

**NI CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY  
PRESIDENT'S BANQUET 2018  
BELFAST WATERFRONT HALL NOVEMBER 29, 2018**

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Good evening everyone. May I say what a great pleasure it is to welcome you all to the President's banquet once again.

First let me thank our wonderful sponsors for their support in putting this exciting evening together.

I also want to thank our Chief Executive, **Ann McGregor**, and the NI Chamber Team..... This is an important date in the Northern Ireland business calendar and I know what a tremendous amount of hard work goes into making it such a success.

We have a terrific night ahead.

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Now.... did anybody watch **Bodyguard**?

Any fans of **Line of Duty** here?

Great. As Superintendent Ted Hastings might say – Now we're sucking diesel!

I'm delighted our special guest this evening is **Jed Mercurio**. ....the man responsible for creating these powerful and exciting dramas. Dramas which are showcasing the talent and natural resources of Northern Ireland.

For that, I want to thank him and World Productions, the company responsible, and of course BBC Northern Ireland.

Jed, it's great to have you with us and we look forward to hearing from you later.

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I have to say – putting a speech together for an occasion like this isn't as straightforward as it used to be ..... with events changing repeatedly before your very eyes.

And, yes, you've guessed it - I'm talking about **Brexit**.

After a long, period of negotiation we now have a draft withdrawal agreement which is undoubtedly a welcome step forward for the majority of businesses in Northern Ireland and it is definitely much better than a no-deal scenario.

We've received a lot of stick in some quarters for saying this but let me say to our critics – we're not your opposition.

We're not the enemy. We want the outcome that's best for businesses, for consumers, for the economy and for the future stability of Northern Ireland – and we'll do everything we can to ensure that we get it.

It is fair to say that the Prime Minister's resilience has been matched only by that of businesses challenged by three years of nonstop political debate and continuous uncertainty.

We therefore encourage our political representatives who support the draft agreement to do everything in their power to influence political representatives in Britain to join them.

For those that are not in support of the draft agreement, it is now time to outline your alternative proposals. We are willing to listen.

I've been looking back over our quarterly economic surveys since I became President.

At the beginning of 2017, our members were identifying priorities for growth. Chief among them – a functioning Executive and no hard border.

Those priorities are still uppermost today. We have a vibrant and innovative business community that wants to invest and grow but

it's stymied because of the prolonged absence of a regional government and the endless Brexit bickering.

Another priority identified repeatedly is the current skills shortage, with eight out of ten businesses having trouble recruiting staff.

Our companies are committed to developing home-grown talent but that alone is not enough to fill the skills gap. Continued access to the labour pool from EEA countries is vital.

In the immediate term the reintroduction of Tier 3 visas; and an extension to the casual workers visa would assist the current shortage.

In a post Brexit scenario NI Chamber and other business groups are pressing for a regional approach to the proposed minimum salary threshold for migrant workers proposed in the MAC report.

This is the sort of considered, positive approach that Northern Ireland needs.

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Speaking of positive approaches ...

Just a few weeks ago the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave the green light to the **Belfast Region City Deal**. What a great moment that was.

Securing this £850 million deal (which includes £350 million from Treasury) took a lot of dedicated teamwork – six local councils, our universities, our regional colleges. And, of course, business and politics played a part too. Congratulations to everyone involved.

Hopefully, there will be another one soon in the North West region.

The Belfast Region City Deal process shows us what can be achieved when you have a genuinely collaborative relationship that's working for the benefit of everyone.

But this deal isn't the end. It's a beginning. We must somehow unlock the mechanism for additional funding that is so badly needed in so many ways.

Last week, the Belfast Telegraph provided a list of all the things that are being held up by the lack of an Executive - a pile-up of more than 160 decisions affecting all aspects of Northern Ireland life – all needing the signature of a Minister.

Broad ranging decisions such as:

- the much needed Belfast Transport Hub
- further investment projects in the harbour area including Grade A office space for inward investors, a new Power Station and the Cruise Ship Terminal.
- the roll out of super-fast broadband
- the stadia and ....
- the children's hospital ... to name a few ....

Big decisions are needed but who will take them? Should this just be left to our civil servants? Is this not the job of our Executive?

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Tonight we are celebrating the creative clash – a clash which sparks the collision of ideas, talent and resources and the development of great partnerships resulting in the development of the Northern Ireland Economy.

Examples such as the terrific partnership between:

- Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Northern Ireland Screen to create the Harbour Studios
- Queen's and Ulster University jointly developing integrated projects in Digital, the Creative Industries and Advanced Manufacturing and Health.

Such great ideas need imaginative action if they're to become reality. They need the support of people with vision who are prepared to step out of their comfort zones.

Our film and television industry is something we can be proud of.

Productions like Game of Thrones and Line of Duty have set the standard.

But Game of Thrones and HBO and the others didn't come here by accident.

There was a lot of support from the previous generation of Northern Ireland's political leadership. They stepped out of their comfort zones too.

The Belfast film-maker and Oscar-winner **Terry George** wrote an article earlier this year recalling the days when **Martin McGuinness** and **Peter Robinson** struggled through traffic in Los Angeles to visit all the major studios, lobbying for more productions to come to Northern Ireland.

In his article, Terry asked – Who's going to do that now?

It's a good question. Can you imagine our current leaders at this juncture sharing a car under any circumstances?

Who will nurture the creative connections now? Well, I'm afraid I have no answer.

As Jed here will tell you, film drama is based on the classic three-act structure.

First, there's the set-up where we meet the characters and the story begins.

Then in the second act the tension starts to rise and the stakes get higher – until finally in act three we get the resolution.

Well, here in Northern Ireland we're stuck in the second act. The tension's still rising, the stakes are even higher but there's no progress towards act three.

No resolution. It makes me wonder – do our politicians no longer care? Or have they simply lost the plot?

At this event last year, I gave a figure for the number of days we've been without an Executive. Well, I'm not going to do that tonight. All I will say is that one day more is one day too many.

I make no apology for returning to this theme. This political inertia affects us all.

It's having an increasingly negative impact on our prospects for growth and prosperity and on society at every level – in our schools, in our hospitals, on our streets.

Every action – or indeed non-action – has consequences. And the consequence of a lack of real political representation means that we have no consolidated voice to speak for us at a time when we have never needed it more.

Our future must not be neglected. It must be secured.

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It's been an honour to be your President.

I've been very privileged to work along with my Chamber colleagues in engaging with those whose actions and influence are vital.

At the end of the year, I'll be handing the baton to John Healy of Allstate and I can't think of anyone better suited to take on the job. John, you have an exciting year ahead of you and I wish you all the best. There are interesting times to come.

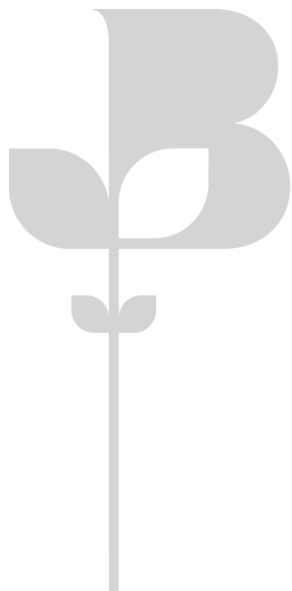
Just to finish, you may have noticed on the way in that this isn't the only event in the Waterfront tonight.

There's also a show called Sixties Gold, featuring The Fortunes, The Tremeloes and the Merseybeats – legendary groups from that musical era.

Now we're all too young to remember any of that, of course, but I do know that one of the Merseybeats' big hits was a song called Wishing and Hoping.

So, on that note, let me wish all of you the compliments of the season. I hope that you enjoy the rest of your evening and that we see real progress in 2019.

Thank you.



Northern Ireland  
Chamber of Commerce  
and Industry