

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAIN TRADE ASSOCIATION LIMITED

ANNUAL DINNER

Culloden Hotel, Thursday 28 April 1994

**EXTRACTS FROM SPEECH OF THE MOST REVEREND DR ROBIN EAMES
ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH, PRIMATE OF ALL IRELAND**

Strict Embargo : 28 April 1994, 9 p.m.

"The attendance at this important function is probably one of the most representative gatherings of the year in the agricultural and farming community in Northern Ireland. The guest list reflects so many facets of farming life and those whose professions and trades support that community. Yet despite the cross-section of interest we are bound together by one common denominator : the welfare of the farming and agricultural life of our Province at a time of immense difficulty, immense challenge and constant heart-searching for all who live on the land.

The Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association plays a vital and important role in our agricultural society. As animal food compounders and raw material suppliers you are a very important

link in the whole agricultural chain. To put it plainly : as suppliers to the Ulster farming community the well-being of that community must be your chief concern. What concerns it will be your concern. Its success will depend to a major degree on your role. You play a crucial part in the whole agricultural industry - but I fear this is not as widely recognised as it should be.

While I am by no means an expert in the concerns which unite you this evening my work throughout Ireland brings me into such contact with the farming community that I am acutely aware of many of those concerns. People talk to me about their lives, their work, their hopes and fears. They talk of the changing picture of rural life. If there is one dominant concern I see it was summed up for me recently by the words of a Tyrone farmer :

"I find it hard to recognise my life now when I think back to the beginning. So much has changed that I often wonder what will I be handing on when my time comes?"

Throughout the history of Northern Ireland there has been a degree of great stability provided by the farming community for the economic and social life of all our people. That has been the real life-blood of this community and time and again I have seen the real stability of Ulster life coming from the land, from our farming community and from the various industries which have supported them. The diversity of the social life in our rural communities has been a hall-mark for so much which has been important in our culture. Now, today, a different picture is confronting us. It is a sombre picture which we dare not ignore.

3.

That traditional picture has changed. Attitudes have changed. Confidence is being subjected to pressures from developments elsewhere in the world over which too many in the farming industry here feel they have little control.

It is my privilege to visit various parts of the world and at all times I try to be as good an ambassador for the Province as I possibly can. Earlier today I returned from the United States where again I tried to paint a picture of Northern Ireland which reflected what I believe is the true face of our people. Behind the headlines of violence and division the down-right decency and character of our people is too often ignored. Time and again that same decency and real character so clearly visible in the lives of our rural community has failed to be given the credit we all know it deserves.

We cannot separate the lives of the countryside from the pressures confronting the whole of our society. We live at a time of tension and uncertainty. We cannot see the way forward with clarity. The air is full of suggestions and proposals. Violence and how it can be ended has obsessed us. Yet the ways in which what counts as normality has been maintained over the past 25 years owes so much to the determination, courage and sheer character of our people. Nowhere has that been more obvious than in the rural community, in the trades and professions represented here tonight. I pay tribute to you all tonight as one who is dedicated to building bridges in this community - I pay this tribute on behalf of the rest of the society in which we live - I pay this tribute as one who is aware that you have faced so many other difficulties which have nothing to do with our local situation.

If there is one message I have tried to bring to the decision-makers in Europe and beyond on behalf of the interests represented here this evening I would sum it up in this way :

The farming community of Northern Ireland and the trades allied to it have the expertise, the traditions, the vision and the ability to produce the goods. They have proved this time and again. Now, today, at this time, they have the right to demand not special treatment denied to others - but they have a right to a level playing field, an equal opportunity, a fair chance to produce those goods...

Rightly or wrongly the perception is abroad that that level playing field, that field of equal opportunity, is being denied. Whether it is to be in the face of competition from the rest of these islands, from developments within the European community or further abroad, I believe we have a right to ask for that equality of opportunity.

At home in the Province itself I am conscious of the feelings of the new generation of rural people. Young people who would have looked forward to a career on the farm are facing uncertainty. Many talk to me of those uncertainties. Many wonder what their future will be. As I move throughout Ireland, north and south, what I can only term **'a movement away from the countryside'** has become a definite social fact. Somehow, some way has got to be found to face up to this fact and to restore a new element of confidence for the future. Somehow we must find ways of **'keeping people on the land.'**

The new Europe is a fact of life. Generations yet unborn will be better placed to judge than we are how successful the European dream has been. For the present let us spell out this evening without apology the fact that a Europe which contains widespread unease within the farming community will be a Europe which lacks stability or sense of purpose.

The Northern Ireland grain trade which enjoyed probably its heyday from the early 60's to the coming of the Common Market is a vivid reflection of those changes to which I refer. The cost of grain per ton today is something like £12 - £14 more than in corresponding parts of England. This is only one example of the larger problem, you face. Yet it is surely one clear example of the right to ask for equality of opportunity.

After seven years of prolonged negotiation the GATT treaty has been signed. It is early days to pass judgements on its effect on your industry. But an effect it **will** have. Already we know that there will be 50 million tons less of subsidised grain on the world market after the signing of GATT. Throughout the world growers are facing a crisis and many are in fact going out of business.

But the real lesson of GATT and of international trade agreements in general for us in Europe is surely this - it is a matter of communication and understanding - the U.K. farmer needs to know more about the global market. He needs to know much more about trends and policies. He needs to know what is going on - and he needs to develop a new expertise of interpretation.
