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PRIME MINISTER'S ADDRESS AT RYOBI, CARRICKFERGUS

18.12.96

PRIME MINISTER

Well John thank you very much indeed and thank you for the invitation to be here at Ryobi today and to have the opportunity of turning on the natural gas. It was a very easy prospect for me simply to turn it on, very low tech, my operation was very low tech in a very high tech enterprise, but I was very privileged to be here and delighted to see what has actually happened.

In a sense I can scarcely believe it has happened. I remember discussing the prospects of natural gas coming to Northern Ireland, must be at least 10 years ago and there seemed at that stage so many obstacles to overcome, so many difficulties before we could see whether it was a commercial proposition, whether the inter-connector could be done, whether British Gas could deliver and actually make sure that it happened. But they have and I am delighted to congratulate British Gas on that and Phoenix as well for their work here in Northern Ireland.

As I say at last we have added another dimension to the increasing competitiveness that I think is Northern Ireland's industrial future. The prospect of natural gas is very welcome, it adds to the competitiveness of Northern Ireland, it adds to the options and choice of industry and commerce in Northern Ireland at a time when there is every sign that that is going to expand. All of this self-evidently isn't going to happen overnight. I dare say it will be some years before all of the options of the present licensing position to have natural gas in Northern Ireland are themselves exercised. But I would be very surprised indeed if there isn't a tremendous expansion of demand and if that growth of energy supply and growth of choice in energy supply, and growth of competitiveness in energy supply doesn't add to the competitiveness of industry here

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in Northern Ireland and I think that is very welcome.

And it comes, if I can touch upon another matter, on a day where we can see the increasing competitiveness. We had this morning some extremely good news for Northern Ireland, the unemployment figures in Northern Ireland have fallen by a record amount in the figures released this morning. For the first time I think in the last 15 maybe 16 years, unemployment in Northern Ireland has now at last come down below 10%, it's fallen by very nearly 1% in the figures over the last month and there's every sign of a sustained fall in unemployment, not just here in Northern Ireland where it has long been overdue to see a fall of that size and I am delighted by it, but also across the United Kingdom. And I am very optimistic about the industrial and commercial future both here in Northern Ireland and right the way across the United Kingdom as well. Not just because of the fall in unemployment, not just because of the arrival of natural gas, welcome though that is, but also because the economic prospects that we have across the United Kingdom at the moment are probably better than we had, we have better prospects at the moment than any people can remember for a very long time indeed.

We have had in the last day or so independent corroboration of that, the independent OECD reports suggest not only that we will have had the largest growth across Europe in the last two years but that we will have the largest growth across Europe this year, next year and the year after next and they make no forecast for beyond that. But that will mean for four or five years the United Kingdom will have lead the growth pattern across Europe and you see the impact of that in the extent to which people are getting back into employment, investment is recreating and developments like natural gas coming to Northern Ireland are themselves being carried forward. So it is out of the amalgamation of a whole series of individual events that prosperity itself blossoms and I think that is what we are seeing.

If I could just briefly touch on another element in Northern

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Ireland. For 17 months in Northern Ireland we had a ceasefire. And I think in that 17 months people began to sense what the economic prospects for Northern Ireland could be if that ceasefire was turned into a permanent settlement. There was no doubt in the change in the inward investment figures, no doubt about the change in the everyday way of life, no doubt about the change in commercial and economic prosperity, investment and hope during that period. And so there is a very glittering prize, not just with the investments we have seen this morning, not just with the fall in unemployment, not just with the prospects of economic growth outstripping the rest of Europe, but if Northern Ireland can add the final glittering prize to that in the period that lies ahead then I believe we will see an outbreak and growth of prosperity in Northern Ireland on a scale at the moment that few people had perhaps imagined. That is something I would dearly love to see, at a time when the process has run into a sticky patch as we come up to Christmas perhaps is a good time for hope and optimism and I believe there is every reason for us to look forward optimistically and with hope for the future that there will be in Northern Ireland.