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*(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)*

Honoured Guests, Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is with great pleasure that I, as President of the British Chambers of Commerce, welcome you to the QE2 Conference Centre here in Westminster, for the British Chambers of Commerce's Annual Conference 2018.

We are delighted that our conference this year takes place on the same day as International Women's Day. In the centenary year of women's voting rights, it is humbling to join events across the UK and around the world today and to continue to Press for Progress.

Indeed today, it's good to see that we have parity between men and women in our speaker line-up.

The British Chambers of Commerce sits at the apex of a Network of individual businesses, each with their own diverse membership bases, in every region and nation of the United Kingdom.

52 amazing business communities, bound by a shared mission to connect businesses through membership, champion places, promote trade, and to speak up for the businesses we represent.

Unlike any other business membership organisation, the Chamber of Commerce Network truly spans the breadth and depth of British industry. From sole employers to multi-national corporations, manufacturers to hoteliers, no organisation truly represents the spectrum of opinion from business quite like the Chamber of Commerce Network.

And it is that depth of knowledge that gives the BCC unrivalled knowledge of the local and national economic picture.

Today we are discussing diversity in business, the future of work, and the future of trade. Topics crucial to the future success of the UK economy.

Today we meet with our country at a crossroads.

There are major choices to be made over the UK's future relationship with the European Union.

There are major choices to be made about how we develop our economy for the future.

Through it all, Chamber businesses are getting on with the job in hand.

Yet they are also seeking clarity, and an end to the political uncertainty that holds growth back.

This is not a blind warning, filled with platitudes.

Our Quarterly Economic Survey – the biggest private sector survey of business sentiment in the UK – is showing a national economy that is treading water.

In my day job, I work in corporate finance in Northern Ireland, in London and indeed right across the UK. I can tell you that many of the firms I see are pausing for breath and biding their time, as they seek answers to the many practical questions arising from the UK's departure from the European Union.

Chamber firms may have different views on what the UK's future relationship with the EU will be – but they are united in their desire for political decision-makers to deliver clarity, coherence and certainty.

While eyes in Westminster have been focused on slogans and labels, Chamber of Commerce members, from Aberdeen to Accrington, from Cornwall to Cumbria, instead are focusing on the real-world, practical and pragmatic questions:

Who can I hire, and from where, and how much will it cost?

Will I need to pay import VAT or tariffs?

Will a supplier's consignment or a customer's order get stuck in customs?

What standards and rules do I need to comply with?

The Government of the United Kingdom and the European Commission absolutely owe it to business communities on both sides to provide practical answers to the questions businesses currently face.

And while businesses will have appreciated the Prime Minister's determination to secure a wide-ranging agreement in her speech last week, they are still awaiting the details they need to plan ahead with confidence.

Over the next fortnight, the government must deliver a swift agreement on transition that gives businesses short-term certainty – and they must strain every sinew to deliver a pragmatic long-term settlement that keeps trade and commerce flowing.

While the battle lines between the two sides are likely to harden over the coming weeks, businesses need to be braced for more noise from Westminster.

However, the time for political posturing on both sides is over. The time for getting stuck into the detail, and answering those real world business questions, has arrived.

Otherwise, there's the very real possibility that we will see businesses hiring less, investing less, or worst of all, looking elsewhere for future growth.

Yet times of change can also bring real opportunity.

As businesses reassess their priorities, and become more efficient and dynamic, they can become more competitive – and seize the opportunities arising from change.

But to do this, firms need to know what they are dealing with, they need support and, crucially, sufficient time to make the necessary changes to their business plans.

Our message is simple.

To Westminster, we say, stop the inward-facing squabbles, and provide clarity and coherence for the very businesses you rely on to drive growth and prosperity.

To Brussels, and to our many friends and colleagues across Europe, we say, be more flexible, be pragmatic, be open to new solutions that keep trade flowing across borders.

Neither side must let ideology be the enemy of our shared prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are delighted to be joined by top-calibre speakers today from across the worlds of business and politics, to discuss and debate the key issues of our time.

While I know our deliberations will touch on the challenges of Brexit, it is also my hope that they will focus firmly on the opportunities future – for they are many, and Chambers of Commerce will be there to support businesses across the UK and across the world in seizing them for many years to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much, and I hope you have a wonderful conference.