

CBI Annual Dinner 2006, 16 May 2006

Sir Digby Jones's Speech

President, your Excellencies, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you John for those extremely kind and generous words and thank you all for such a warm welcome this evening.

It was 7 years ago when the then President of the CBI, Sir Clive Thompson, contacted me to enquire if I would be interested in taking up the challenge of Director-General. There were many influences in my decision but perhaps the greatest was that I wanted to make a difference - because I believed that business can make a difference. The troika of Sir Clive, my Lords Marshall and Vallance took a chance on me that day ('Digby Who?' was the headline in The Times!) and I would just say tonight a big thank you to each of you for your confidence, your support and, even today so many years on, the ongoing advice and help I still receive from each of you on a regular basis.

I have been fortunate in my time as Director-General to have worked with Presidents who have excelled in their leadership and support and to Sir John Egan I express my sincere gratitude for your robust help and strong leadership. But perhaps Clive, Ian and John will forgive me for reserving a special thank you for our current President John Sunderland. Under his demanding but fair Chairmanship the CBI has fundamentally changed the way it governs itself, some would say it's been brought



kicking and screaming into the world of modern day corporate governance. His engagement with everyone in the CBI everywhere has been so meaningful and has helped enormously.

The job of President is often a thankless one and I have been very lucky to have had in Clive, Iain, John and John (not forgetting Colin Marshall who has always been there to help me) the very best and I would ask you, Ladies and Gentlemen, to join me in saying a big thank you to them all.

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A big thank you is also due to God's Own City. I owe Birmingham so much and it has been a privilege to make people aware of what it has to offer as I have toured the world in this job over the past few years. Birmingham has never let anyone down, has never asked for help as seems to be the norm for cities further north. Birmingham has always delivered and I thank the city of my birth for giving me so many opportunities.

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Over the last year 6½ years no-one could have spent more than a few minutes dealing with, or working in, the CBI to realise just what a team effort its leadership has been. It is not an over-statement to say that without the fabulous contribution, tremendous loyalty, beneficial experience, complete reliability and sense of partnership that my deputy, John Cridland has given me every day, we would not tonight be looking back on such a successful time. We all know who has really run the CBI for the last few years! Here tonight at our celebration of an organisation in rude financial health with membership levels at record highs and a sense of purpose and public identification that is the envy of similar organisations in Britain and around the world, John, from the bottom of my heart I thank you for all you have done to make that possible.

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Behind every successful man is an astonished, averagely unimpressed woman. When I accepted this job it meant a fundamental change in lifestyle and family finances for Pat and me. Not only did Pat accept those challenges with her usual quiet support and strong graciousness but there is no way I could have undertaken the job in the way I chose, without the constancy and stability she has brought to a difficult task. Home, for this tour of duty, has been wherever Pat has been – thank you love.

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There are many senior members of the media here this evening as my guests. As I have journeyed the world in this job I have come to value the quality and independence of our press. It is the best in the world and, no, they don't always get it right! Yes, they often write and say things I wish they wouldn't. How often have I wished that the headline bore some resemblance to the story?! How often do I wish that journalists didn't start from such an unfounded, cynical position? But, an intrusive, enquiring and often confrontational press does keep those in public life more honest and if what we rail against is the pricking of the balloon of our arrogance then that is surely no bad thing. I have learned a lot from the media over the years and I thank you all for the time and application you have put into the relationship with the CBI. It has been very much a two-way street and one which I have enjoyed immensely.

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The relationship of the CBI with the Government of the day will always, rightly, be one of constructive tension. If it isn't, then frankly we are not doing our job. After all no politician pays our wages and we should never do their bidding. If telling it how it is upsets those dependent on the sentiment and votes of the nation, then so be it. But, without quality access to decision makers and detailed consultation we could not succeed and I am grateful to this Government for the access and consultation they have afforded us. Of course, that is only possible if we are worth talking to and the

CBI is stuffed full of hard working, clever and not particularly well-paid people who are some of the nicest people I could ever have wished to work with. It has been a privilege to lead them. I am proud of their ability, their loyalty and their independent spirit.

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The CBI now has offices in Washington, Brussels, Beijing and 13 places around the UK and our lobbying is as important in Delhi as it is in Derby, as relevant in Atlanta as it is in Altringham. This is the Britain of the 21st Century – engaged with the world, open, free-trading – a country for which globalisation was made. The UK government must now make a re-energised UKTI succeed. It needs more money, more political support – wake-up politicians and smell the coffee of our international trading and investing success.

Only the other week I sat in front of a Minister in Beijing who asked me – ‘Do you know why I like the Brits? Because you’re not American and you’re not French!’ What he actually meant, of course, was that he does not turn on his TV or open his newspapers to find in Britain the muddle-headed, regressive and damaging protectionism in which other countries are currently indulging.

Free trade and open markets work. When unaccountable, opaquely funded, unelected NGOs say that free trade makes rich countries richer, they are telling the truth. Of course what, in their deceitful way, they forget to mention is that it makes poor countries richer too. If we do not get a successful completion of the Doha Development Agenda, the Chinas and the Indias, the Americas and the Frances will go on with no earth-shattering consequence. I would just ask those bigoted NGOs and those hypocritical protectionist politicians in so much of the developed world to remember the same cannot be said for a kid in Bangladesh or Botswana who will

probably die if we don't get sustainable wealth creation into their countries without further delay.

And remember this – a kid with cleaner water, better healthcare, better education and a road (all possible on a sustainable basis by allowing business in to make a difference), is less likely to pick up a kalishnakov to solve his problems

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But this fabulous country, this liberal tolerant home, where we don't give a damn about the God that you worship, the colour of your skin or the fact that we can't pronounce your name – where you are very welcome to come and work hard, speak english, take part in the transparent economy and help build a better Britain – this wonderful country, whilst seen as fair minded in the eyes of so many in the world cannot compete in a brutally competitive, unsure environment if it does not have more and better skilled people to take part in its 21st century value added, innovative economy. I am thrilled that London has just won the right to hold the 2011 Skills Olympics. No, it won't get the acclaim that its athletic older brother will receive the following year but in this fast-changing, rather frightening world, its achievements will be just as important for this country as we equip our people to deal with the challenges of open markets.

This Government should be ashamed that nearly half the kids who took a GCSE last summer did not get grade C or above in english or maths (and they are the ones that took it!) but employers (including those in the public sector) must also do so much more to train and skill our people and equip them with self-belief and competence in a world where India wants your lunch and China wants your dinner.

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If the internationalisation of the CBI is one of the great achievements of the last few years, then the deeper and wider engagement with the membership is the source of

greatest pride and I have saved the biggest thank you till last. Without the support, the engagement and, frankly, the dosh from you the members of the CBI this job would have been impossible. Instead, you have made it the best job in the country and I thank you for that.

As I head off to a plural life with Deloitte, Barclays, Ford, JCB, Alba, Cancer Research and Leicester Tigers, Pat and I reflect on a period in our lives when we have made friends that will last a lifetime, we've learned something new every day, we've discovered so much that is good in so many people and have never let a day go by without a good laugh. Life is far too important not to take a bag of smiles with you wherever you go.

My friends, I said at the start that one of the big drivers for me accepting this job all those years ago was that I felt business could make a difference. Well, I was wrong. If we build on what this wonderful country has given each and every one of us, if we as business make social inclusion a reality, if we strive for excellence every day and if we trade and invest freely with the world and equip our people to compete and win, whatever job they do, then business doesn't make a difference – it makes the difference.

Thank you.