

Report on the Contribution of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to Economic Recovery: Statements

Friday, 28 March 2014

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I congratulate the committee on the work it has done, as well as the Government and our diplomatic service, in restoring our reputation abroad. I used to work abroad and there were several low points concerning our reputation over the past several years before I was elected to this House. I have learned from my contacts abroad that this has changed for the good.

This is an excellent and welcome report. However, we have to be careful that we do not open ourselves to accusations of hypocrisy on the point of which states we trade with. We have abused human rights ourselves in the past. There are those who claim we are still abusing them, whether it is regarding the issue of a woman diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality not being allowed to have a termination or how we treat asylum seekers in direct provision. We must be careful when we speak about other countries and their human rights records that we do not come in on our high horse.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell is correct that trade opens up countries. There is a long history in international relations of countries using soft power, namely their economic power, to bring influence and change attitudes in other countries. Our diplomats and the Government in its trade missions are good at this aspect of diplomacy.

The report highlights the work done by our diplomatic corps in rebuilding our economy and opening up new trade links. However, we should not reduce the work of our ambassadors and staff just to dealing with trade promotion and issues. One cannot quantify what it means to a citizen distressed abroad when an embassy comes to his or her aid. One cannot quantify what it feels like when a giant shamrock is projected on the Burj Al Arab in Dubai on St. Patrick's Day.

The Royal Irish Academy is holding a conference on disarmament issues, one on which Ireland has been to forefront. One cannot quantify the importance of Ireland's initiative in the 1950s and 1960s in developing the non-proliferation treaty and what it means to the world today. I accept the report does not try to elevate trade over other aspects of foreign affairs policy. It is important, however, to marry our foreign and domestic policy, particularly when it comes to financial investments. Disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons are incredibly important. That and peacekeeping were our two pillars when we first entered the United Nations. Today, however, the State invests in companies which produce nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles through the National Pensions Reserve Fund with funds of up to €10 million. While it is not a huge amount, it is significant because it is completely at odds with our foreign policy and our reputation in the area of non-proliferation. As we move to establish a new strategic State investment fund, we should divest from these companies to ensure we have an ethical investment policy that matches our foreign policy aims. It is important we speak on these issues and others, including human rights, but do not open ourselves to accusations of hypocrisy on how we spend our State moneys.