

BUSINESS and CIVIC SOCIETY CALL FOR COMPROMISE AND MUTUAL RESPECT

The system of devolved government for Northern Ireland was established in 1998 by the referendum vote on the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The electorate turnout was one of the highest on record at 80.7 per cent; 71.12% voting in favour of the agreement and 28.88 per cent voting against. The UK government devolved powers to Northern Ireland on December 2 1999 on a power-sharing basis as proposed in the peace agreement. Our unique system of government is designed to represent the interests of the entire community.

The implementation of that Agreement over the last 18 years has brought both peace and increasing prosperity to Northern Ireland. The terrorist acts and the widespread sectarianism that blighted the lives of people in all communities during the 1970s and 1980s largely disappeared. In many respects this hard-won peace is now largely taken for granted by our young people, undoubtedly a good thing, albeit the risk of complacency may not make us sufficiently vigilant.

Peace and political stability have reached into our everyday lives. The new political arrangements have brought significant opportunities for this small region. The cease-fire and a power-sharing devolved government have allowed us to place Northern Ireland prominently on the global map for new investment opportunities, attract international tourists and have provided local businesses with the stability and security to invest and create jobs.

We have much to be proud about - in the last two decades our reputation on the world stage has been transformed. This region is increasingly associated with positive qualities including our sporting and cultural prowess, great food and hospitality, film-making and the ability to host international events (the Giro, the World Police and Fire Games, the Irish Open Golf and the MTV Europe music awards to name but a few).

These events and significant foreign direct investment have supported local employment and brought much needed economic activity to Northern Ireland. Our employment rate has now risen to 847,000 and unemployment has fallen to 5.3%. This rate compares very favourably to the double-digit unemployment levels that prevailed in the 1980s. Underpinning this transformation is a more vibrant private sector and increasing evidence that Belfast is again becoming the economic driver of the region.

Of course, there is much more to be achieved. We are ambitious and we share a desire to raise living standards for everyone and create an economy where our young people wish to return to these shores to build businesses, invest and raise families. Equally, we become a destination of choice for others seeking to create new dreams here as we have done elsewhere in decades and centuries past.

The EU referendum result presents major challenges for Northern Ireland's progressive journey. As the UK embarks on its negotiations with the EU, this region is at a very significant juncture: our farming community, our agri-food sector, our retail sector, our tourism sector, our manufacturing base and indeed our local universities all face profound challenges and disruption in the years ahead.

In the last two decades, the social and economic framework at the heart of the European Union has supported both political stability and economic progress across the island of Ireland. It is myopic for any of us to assume that disruption to that arrangement will not have major implications and consequences for both our economy and political stability. The Irish government is addressing these issues head-on and is not ducking the challenges ahead.

As a small region, we must work together to face these new challenges. Northern Ireland needs a strong and cohesive political voice in London, in Dublin and in Brussels to ensure that our society and our economy and the deepening foundations of our peace are not inadvertently damaged when the UK withdraws from the European Union. There is an increasing awareness that our peace is both fragile and incomplete.

As the Northern Ireland election approaches this week, both business and civic society wish to make their voice clear to our local politicians. Given the seismic challenges that the EU referendum presents, we have **three specific “asks” for our politicians**:

- a) Deliver a power-sharing Devolved Government this month that works for all the people of Northern Ireland – that is what we all democratically voted for back in 1998 and that is what has since delivered peace and increasing prosperity to this region; and
- b) Use these devolved power-sharing arrangements for the greater good – maintain the peace, compromise where necessary, show mutual respect and sensitivity to all communities, **and work in partnership with business to deliver more economic prosperity for all**; and
- c) After this election, our devolved government must ensure that Northern Ireland’s economic, social and political interests are accurately and clearly represented at both the UK and European level seeking to ensure a the minimum level of disruption.

The business community, the voluntary sector and the higher education sector wish to also take this opportunity to ask the public to fully support devolved government in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Agreement did not just deliver peace and economic opportunity; it also allows people across Northern Ireland to shape their own future by democratically participating and voting for their chosen political representatives. **We all have a role to play in shaping the future of Northern Ireland** – delivering peace and economic opportunity for future generations.

Political participation through the electoral system is a responsibility all our citizens share whether young or old. Given the immense changes that lie ahead as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the economic stakes for Northern Ireland are exceptionally high. This in turn has clear implications for the peace process. **People across Northern Ireland deserve a government that works and represents their economic and social interests.** We implore Northern Ireland citizens to be clear in their ambitions for the future of this region and make their voice and their values heard at the ballot box and represented in our future local government.

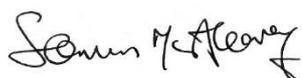
Sincerely,



Angela McGowan, Director
**Confederation of British Industry
(Northern Ireland)**



Ann McGregor MBE, Chief Executive
**Northern Ireland Chamber of
Commerce and Industry**



Seamus McAleavy, Chief Executive
**Northern Ireland Council for
Voluntary Action**



Wilfred Mitchell OBE, Policy Chair
**Federation of Small Businesses
(Northern Ireland)**



Patrick Johnston, Vice Chancellor
Queen's University Belfast



Patrick Nixon, Vice Chancellor
Ulster University



Stephen Kelly, Chief Executive
Manufacturing Northern Ireland



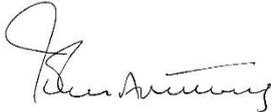
Linda Brown, Director
**Institute of Directors (Northern
Ireland)**



Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive
**Northern Ireland Independent
Retail Association**



Gordon Best, Chief Executive
**Quarry Products Association
Northern Ireland**



John Armstrong, Managing Director
**Construction Employers
Federation**



Aodhán Connolly, Director
**Northern Ireland Retail
Consortium**



Declan Billington, Chairman
**Northern Ireland Food & Drink
Association**



Barclay Bell, President
Ulster Farmers Union



Sinead McLaughlin, Chief Executive
Londonderry Chamber of Commerce