

**SPEECH BY ADAM MARSHALL, DIRECTOR GENERAL
BRITISH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 8 MARCH 2018
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INTRODUCTION

Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen – good afternoon.

Once again, it is a genuine honour and a privilege to address you as the Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce.

Ladies and gentlemen, I could stand here for the next twenty minutes – indeed, the next hour – talking to you about the intricacies of Brexit, and the many frustrations we hear from Chamber businesses across the country who need pressing, practical questions answered.

Yet that’s precisely what I don’t want to do.

It may be hard to believe at the moment, but the biggest challenges and opportunities we face as a business community – and as a country – are not bound up in the negotiations on the UK’s departure from the European Union.

Today, I want to talk about the choices that our leaders must make right here in the UK.

The choices that are in our own hands.

The issues that are currently being overlooked.

The practical, pragmatic UK agenda that will unlock investment and a brighter, more prosperous future.

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One year ago, almost to the day, I stood on this platform and argued that:

“Getting the fundamentals right here at home is the most important thing that any government can do to underpin the success of our civic businesses, our communities, and our people.

“And the message to government from Chamber business communities is that an ambitious domestic agenda matters as much, if not more, to their success than any eventual Brexit deal.”

Today, I feel duty-bound to reiterate that message.

Over the past year, I’ve had the huge privilege to meet and listen to thousands of UK businesspeople – the civic business leaders that make up our Chambers of Commerce.

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They come from every sector, from every region and nation, and are at different stages in their own business journeys.

Yet week in and week out, these conversations come back to the same indelible themes:

- Disappointment with short-term, parochial Westminster politics;
- Impatience for action that makes a real difference on the ground; and
- Dismay that some of the most important real-world issues here at home are being delayed or forgotten while Westminster and Whitehall are consumed by the task of extricating the UK from the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen, the message I hear from Chamber business communities all across the UK comes down to their desire to see action that underpins business confidence.

The confidence that drives investment and innovation.

The confidence that creates jobs in our cities, towns and counties.

The confidence that sits at the root of our shared prosperity.

Here, today, our business communities demand that Westminster do its part.

It's time for radical action to fix the fundamentals here at home.

It's time for a stronger, more full-throated defence of private enterprise and wealth creation.

And it's high time for a bigger, more optimistic vision for the future of the United Kingdom.

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‘FIXING THE FUNDAMENTALS’ HERE AT HOME

Ladies and Gentlemen, we in business know that success so often depends on getting the basics right first.

We understand that there are nuts-and-bolts changes that can make companies more competitive, more profitable and more sustainable.

The sorts of changes that require hard work, attention to detail, and the dedication and patience needed to get a good return on investment.

Fix the fundamentals, and better returns will follow.

The same holds true for the UK economy.

It’s time for Westminster to join us in focusing on the basics.

By addressing the less flashy things that always seem to fall between the cracks.

We must equip this country for future success – by fixing the fundamentals first.

This means dealing with the 7 billion pounds of unfunded repairs on local roads across the country, so that businesses and their employees can get from A to B.

It means delivering new and improved railway infrastructure, capacity improvements at our airports, and new runways. Yes, it’s true that some projects are coming to fruition. But the backlog is huge – and both public and private investment must grow.

It means revitalising the energy grid that supplies power to our homes and businesses, and exploiting the potential for supplying energy from the resources in these islands, rather than from abroad.

It means being far more radical in the use of the state’s assets and balance sheet to build more houses – rather than just talk about planning reforms and targets that don’t do the job on their own.

It means a real plan to rid Britain of mobile phone ‘not spots’, particularly along our road and rail corridors, which stop firms transacting business – not to mention the amazingly poor broadband connections that too many of our firms face.

It means stabilising the training and apprenticeships system – where never-ending change has undermined business confidence and investment. Fixing an apprenticeship levy and funding system that have seen numbers plummet, rather than increase, at precisely the time when firms should be recruiting and training people with confidence.

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It means working together, government and business alike, to unlock more of the talent we have here in this country. Today, International Women's Day, we must unite to push for progress, eradicate bias, and celebrate those firms that have put diversity and equality at the heart of their own success.

It means finding ways to support the millions of people with caring responsibilities – most of whom are women – so they aren't forced to choose between career and family.

And at the same time, it means delivering a clear and easy-to-use immigration system that lets firms fill immediate skills needs at every level.

Nothing, literally nothing, is more important to Chamber business communities than being able to get the right people to grow a firm, whether from here at home or around the world.

Fixing the fundamentals means improving procurement processes, so that public authorities can place more work with innovative small and medium-sized companies, and put more emphasis on the value delivered by a supplier to our communities and regions, rather than just the cheapest spreadsheet cost.

And, finally, it means an end to the annual tax wheezes that see businesses facing ever-higher financial burdens and cash flow pressures before they turn over a single pound.

Successive governments have acknowledged that more could be done to get the basics right for business.

Indeed, the current government's developing Industrial Strategy is up-front about many of these challenges. Yet the leadership and the infrastructure simply aren't there to make change happen.

A great business will not just create a strategy, but will mobilise every resource at its disposal to transform it from theory to reality. A great government, then, would commit not just to identifying the fundamentals for growth – but to delivering them, day in and day out.

And that government would be rewarded, too. A happier, more inclusive, more innovative, more entrepreneurial and more productive society beckons if we get the basics right. With the right environment around them, businesses will unleash investment, which in turn will drive higher wages and greater prosperity.

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A THRIVING PRIVATE SECTOR

Fixing the fundamentals is the starting point – but unequivocal backing for a thriving private sector is also crucial.

The wave of business investment we all want to see depends, intrinsically, on the level of business confidence in the stability and stance of governments.

The business communities I represent have been disappointed by the UK's recent track record when it comes to political stability. Britain has no right to lecture other countries about political risk when we have, in the last five years, generated so much of it ourselves.

Yet our business communities are even more worried about the rhetorical assault on capitalism and wealth generation emanating from some quarters of Westminster.

The vast majority of companies in the UK today are civic-minded, and committed to ensuring that success is about their workforce, their communities and high ethical and environmental standards – not just the bottom line.

Those who seek to divide our business communities by pitting the small against the large, or by demonising some sectors while championing others, must be challenged.

The success of every big business is built, in part, by an army of smaller firms – and there are legions of entrepreneurs out there who want their ideas to power tomorrow's world-leading corporations.

And those who suggest that the solution to poor procurement and questionable outsourcing decisions by government is the wholesale nationalisation of entire swathes of the economy must also be challenged.

Make no mistake – the facile, breezy discussion on nationalisation underway on the hard left of the UK's political spectrum is just as wrong-headed as the Brexit fantasy world inhabited by some on the hard right.

'Costless nationalisation' is, in the simplest possible terms, Fake News. Nothing that undermines the pension funds of millions of people, that plunges suppliers into uncertainty, that puts investment into the deep freeze, and that reduces choice and competition for consumers, is 'costless'.

Could government do a far better job on procurement? Could it empower regulators to do more? Certainly.

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Yet accepting a role for the state doesn't mean accepting mass nationalisation – or a rollback of the improvements that private sector companies of all sizes have brought to the public at large.

The job ahead for those of us in the world of business is twofold.

We must tackle, head on, the trust issues that have led so many people to lose faith in the ability of business to transform society for the better. I know, from working with Chamber members all across the UK, how much businesses do each and every day to transform lives and communities for the better.

It's up to us, together, to demonstrate that business is not all about rewards for failure or the prioritisation of making a quick buck over long-term returns.

And at the same time, we must campaign hard to make the case for private-sector enterprise, innovation and effectiveness. Facing down the superficially seductive argument for nationalisation won't be easy – but it's vital to the future success of communities and prosperity all across the UK.

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A BIGGER VISION: BRITAIN NEEDS A LODESTAR

Neither the incrementalism and instability of the current government, nor the throw-back thinking of an opposition wedded to nationalisation and statist over-reach, makes businesses confident about the future prospects for growth.

There is a real hunger coming from businesses across the UK for real leadership and vision. This is the final theme I would like to cover today.

Businesses want to see a positive, optimistic vision for the future of the UK.

The reason is simple: they want something to get behind.

A national sense of mission that unites the efforts of business, government and the public at large with a real sense of purpose.

Now more than ever, it is clear that Britain needs a lodestar.

The sort of mission that gives a clear answer to the critical question that faces us at a time of great change:

What kind of country do we aspire to be in twenty or thirty years' time — and how will we get there?

There are those who would argue that Brexit is that mission, but they have entirely missed the point. Brexit is a process, not an outcome.

Brexit has been allowed, by government and opposition alike, to cloud over the rudderlessness of recent years; a convenient excuse to plough attention and resources into a process of disconnection, rather than to take the far harder step of re-imagining Britain for the future and then marshalling all available brainpower, management capacity and financial resources into making it happen.

The time to be radical, and set out big aims for Britain, is now.

A shared sense of purpose, binding individuals, communities and businesses together with the convening power of government, is what's missing.

No amount of hand-wringing about the UK's poor productivity performance, which does not resonate at all on the streets of Britain away from Whitehall and the City, can substitute for this.

So what kind of country do we want to be in twenty or thirty years' time?

The healthiest country in Europe?

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The first major country to go completely carbon-neutral?

The highest-skilled nation, offering growth opportunities for everyone?

The best-connected country – making us the crossroads of the world?

Any and all of these would make worthy missions for a United Kingdom forging a new role in the world.

And they all rely on one central ingredient: the active participation of all of our people.

What matters more than which mission we actually select, is the way we then choose to come together to tackle it.

In an age where global competition is only getting stronger, we need absolute focus.

Now more than ever, we need a national statement of intent that can survive beyond the lifespan of a single government – and sit above the party political fray that so dismays our businesses.

Bold, simple, to the point — what we will be known for, and how we are going to transform our economy, our cities and towns, the machinery of government, and so much more in order to make it happen.

As I criss-cross the country, businesspeople from firms of all sizes and all walks of life say that they are getting on with things in spite of uncertainty — but they yearn to be part of something bigger, too.

Young people, who have been so cruelly treated by the twin drag-anchors of bad luck and the mismanagement of their forebears, also seek a clearer vision. They are engaged, informed, and connected – and rightly demand a sense of purpose in the jobs they take on, the businesses they patronise, and the society they wish to see.

History shows us many examples of inflection points – those once-in-a-generation chances for a nation to undertake a process of renewal and revitalisation.

This is one of those moments.

Beyond Brexit, it's time for a new national conversation — and a new mission to guide our individual and collective efforts, that sparks both better lives in the here and now, and the sort of entrepreneurial innovation that defines the future.

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CONCLUSION

Ladies and Gentlemen, the United Kingdom today stands at a crossroads.

Our leaders can take the easy, comfortable route of muddling through, crossing their fingers, and hoping that something will turn up.

Or they can do what businesses do day in, day out, all across the UK and around the world: think big, plan properly, and then focus relentlessly on the details that make success possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, I know which country I'd rather be part of over the coming years.

A confident, enterprising, risk-taking Britain.

A Britain where businesses are celebrated – both for their local commitment and for their global success.

A Britain where the next generation has more, not fewer, opportunities than the last.

Thank you very much for being with us today – and thank you for listening.