

Outgoing North East Chamber chief hails region's business community

James Ramsbotham, the outgoing head of the North East's largest business organisation, is a man fond of a saying, and has one to describe the often turbulent times in which he held that job.

"I'm a sailor," he says, "and one of our sayings is that no-one ever learned to sail a boat on a calm sea.

"The reason that so many businesses are so good up here in the North East is that we've got so much experience of dealing with challenges and tough times. I'm absolutely in awe of the way that people in the North East manage to knuckle down and make things happen."

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That the last 15 years have included tough times is beyond dispute. Mr Ramsbotham became chief executive of the North East England Chamber of Commerce in 2006 and a year later was faced with the collapse of Northern Rock and the financial crisis. That led to years of austerity before the Brexit referendum, years of uncertainty over the country's departure from the EU and finally the coronavirus pandemic.

And yet for most of that time, Mr Ramsbotham has mostly been upbeat and positive about the region's fortunes, part of a deliberate attempt to change the narrative about the North East away from its problems to instead accentuate its potential. (Again, he has a well-worn – but no less true – phrase to sum this up: "the North East is not a problem to be solved; it's a region whose potential needs to be maximised on behalf of UKplc.")

That drive to focus on the positive was manifested early in Mr Ramsbotham's tenure at the Chamber with a campaign called 50 Great Reasons To Do Business in the North East, which was sent to hundreds of decision makers around the UK but also translated in dozens of languages to go global. Another campaign – in association with The Journal – helped persuade the Department of Transport to lift an arcane regulation that was holding back an estimated £1bn of investment into the region (and around 10,000 jobs).



James Ramsbotham, then new Chief Exec of the North East Chamber of Commerce (2006)

(Image: Reach plc)

Mr Ramsbotham lists a number of other highlights of his time at the Chamber, including Newcastle Airport securing the Emirates Airlines service, the building of the Hitachi factory in County Durham and a number of successes in the automotive sector. His tenure included the Chamber's 200th anniversary in

2015 which was celebrated on Durham's Palace Green and paved the way to two spectacular annual dinners in Durham Cathedral itself.

Yet the last few years have seen Mr Ramsbotham and the Chamber increasingly at odds with the Government, sometimes on matters at the heart of the business agenda, but increasingly on subjects that might not always be seen as being part of a Chamber of Commerce's brief. (In July, the Chamber joined unions and voluntary groups in urging the Government to reconsider its decision to cut the £20 uplift in Universal Credit).

Having stayed officially neutral in the Brexit debate, Mr Ramsbotham has made no secret of the fact that his business members are being hurt by increased regulation and other barriers to exporting, while he also questions the Government's levelling up agenda.

He said: "It's the right sort of political rhetoric and it's up to us to turn it to our advantage. The problem is that, as with the Northern Powerhouse, right now it's only political rhetoric. There's no detail behind it and sadly this is the problem, with this Government particularly but actually several Governments previously. They're really good at making the big, bold political statement but there's no detail behind it.

"One of the classics of that is Brexit. We've delivered one of the biggest changes to this country in a century and there's no plan. I kept saying to various politicians that when I leave the house, I know I'm going before I leave the house. We left the EU in January but we've been driving around for nine months and we still haven't got a clue where we're going.

"The decision was a democratic one and it's not up to the business community to decide on a democratic process. What businesses are saying is that the implementation of that

decision needs to be done in a way that improves the lot of this country in whichever way that's measured.

“Actually, all they've done is deliver Brexit and make absolutely zero effort to understand the impacts, or to try and create benefit from it. That's what I criticise them for because that's what we look to Government to do. These big things that are way above things we can influence at a local level, but we do expect them to come up with a sensible way of making it work. And it's just not happening.”

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Mr Ramsbotham's length of service means he has brushed shoulders with many politicians: five Prime Ministers, at least 10 Business Secretaries and countless other Ministers he has lobbied on a range of subjects.

It is telling that when asked to name a politician who he rates highly, Mr Ramsbotham picks two who have little or no role in the North East: Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon ("she was the only one who came to listen and to learn rather than to 'tell us'") and former Polish president Lech Walesa ("one of the most gracious people I have ever met").

As a former soldier who has been unashamed to go into battle for the North East in recent years – and possibly pick the odd fight or two – he is now returning in sorts to his other former career as a banker, taking up the position of chair of Newcastle Building Society. (Handing over the Chamber job to John McCabe, he says: "I can't think of a better person to take over from me.")

The switch from Chamber to Building Society sees him swapping one mutual organisation for another, which seems fitting for a man who has always stressed the importance of working together.

"I am concerned that not only are there divisions within the North East, I think as a nation we're more divided than we've ever been in my lifetime," he said. "We're now divided in Europe and around the world.

"And with the really big issues we have to face, particularly climate change, we've got to work together. We've got to find ways to gather our forces and cooperate."

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