with you, and with all of the Irish community organisations across Canada, to help strengthen the links between our two countries.

As I'm sure you are aware, this is a particularly interesting time in Ireland. Following last month's landmark general election, a new Irish Government was elected in the Dáil this week, with the largest majority in the history of the Irish State. The new Fine Gael/Labour coalition government faces some significant challenges. Ireland was affected very badly by the recent global economic crisis, together with problems in our domestic banking system. It will take a lot of hard work to address these issues and return Ireland to sustainable economic growth. However, we are now finally heading into spring, and St Patrick's Day is traditionally the time when Irish farmers begin in earnest to bring the fields back to life after the winter break. We are hoping for a similar new start in Ireland. Last year was essentially a year of stabilisation and now in 2011 we are moving into growth and hopefully better times.

Indeed, there is much cause for optimism for the future. As a small, open economy, export success is fundamental to Ireland's recovery. We are already showing a strong rebound in this area, with exports expected to reach new record levels in 2011. This success includes increased trade and investment links with Canada, which are in a very healthy state. Trade between our two countries reached \$2.7bn last year, and Irish exports to Canada rose by a remarkable 27% in the third quarter. We are hopeful that this relationship will grow even stronger with the successful conclusion of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the EU, which is expected at the end of this year. The Albertan provincial government is involved in these negotiations and is playing a very active and constructive part in them. Further trade liberalisation will present an excellent opportunity for Irish companies to increase their presence in this country.

Ireland has been very successful in attracting foreign direct investment from market leaders in a range of industries including pharmaceuticals, IT, and financial services. We have regained our international competitiveness, and the country ranks highly in the World Competitiveness Yearbook as a great place to do business thanks to our skilled workforce,

high productivity, openness to new ideas, low corporate taxes and business-friendly environment.

It is particularly encouraging to note that home-grown entrepreneurs account for an ever-increasing share of our export figures. Irish innovation now has a truly global reach. To give you just one example, which those of us not lucky enough to hold a Canadian passport will be all too familiar with, the eye and fingerprint scanning technology used by US Immigration services at the border was developed by Irish IT company Daon. Our strong commitment to investing in research and development will ensure that this trend continues.

Recent events have damaged our international reputation, and of course we must and do acknowledge the seriousness of our situation and the extent of the challenges that we face, but we should not engage in undue pessimism which can be self-defeating. Ireland clearly has a more positive story to tell as well, and we feel that it is important to communicate that good news at home and abroad. The international Irish Diaspora can help us tell that story and be Ireland's advocates in the countries that are our key trading and business partners. We at the Embassy are very appreciative of the Chambers' efforts in emphasising the positive aspects of Ireland's situation.

In fact I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the great work done by the Chamber here in Edmonton, and through your participation in the wider Ireland-Canada Chamber of Commerce network. The Chamber provides a valuable forum for local business people, whether of Irish background or friends of Ireland, to make contacts and take advantage of new opportunities. It is great to see the extent to which the Chamber is involved in the wider community as well. Your establishment of the Wild Geese Endowment Fund at the University of Alberta, which will give Canadian students the chance to study in Ireland, is an inspiring and valuable initiative. And your generous support of the Irish Sports and Social Society's annual Feis is another example of the great spirit of mutual support and co-operation that exists within Edmonton's Irish community.

I have spoken this evening about some of the strengths that exist within Ireland's economy and some of the reasons to be hopeful for the future, but, while it may be a cliché, it is true to say that by far our greatest asset as a nation is our people. For such a small country, Ireland has an extraordinary global presence, with Irish citizens and people of Irish heritage to be found in every corner of the world. Wherever they have gone, the Irish have remained proud of their culture and their identity, while also integrating well and often achieving great success in their new homelands. One of the greatest aspects of the global Irish community is that it is just that – a real community, in which people come together to help each other out, share their experiences, and celebrate their culture. This can be seen here in Canada, where from coast to coast there is a wealth of thriving Irish community organisations which celebrate our arts, music, dance, theatre, literature and national sports, and really show the best of Ireland to our Canadian friends. This too is an important way of telling Ireland's positive story to the wider world.

In Ireland, we recognise the debt that we owe to our many citizens and well-wishers who represent us abroad. We are grateful to accept the help of our citizens abroad, and two years ago the government established the Global Irish Network whose membership includes many influential figures in the worlds of business, academia, science and the arts, who are willing to give their advice and assistance to Ireland. The government attempts in some small way to repay our debt to the Irish abroad through the Emigrant Support Programme, through which we offer funding to help support community groups who are providing valuable services to the Irish overseas. In 2010, Canadian organisations received just over \$100,000 for a variety of projects, and we hope that this figure will continue to grow over the coming years. Clearly, the country's relationship with our global community is perhaps stronger than ever, and it is something we hope to build on further.

Of course, none of the wonderful community organisations which I have mentioned would exist without the extraordinary people who devote their time, their energies and their skills to them. President Mary McAleese in her St Patrick's Day message to the people of Ireland this year paid tribute to those who volunteer, and in doing so make the lives of others in their communities that much richer and better. I would like to echo those sentiments by expressing my appreciation, and that of everyone at the Embassy, for the work that you do. For being here tonight to support the Ireland-Canada Chamber of Commerce and the Irish Sports and Social Society, and for all of the other ways that you play your part throughout the year, I very sincerely thank you.

On that note, I would like to invite you all to enjoy this well-earned St Patrick's Day celebration. Beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig oraibh go léir, a very happy St Patrick's Day to you all.