

Plans to Promote Northern Ireland

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to promote Northern Ireland in the United States of America and in Europe.

(AQO 503/08)

The deputy First Minister: Promotion in the United States and Europe is a high priority for OFMDFM. The bureau in Washington promotes several priority sectors to key audiences in the United States, including politicians, businesspeople, academics, research institutions and cultural organisations. We are also engaged in several major initiatives to encourage investment and visits from the United States.

Invest NI and the bureau are working with the US State Department and US businesses to bring over several economic missions in the next few months. We will travel to Washington, DC, and other major US cities to plan an economic conference for early 2008. OFMDFM will work with Minister Dodds and meet chief executives of major US corporations to promote the investment message.

The First Minister and I hope to travel to Brussels before Christmas to hear, at first hand, about the progress made by the European Commission Task Force, the establishment of which the Commission's President Barroso announced on 1 May 2007. Our planned visit follows on from a series of visits by Ministers over the past six months: several Executive colleagues, including both junior Ministers and I, have visited Brussels and met senior politicians and officials on departmental business. Such a level of personal engagement is important in keeping the North in the minds of our European partners. It demonstrates to those in the European institutions, in addition to potential investors, tourists and regional and industrial partners, that we are open for business.

I commend the work of the Executive's Brussels office, which supports Ministers and officials when they visit the city. To ensure that the North's interests are taken into account as policies are developed, it also assists Departments in their monitoring of policy and legislative proposals that are working their way through the institutions. The office works with other regional offices to promote a positive image, most recently by participating, with other regional offices, in the European open-day event that promoted Europe's regions and cities. The office also makes its facilities, expertise and advice

available to local government and civil society representatives to assist them in their dealings with the European institutions.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his detailed response that outlined the situations in the United States and Europe. Does the Minister agree that there is tremendous goodwill in the USA and Europe towards the people of Northern Ireland and the Assembly? Does he agree that it is time to promote Northern Ireland and to encourage businesses to set up here and create employment, which would benefit everyone? Will stronger trade links be established between businesses in Northern Ireland and those in USA and Europe?

The deputy First Minister: I recently visited the United States at the same time as Ministers Poots and Empey. There, the phenomenal interest in the political developments over recent months is obvious. A tremendous sense of goodwill and support emanates from everyone that we meet on our visits to the United States. In all probability, the most important economic-investment conference ever to be held here will take place in about May 2008. In the lead-up to that conference, further economic missions will come over from the United States. That demonstrates that people in the United States have a huge interest in the situation here and are seriously considering investing in this part of the world.

2.45 pm

There is a limited window of opportunity because the presidential election campaign kicks off, big time, early in 2008. Therefore, the period between now and May 2008 is critical. We must take advantage of that opportunity, but we are being well supported. The visit by Ambassador Tuttle and Ambassador Foley and the level of interest being shown by Paula Dobriansky at the State Department clearly show that there is enormous goodwill for all the work that we are doing. If the economic investment conference is successful, and if we secure more highly paid, quality jobs for our young people, that will have a massive effect on the battle that we are fighting to ensure that the economic prospects for all our people are improved.

Mr Gallagher: Does the deputy First Minister agree that, in promoting any part of Ireland, a key target group is those of Irish descent, and that that is particularly true in the United States? Will the deputy First Minister provide an update of any discussions that he has had with the Dublin Government in relation to the promotion of the island? As a representative of a constituency that has been starved of foreign inward investment for many years, does he see any role —

Mr Speaker: Order. Supplementary questions should relate to the original question. I have to rule that supplementary question out of order. It does not, in any way, relate to the original question.

Mr McCallister: I will try to stay on the subject. Does the deputy First Minister agree that the fundamental purpose of our Washington office differs from that of the European office, in that it is primarily geared towards attracting new business and inward investment to Northern Ireland? To that end, does he believe that the office should, therefore, be business led rather than managed by the Civil Service?

The deputy First Minister: The experiences of recent years were a result of the circumstances of the time. However, we now find ourselves in a wholly new situation as a result of restoration of the institutions. As I said in an earlier answer, there is huge interest in the United States and in Irish America. Many Irish-American companies have shown tremendous interest. Much of the work that has been done by the Irish Government has assisted our efforts to generate interest in attempts to bring about an approach whereby everywhere on the island will benefit, but, particularly here in the North, because we have had such uneven development in recent times.

There are big questions for us to answer in respect of the Washington bureau and how we take its work forward. There will be a change in the leadership of the bureau in the next few weeks. On 1 November, Norman Houston takes up his position as director of the bureau. The challenges that lie ahead must take into account the points that Mr McCallister has just made.