

Tuesday 9 February 2016

the actions his Department has taken to promote tourism here. (AQT 3473/11-16)

Mr Bell: Tourism in Northern Ireland is going from strength to strength. I think that the last set of figures that I looked at showed that it is worth £751 million, and we intend to grow it to a £1 billion industry by 2020. I get very encouraged when I hear about 81 cruise ships coming into Northern Ireland and when I see statistics saying that 2.53 million people are visiting Titanic Belfast. I am also very encouraged to hear that, as I announced on Friday, 100 major Chinese tour operators are coming to visit Northern Ireland in the next number of weeks. The potential of that is absolutely huge. I had them down at Mount Stewart, and they were, quite frankly, blown away with what they could offer. They were telling me that they could surely attract significant numbers of Asian tourists, who are in one of the biggest markets in the world, to Northern Ireland.

Of course, I know that the Gobbins cliff path is in the Member's constituency. That is a feature. When you put it alongside Titanic Belfast, the Geopark in the west and Mount Stewart and combine them, you see why we have a unique tourism offering in Northern Ireland and why I am confident that we should achieve our target of a £1 billion industry by 2020.

Mr Lyons: I am very pleased that the Minister highlighted the Gobbins cliff path as one of the attractions in our constituency. It is great to hear that so many good things are happening within tourism at the minute, but we do have a slight problem. An awful lot of people go to Titanic Belfast and then perhaps up to the north coast. Would it not be a good idea for more tourists to go via the east Antrim coast to visit Carrickfergus, the Antrim coast road and the Gobbins cliff path? Will the Minister agree to work with and meet Mid and East Antrim Borough Council so that we can work out how we can maximise the tourist potential of that area?

Mr Bell: I will, of course, meet the council. The Member was with me the previous occasion we met the council specifically on the tourism initiative. I will continue to work with the council because I want all of Northern Ireland to benefit from the tourism that comes in.

We have found that, when people come and visit us, they like it. They come back and want to bring their family and friends. Part of our challenge is to make sure that they come and visit us specifically. The whole Causeway

coastal route is worthy of international appeal, and it has been identified as an area for growth for visitor numbers and for spend.

When you add the other things that are going on on the periphery, you can see things like the huge success of 'Game of Thrones' tourism. The Irish Open in 2015 had 107,000 paying spectators, and we will get the Irish Open back in 2017. We will also have one of the biggest tournaments in the world, The Open, in 2019. You can compare those with things like the Women's Rugby World Cup. My Department is putting a lot of strength into trying to attract the Rugby World Cup to Ireland, which has the potential to bring some 350,000 rugby supporters here, and into working on how we can maximise that benefit for Northern Ireland. When you look at that, you will see that we can all be encouraged by the tourism offering.

Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme: Closure

T4. Mr Patterson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the closure of the renewable heat incentive scheme will take effect, considering that legislation passed on 18 November 2015 clearly stated to the sector a closure on 31 March 2016. (AQT 3474/11-16)

Mr Bell: I welcome the Member to the House. I said that there was a huge increase in the demand for the renewable heat incentive scheme at the end of last year. That has given not just my Department but Northern Ireland a huge budgetary pressure. As the Member should know, the Chancellor of the Exchequer decided to limit the amount of money that was paid to Northern Ireland out of the UK pot for renewable heat. That is why I signalled my intention last week to ease that financial pressure, which could amount to over £27 million.

Mr Patterson: I welcome the comments of the Minister, and his welcome to the House.

The Minister announced the sudden closure of the renewable heat initiative last Friday, after 6.00 pm, in a press release. In his press release, he mentioned that around 6% of Northern Ireland's heating needs are now provided through renewable technologies. The Executive's Programme for Government renewable heat target is 10% by 2020. Has the Minister abandoned that target? Does he still have an incentive policy for renewables? A lot of firms have invested money into this and need answers from the Minister.

Tuesday 9 February 2016

Mr Bell: The reality is that we have exceeded the current target. I now want to listen specifically to the industry. I have been listening to individuals who are currently installing the renewable heat boilers. I think it is important that we, as politicians and everyone in this House, listen and do all that we can to help as many people as possible. I will reflect on what is being said to me, and I will examine ways in which I can help those who have been affected by my decision from last week. I also want to say that, inevitably, there will be an investigation into why we have found ourselves in this position. I have, as a matter of urgency, asked my own officials to ensure that the scheme is running to the letter and spirit of the law. I will be keeping a very close eye on that.

I think the Member also needs to understand that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has limited the amount of money being paid to Northern Ireland out of the UK pot as regards renewable heat, and that puts challenges on every Member of this House.

Employment Law: Inward Investment

T5. Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who will be aware that the Employment Bill is working its way through the House today in order to reform employment law in Northern Ireland, and in light of his previous answer in which he listed business costs, the talent pool and corporation tax as three of the main drivers to get investors to come to Northern Ireland, to state how important the employment law environment is when he is talking to investors who are thinking about coming here. (AQT 3475/11-16)

Mr Bell: Any investor will want to consider the employment legislation against the backdrop of putting a significant amount of investment into Northern Ireland. I have to say that in all my discussions, from Asia through to America and Europe, I have learned that when they look at Northern Ireland they are looking specifically to a talent pool with a very low rate of attrition; I think that, in some cases, it is less than 7%. Investors are looking to save business costs and are attracted by us having, in the future, the lowest rate of corporation tax in Western Europe. I think all of that has helped us to reduce our unemployment figures to approximately 6%. This stands against a European average of above 9%, and, the last time I looked, the Irish figure was 8.9%. So we are in a very competitive position. We cannot rest on our laurels. We have the unique

opportunity of there being 30,000 jobs in front of us. The challenge is for us to ensure that we have young people with the skills to rise to that challenge and also to ensure that, as people progress, we see a decrease in economic inactivity.

Mr Ross: The Minister has talked about the competitive nature of attracting investors to Northern Ireland. One of the elements of the Employment Bill going through today is an amendment that will allow Northern Ireland's qualifying period for unfair dismissal to be the same as that in GB. Would he share my concern that, if Northern Ireland has a different employment law environment than, perhaps, Glasgow or Liverpool, we would be at a disadvantage, in terms of investment, if we did not keep in step with change in the GB employment law?

Mr Bell: Yes. Let me answer the question in the following way: one of the groups that I was with came here to create hundreds of jobs and is now in a position where they have created thousands of jobs. Their chief executive told me that one of the things specific to Northern Ireland is that, on an international market basis, people love the fact that, in terms of compliance, law and regulation, we are on the same page as the rest of the United Kingdom.

You could have all the advantages of United Kingdom business, with lower costs and, I would say, a very attractive employment pool to work from — one of the best educated — and, into the future, the lowest rate of corporation tax in western Europe. However, it has been mentioned to me that that compliance across the United Kingdom, and particularly the regulation across the United Kingdom, has led to further investment in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Mr Gregory Campbell is not in his place. I invite Mr Paul Girvan to ask a very short supplementary question.

Air Passenger Duty

T7. Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of Belfast International Airport's recent job announcements, what measures he has taken to ensure that this region gets some help with air passenger duty (APD), given that we are competing with Dublin — 100 miles down the road — which offers 0% APD, and the Scottish