Dame Diana Johnson pleads for the Humber's chance to level up UK Plc

Dame Diana Johnson quoted two US presidents and pilloried the incumbent Russian one as she forcefully put her case for levelling up forward at the invitation of a fourth.

The Hull North MP joined the Lord Mayor of Hull as a guest of honour at a dinner following Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting.

It saw Mike Whitehead elected to president, and a robust remaining part of the 'red wall' was clear on priorities.

"We need our region to realise its full potential to contribute to UK Plc," she said after making her feelings abundantly clear on the Ukraine crisis. "To paraphrase John F Kennedy we ask 'not what your country can do for us, but what in the Humber we can do for our country'. And as Bill Clinton said, 'it's the economy, stupid'.

"We all know building a growing economy in the UK is the key to improving standards of living, ending poverty, having well-funded public services and generating funds to reinvest for further economic growth.

"We are in the midst of a long process of industrial change and the whole area has shown great initiative, enterprise and pragmatism.

Dame Diana Johnson talks to business leaders as aprt of the Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce annual general meeting event at the MKM Stadium, Hull, with Chamber chief executive Dr Ian Kelly listening intently.
(Image: Reach Plc)

“We have an existing industrial base around many sectors, a great ports complex facing Europe and the Baltics and freeport status. We have a top university providing cutting-edge research and development suiting modern industry and after five years of campaigning we secured Siemens and now new modern industries around the Energy Estuary are expanding.

“Digitally, it is one of the fastest growing economies in the UK, and arts, culture and tourism have done well since the UK City of Culture in 2017.

“We have weaknesses that need to be addressed, and listing them is a good ‘aide-memoire’ to what we need from the levelling up agenda.

“For every Siemens we have also lost businesses. We have fought for BAE Systems, we no longer have Comet, Hull is a top five place for deprivation and has been one of the first in

and last out of economic downturns in recent decades. Several neighbourhoods are described as left behind."

Highlighting the perennial placing above the national unemployed average, and a need to move away from low paid economy to higher skills, she said: "Raising education standards has been a challenge, too many local young people are not in education, employment or training."

But the decarbonisation agenda could help reverse such decline.

"Future development of our new green Energy Estuary and progress to Net Zero should not be seen as a burden to be borne grudgingly, but a real opportunity to create future jobs and growth in the Humber," Dame Diana said.

"The Energy Estuary can contribute to reducing fuel poverty, and bolstering energy security and reliance – all the more important with recent events with Ukraine.

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It has been a great pleasure to see the expansion plans at Siemens and lots of other great work in carbon capture, hydrogen and projects like Hull Lagoon are really exciting and a real opportunity.

Also, I'm interested to see what comes out of freeport status. We have to wait to see. This is one of the benefits post-Brexit, that we can have these freeports. We need to fight tooth and nail to get everything we can for our area, we have the biggest ports complex in the country, let's hope (it works). I know Martin Vickers on the South Bank has been really pushing and championing it, I want to bring jobs and investment into my patch, if this is going to do it then good."

Turning back to the Westminster Levelling Up project, she said: "It is 10 years since Michael Heseltine launched his report No Stone Unturned. Most across the mainstream political spectrum shared the importance of the words – rebalancing to Northern Powerhouse to Levelling Up. Deeds have not yet matched the words.

"What is at stake if the levelling up agenda doesn't have the scale and transformative ambition?

" Hull is getting some of the levelling up money, and we're really grateful for it, but we have to be clear, it is a small proportion of the funding package actually required to transform the regional economy."

She said London to Humber docklands investment "doesn't even relate".

In her 17th year as Hull North's representative, having won five elections and survived a deselection attempt, Dame Diana bemoaned the Integrated Rail Plan that "fails on levelling up for our area" and the devolution path that feels enforced.

"One specific threat is an issue which has been something the Chamber has been concerned about for some time – the government's intentions on devolution, which seems are being made in Whitehall," she said. "Whatever devolution looks like it appears to be a condition of getting funding."

She felt constituents should have a say on what amounts to an extra tier of governance.

"We have to remember 'it's the economy, stupid,' she continued. "We need to get on with the job for our area and to this end, MPs around the Humber have a good record of cross-party, cross-Humber, cross-local authority working."

Closing with a final quote, this time from a former party leader, she said: "The opportunity to serve our country, that's all we ask. They were the final public words of John Smith. That statement is the message we keep trying. The contribution the Humber can and would be able to make to grow the prosperity of our country is huge. We just need to be given that opportunity."

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