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## For U.S. Trade Chief, Patience Is Key


By BRIAN KNOWLTON

WASHINGTON — Ron Kirk, the unlikely new U.S. trade representative, often jokes about not having a deep background in the arcane world he is wading into, a place of impenetrable jargon and negotiations that seem to drag on for decades.

Mr. Kirk, who served twice as the mayor of Dallas, also concedes that he never dealt much before with people like Catherine Ashton, the European Union's trade commissioner, who, to his delight, is a British baroness.

But in his first weeks in the job, the two of them engineered a quick resolution to a longstanding dispute over exports of American beef from hormone-treated cows to Europe.

For his part, Mr. Kirk sees his past professional experience as not irrelevant.

“I bring the urgency, the freshness, the  brightness of a mayor,” he said in an interview Thursday. “I'm here to solve problems.”

While European officials say relations are off to a good start, the contours of Mr. Kirk's trade agenda remain only partly defined.

He has vowed to push for a revival of the Doha Round of trade talks, though doubts persist about its prospects. And he indicated that responsibility within the administration of President Barack Obama for one critically important trade relationship, with China, would remain divided among departments. Mr. Kirk will not accompany Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner on his trip to Beijing this coming week.

In fact, there are questions about the new administration's intentions when it comes to promoting free trade; it is not among 29 priority issues listed on the White House Web site. And in a time of global financial and economic crisis, protectionist sentiments are running high. Americans — along with people elsewhere — are dubious about expanding trade deals.

“I understand the pain,” Mr. Kirk said, noting that his in-laws in Detroit include many past or present auto workers. “To save trade, we've got to do it in a way that we are more responsible, and responsive, to those who are skeptical about it.”

Mr. Kirk, a big, droll man with an outsize personality, says he does not have “deal fever,” indicating no rush to slam together new trade deals, even if the local politician in him hates to see solvable issues drag on. He has said that existing trade pacts must be more strictly enforced, particularly on environmental and labor standards, even if the bad economy complicates that work.

Some trade specialists see his early remarks as auguring a reassuringly steady course.

“So far, the big story is the continuity of U.S. trade policy” under Mr. Kirk, said Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. “It’s been pleasantly surprising for trade advocates.”

But Alan Tonelson, a research fellow with the U.S. Business and Industry Council, a lobbying group, criticizes Mr. Obama for focusing on completing bilateral trade deals rather than pushing a more ambitious trade agenda and doing more to combat protectionist practices elsewhere.

Mr. Kirk seems patient and unperturbed. He suggested that there might be value in starting with smaller agreements like the one started with Panama while rebuilding a foundation of public trust in trade.

He offered no magic solution to narrowing the yawning trade gap with China, saying he hoped that Beijing would see its own interest in becoming “a little less export-dependent and increase domestic consumption, which will give us a little more breathing room.”

He also suggested that it would be “arrogant” to think the United States could snap its fingers and revive prospects for a global trade deal, which stalled last year after seven years of off-and-on talks. Still, one World Trade Organization official said Mr. Kirk had “created a lot of goodwill” among trade diplomats by prominently supporting the so-called Doha talks. The spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.

While Mr. Kirk, 54, left a bipartisan trail of fans behind in Dallas, he remains something of an enigma abroad. He lacks the classic, insider background of more recent U.S. trade representatives, who had extensive Washington experience as well.

Yet as mayor, Mr. Kirk liked to call Dallas “the capital of Nafta” — the North American Free Trade Agreement. “He truly saw Dallas as the gateway to international trade,” said Justin H. Lonon, then Mr. Kirk’s press secretary, and now vice chancellor at Dallas Community College.

In some ways Mr. Kirk follows the model of another Texan, Robert S. Strauss, who was a lawyer and political activist before being named U.S. trade representative by President Jimmy Carter. Mr. Strauss is remembered by some as one of the best, having successfully completed the Tokyo Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations and secured its Senate ratification.

Bruce Buchanan, a professor of government at the University of Texas, said Mr. Kirk had “natural skills” that fit his new job. “He is very adept at getting groups to work together, and he is very much pro-free trade,” Mr. Buchanan said. “He’s a man of talent.”

Mr. Kirk, the first African-American to hold the job, is often compared now to Mr. Obama: pragmatic, with abundant charisma, someone who learned growing up to bridge racial and ideological divides. When a race riot broke out at his high school in Austin, Texas, where he was senior class president, he helped mediate.

With a law degree from the University of Texas, he went to work for Lloyd Bentsen, the now-deceased Democratic senator from Texas, and later was named the secretary of state of Texas. When Mr. Kirk set his

sights on the Dallas mayorship, it seemed a reach.

“He was,” Mr. Buchanan noted, “a black man in a very conservative city that did not have a great racial history.”

But by marshaling an unlikely coalition of black voters and white businesspeople, Mr. Kirk easily won election in 1995.

He lowered taxes, helped bring down the crime rate, and whipped a notoriously dysfunctional City Council into shape. This led to his re-election in 1999 with what Mr. Buchanan called an “astounding” 74 percent of the vote.

Mr. Obama, while still an Illinois state politician, studied Mr. Kirk’s rise. They met and bonded.

“Ron is the kind of guy who never met a stranger,” said Dave McNeely, a political columnist in Austin. “He’s very affable, gregarious, funny, has a wicked sense of humor and he brings people together well.”

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