

Ibec President's Broadcast

Speech of incoming President, Alastair Blair

Thursday, 24 September 2020



Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good afternoon to everyone and let me extend my own warm welcome. It is a great privilege to be here as the new President of Ibec. Whilst the very nature of this afternoon's proceedings quite rightly are utterly different to any other year, it is important we first use this moment to say thank you to a number of people.

To Pat McCann - Pat, I am sure when you took the role last year, you like we, never thought 2020 would be quite like this. I know your own business is very much in the forefront of an industry that is heavily affected by the Covid crisis. But cometh the hour, then cometh the right person and your leadership on behalf of Ibec, your own industry and your own business has been evident to everyone. For your leadership, your calm pragmatism and for bringing your enormous experience to bear we, and I, are extremely grateful. I would gladly be your Deputy again in any role – thank you from all of us for a job exceedingly well done!

To Danny McCoy, the Ibec executive and the whole Ibec team, we applaud your work in the last twelve months. On so many fronts you have led and been the voice of the members of Ibec. Your ability to, and I say the word advisedly as it can be overused, “pivot” in mid-March from what must have been the normal business of Ibec back then - to a position of being able to put shape on the needs of Ibec members was hugely impressive. Not only were you able to bring recommendations and propose actions to stabilise the economy in the first months of the crisis, you were also able to shape the Ibec Reboot and Reimagine campaign that lays out the framework of how we can live through, and emerge from, this crisis in a better place – meaning a better economy, stronger businesses and critically, stronger communities in which we live. The message is clear - business has a crucial role to play in creating that future. If we are serious about the need for business leadership and minimising future risk then Ibec provides this platform. Representing as it does, 70% of the private sector workforce, encompassing 36 Trade Associations and with 7 regional offices in Ireland, as well as offices abroad, Ibec is the voice of the Irish business community and an advocate that we can all rely on.

I would like to thank An Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, for his words of encouragement and the positive and collaborative tone which is an important foundation for us to make progress looking forward.

So I, like Past Presidents before me, stand here both thrilled and slightly relieved. Thrilled to have the opportunity to be in this role and frankly, relieved that the vote passed at the Council today – and for that support I am extremely grateful.

I am equally delighted that Frank Gleeson will be in role as Deputy President of Ibec and I will do all I can to ensure that I leave things in as good stead as Pat has for me.

For sure the coming year will be very busy for everyone - but I want to thank my family for the enormous support they have given me over the years. I think they would have rather enjoyed the formal evening we are unable to have tonight. It would have allowed them to give a well-prepared

post-Dad's speech critique at the table. It is worth noting that they have probably seen more of me in the last 6 months than they ever expected or perhaps at times wanted to! I am really very grateful for their support and patience.

On Monday of this week I passed the 33-year milestone with Accenture – I don't think I would change anything in all truth. My first day seems like only yesterday.... most of the time. I vividly recall walking through the red door of our then office on 49 St. Stephen's Green, filled in equal measure with a thrill, but in all truth, also relief that I had a job – it was the late 1980's after all. It was then a company of some 70 consultants and at the time in the very vanguard of using technology in business. We had a few desktops and things called luggables, not laptops – indeed you needed to be a fitness fanatic to move these pieces of technology. It was also the start of a period of very profound change that continues at ever faster speed.

In those days, our business was about consulting with and solving clients' problems, but with only the most basic technology available as it was back then. As technology evolved, we moved to building more complex solutions that talked to each other. Today the sophistication of technology puts the power in the consumers and citizens' hands – creativity, innovation and the user experience are what differentiate a product or service. It's the same in every business and industry. For all of us, such creativity and innovation depend upon access to the right mix of talent, skills and a "will-do" mindset and, of course, diversity in all its forms is the future. In our Irish workforce of 4,500 people we depend on that recipe today.

It also requires an ability to learn and re-learn constantly and be highly adaptable. This is surely Ireland's great opportunity into the future. A small island nation with an open economy interwoven with some of the largest trading nations, change has become our friend over many years. We need to nurture this ability to change. In the hours and days following the lockdown in March we saw rapid change, the sort that can take months or longer to happen in the normal course of time. Clearly not all was good but it did show a remarkable innate ability within.

I am always reminded of the story about change, where in a meeting, the manager asked their team, "who wants change to happen? Everyone put their hands up. However, when the follow on question was "who wants to change?", there were a lot of hands glued to seats.

As we look to the immediate future we are not just dealing with change, but also something business tends to dislike intensely - uncertainty. No-one ever imagined that we would be dealing with Brexit and a global pandemic together. Both create their own uncertainties, clearly one brings real fear for public health and individual safety, the other great uncertainty about how we will trade and live alongside our nearest neighbour and friend. It also casts doubt on how our island will continue to operate as an all-island economy. Despite the many challenges that Brexit brings, we are also embarking on a new and exciting chapter for our 'shared island' agenda. Government's vision for a shared island has been responded to very positively by all stakeholders and political perspectives across the island, and business will have a key role to play in helping deliver it.

Now is not the time to re-state all the risks associated with Brexit. They have been well explained over recent years, but the impact on businesses, big and small, of a "no-deal" outcome would be substantial. As businesses we call for a speedy outcome to allow business and the country to prepare for what is ahead - the uncertainty is good for no one.

We are also living with a global pandemic that has required us to change the way we live - personal and working lives have changed utterly. It has caused huge human suffering. We are all indebted to

the remarkable, selfless work done by those in frontline health services and in many other businesses and government departments that enabled our economy to function.

The double uncertainties of Brexit and Covid 19 will continue to place huge focus on the need for government intervention, both policy and fiscal. Ibec's budget campaign is advocating for a €6bn fund in 2021 to rehabilitate the economy, strengthen competitiveness and ensure recovery. We know that these twin crises bring long term structural damage to our economy and so the withdrawal of supports must not happen without a long-term recovery plan in place.

In keeping with the theme of Reboot and Reimagine for the Irish economy, we must also look to the future, build on our strengths and fix some of the weaknesses that have become evident. The last six months have shown our resilience, coming together and wearing that "green jersey of Ireland" in order to deal with a crisis.

Looking forward, our success will be defined by the quality of our infrastructure, our ability to innovate at speed, having a world class education system, while enhancing the quality of life in this country and protecting our environment. We need all of these to remain a great place for people and families to live and work.

The need for better infrastructure, for example better transport, and the rapid roll out of broadband to all parts of the country could not be more stark at this time. We need to ensure that no part of the country is left behind – we cannot create a divide - least of all a Digital Divide.

We have to improve the quality of life through better health care, more effective childcare structures and funding, and make housing available that people can afford.

And then there is education. Access to strong education has been at the heart of Ireland's appeal over many decades - coupled with a "can-do" attitude. Skills will be key to our nation's economic recovery. As a small but highly adaptable nation, we need to refocus on the learning path – not the path to learning. We have proven we can adapt, but now more than anything, business remains, and I remain, unduly concerned about education. The pandemic has placed huge pressures on all aspects of the system - and I am not just talking about just the Leaving Certificate or any single aspect.

We were adapting to a new digital world in recent years. Then, in a matter of weeks, we were thrown into what looked like a more extreme version of the full digital world - the work from home, contactless preferred, one-click/always-online, world. We may not have liked some of the changes, but we responded - though we have much yet to do to get it right.

So now is the time to adapt our approach quickly and build digital skills and access to them for everyone in our country - from primary level and beyond. We need to take the opportunity to reassess our education system and make the profound changes required. What the crisis showed us, when the Leaving Certificate was cancelled for the first time ever, is just how flexible and adaptable we can be. However, there is a real risk that without access to technology and those skills, there will be those "with" and those "without" – we can avoid that Digital Divide by equipping people with the skills for the future.

Of course, the path to learning doesn't stop there. The days of getting a "solid pensionable job" are no more. Education and learning continues across a lifetime. Industry needs support as it places emphasis on re-skilling the workforce. The catalyst is there to give people the skills to do their jobs brilliantly and adapt to whatever the future brings.

I firmly believe that building and supporting Ireland's greatest asset – our people and our talent – will help reduce unemployment and provide strong opportunities for people – it can more than anything position Ireland at the leading edge of those nations in the new digitised world economy. It can be a real win for Ireland if we get it right.

So, returning to the theme of Reboot and Reimagine, now is also time to look forward. And that can be difficult when people are fearful - fearful for their health and that of their families and friends, fearful for their jobs, their companies and their livelihoods. But to move ahead and create some momentum in the right direction we must put some of that fear aside and have something to go for, to aim at. We must also reflect quickly on some other learnings from this year as they can serve us well looking forward.

We need to drive social dialogue and engagement to support a stronger business role in crisis management and building momentum for change in skills and education. We also need businesses to be aware of the particular challenges facing young people in this crisis and to identify ways to support work experience, job creation, learning and mentoring.

Reboot and Reimagine will be at the centre of how we now 'pivot' this fantastic country of ours. As I talked about in my own experience of the then and now, tomorrow will be about how we get back to a better Ireland – working with stakeholders, jobs, education, and creating the skills to succeed. It is a time to work together, business, government, all stakeholders in our community, to invest in our collective future and reimagine our role and ambition in the world that is ahead, while also managing the here and now. We need to embrace change as willingly as ever and innovate in everything we do. In closing, let me say what a real honour it is to be here and to have the opportunity to play a small part in what is ahead.

Thank you for taking the time to be with us and I will now pass back to Sharon.