

A strong voice for business

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN AIKEN OBE

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, THE BRITISH IRISH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



STEPHEN AIKEN holds an MPhil, in International Relations, from the University of Cambridge, an MA from Kings College London and has an extensive policy background in UK government service. In an earlier guise, he had the privilege to serve in the Royal Navy Commanding nuclear powered submarines.

Please tell us about the objectives and background of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, which was only set up three years ago.

Despite there being many bilateral chambers in Ireland, including the American, French, and German, which have been around for decades – the American chambers have been around for 60 years – there has never been a British Irish Chamber of Commerce. To some extent this might have been due to what we might call historical resonances, but also due to an idea that British and Irish companies were very familiar with what was going on in each other's countries. Companies in both countries assumed that they understood the business culture of the islands.

One of the things that had become obviously apparent a few years ago was that this view was not a given. And we realised that there was an enormous amount of opportunity for a business organisation to grow and develop and to represent that significant joint business space.

As a chamber we're unique; we represent British business interests in Ireland, and Irish business interests in Britain, and the joint business interests that encompass all these islands. We talk quite a lot about the islands and the all-island space. Because one of the things the chamber has been advocating, and is increasingly seeing develop, is moving toward much more interconnected, integrated, and interdependent economies, both internally, within the islands, and also into Europe, North America, and the emerging markets.

What can the British Irish Chamber of Commerce do for British or Irish companies looking to move into each other's markets?

Perhaps the most important thing we offer is smart networking. We have the ability to fit companies of all sizes with each other. Three years ago we had 22 members, now we have over 250 members, that include FTSE 100 companies, FTSE 250 companies, very large and independent companies all the way down to the one or two person high-tech start up. Over these three years we've interacted with the different sectors that are strong points in the British-Irish relationship: in energy, in agribusiness, banking, financial services, the tech and ICT areas, in life sciences and also, uniquely for a chamber, we're

also very heavily involved in sports, culture, the arts, and tourism, which we think underpin the business relationship in these islands.

Our other strength lies in our ability to influence. We do this by working in partnership with key stakeholders, and these are not just the British and Irish governments, but regional governments around the British islands, we also link up semi-state sectors with state sectors, and link up with Europe and beyond as well. Being a member of the Chamber gives you a strong voice that you can use effectively to be able to advocate for our position on a wide variety of issues. For example, we are committed to Britain remaining in Europe: this is a strategic issue for Ireland as well.

Can you name some companies you have worked with that you would consider success stories?

We are slightly Darwinian in the sense that you wouldn't be part of us unless you were interested in exporting. This is the sector that is doing well in Ireland and Britain. We could talk about Centrica, the ESB, Greencore, ABP, and in banking and financial services there is HSBC, AIG, and Bank of Ireland. Smaller projects would include the Oriel Wind Farm.

Oriel could become a supplier of clean energy to the British market. This is a great opportunity for medium-sized entrepreneurial companies in Britain.

How do you see the chamber evolving over the next few years? What are your main objectives?

When I first took over as CEO, we set out on a five-to-ten year journey, thinking it would take five to six years to be the focal point in the Irish-British business space. We've been enormously lucky: thanks to our partnerships with the government and key stakeholders, our members, we're there already ready. We're taking stock now about where we're going to take the relationship in the future. We're going to expand into sectors that are under represented so far. We're working closely with the SME sector to develop small companies' export potential. We help inform government on infrastructure skills shortages, and we're calling for an all-Ireland 12.5 per cent corporation tax, as well as talking to our friends in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales to look at opportunities in trying to reduce impediments to business in the islands.

What are the new sectors British companies should be looking at in Ireland, and Irish companies in the UK?

The new big growth areas are the tech and ICT sectors, as well as the creative industries. There are many opportunities to tap into the synergies created by software companies here in Ireland. Irish companies are beginning to take advantage of the opportunities in London, which is a global centre. London is one hour away; you don't have to go to China and India to get into those markets, you can meet the key stakeholders in those markets in London and you can sell globally. Similarly, for British SMEs who are trying to enter the tech and ICT industries, they don't have to go to San Francisco or Silicon Valley to meet the main players, because most of them can be found in Dublin. Our job is to get those groups together and let them talk.

Is the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce involved in President Higgins' State Visit to Britain?

Many of our members will be going to the main events and attending State banquets. We will be organising events in London for many political leaders on both sides, and we're very much involved in the cultural activities; many of our members are closely involved with the major cultural events. This is a tremendous opportunity to reinforce the expanding and growing relationship between Ireland and Britain in the 21st century.


How important is this State Visit?

Extremely important, and for at least one clear reason: it underpins the changing relationship within these islands. Both countries now see themselves as equals, we have built up a good relationship to address issues like Europe. Britain and Ireland are on the same side on the major European issues. Both our countries are globalisers, outward looking, looking to North

America and the global community for business growth, and working together to do that in Europe to our common benefit.

Just think about the strong working relationship we have developed that helped resolve issues in Northern Ireland. There are still strong resonances from that. I think that it is fantastic that President Higgins is now able to square the circle. The Queen's visit two years ago was a momentous occasion; let's not forget that many people had never realised she had not visited Ireland before, they just assumed she had done so in the preceding 50 years. And now President Higgins being accorded a full State Visit, which is another historic moment.

Are there any other points you'd like to make?

It is very important that we continue to work on this relationship. Both Prime Ministers say they want our economies to be at the centre of the relationship. There are many areas where mutual cooperation can work, but we need to do take some definitive steps. We talk about closer energy cooperation, so what we need is to have an inter-government agreement, and we need that signed. We need to work closely in agriculture, research and development, to move beyond talk to action. There is a lot of work going on behind the scenes, and we'd like to work in partnership with the key stakeholders. Business has a lot to say, it has a big role to play. We need to develop the sense of certainty about our relations. The UK economy is doing well, and we've come out of our period of darkness. We're seeing improvement on economic issues to do with Europe, and they need to be resolved. We in Ireland need Britain as a strong voice within Europe, it needs to be part of the decision-making process, particularly in regard to the single European market. 

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Irish offshore wind farms such as the proposed Oriel project in the north west Irish Sea offer the possibility of energy exports to the UK