

NEW YEAR MESSAGE FROM DR LIZ CAMERON OBE, DIRECTOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SCOTTISH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

It's not just the start of a new year but a new decade. A hundred years ago the so-called "roaring twenties" conjured a decade of prosperity, modernity and the advent of moving pictures. The question is, can we make the next ten years a bustling new jazz age in Scotland?

We have certainly come through a bruising 12 months, which topped the years of uncertainty that followed in the wake of UK's slow lurch towards the exit door of the European Union. This disruption came hot on the heels of the banking crisis, which did so much to shake up economic stability in the first decade of the millennium. During this time, Scottish businesses have been battered and are crying out for some much-needed consistency and regularity.

The only constant through the turmoil of recent years has been the rapid pace of technological change. And while I am not one to make predictions, I would put good money down that digital transformation - driven by data and artificial intelligence - will only accelerate. Likewise, businesses need to put their shoulders to the wheel if we are going to meet the most significant challenge facing citizens across the globe, climate change.

Businesses in Scotland will need to dig deep to embrace the upheavals the coming era brings. Thanks to Brexit, these include an urgent need to internationalise and target new markets for sales and growth. Business and government now must work more closely together than ever as the rules of global trade are being re-written. Business needs to be at the table while they are.

There is also a massive skills challenge to meet both for future entrants to the employment market as well as current employees. We need a major shift in mindset so that education and training is seen as a lifelong effort. We need to train and prepare the workforce before industries are disrupted or become obsolete. Otherwise we will continue to lose out on valuable productivity growth, not to mention waste our most precious resource - human capital and potential.

Governments in both Westminster and Holyrood must do everything in their power to enable businesses to thrive and grow. There are key areas that our parliamentary leaders must address to ensure businesses and the economy are able to step confidently into the future.

As 2020 dawns, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce call on the Scottish Government to deliver a happy new year to businesses by confirming that the small business bonus is not under threat, that measures are taken to ensure local authorities aren't given leeway to create 32 unlevel playing fields for businesses, and that the continual cry of businesses to sort our business rates are urgently actioned.

We further urge Scottish Government to think very carefully about the future of the ScotRail franchise so that there is no momentum lost in delivering the continued improvements we have been experiencing to vital transport services. We also need to ensure that the signals sent out to investors in infrastructure - including in the transport sector - rings loud and clear that Scotland is truly open for business.

Significant aspects of our competitive edge are in the hands of elected parliamentarians. They must put jobs and business high on their list of policy and operational priorities, committing to a major clamp down on the rising cost of doing business. There is a quietly growing perception that business needs to be taxed or even punished for growing and creating jobs, which is driving policies that make business investment more challenging. Maintaining and honing competitive edge will be essential if Scottish employers are to compete globally and tackle the challenges we all face.

2020 must be the year when both governments refocus and balance their energy, expertise and support to domestic priorities. We urgently need an environment where we can grow and compete.