

Thank you Colin.

Taoiseach, Distinguished Guests, fellow Ibec members, you are all very welcome.

It is my great privilege to stand before you this evening as the incoming President of Ibec and I do so with deep gratitude and tremendous pride

Please join me in congratulating Danny and all the team at Ibec for organising this evening's event.

This will be my 15th Ibec President's Dinner, and over the years this gathering has been a source of inspiration, purpose and action for me and I know that it is for many others.

It is a powerful expression of Irish business - bringing together enterprise leaders, policy makers and partners from across society and across the globe to celebrate what we have achieved, solve for the challenges ahead and action our shared ambition for Ireland's future. Thank you, Danny and the entire Ibec team for your steadfast and values-based leadership.

To begin, I want to extend my sincere gratitude to our outgoing President, Colin Hunt. Colin, your tenure has been defined by a relentless demand for what you so aptly called **'Generational Solutions'**.

You brought the 'Spirit of Ard na Crusha' ' back into the national conversation, reminding us of what bold leadership looks like.

Thank you for your no-nonsense approach and enduring commitment to Irish Business.

I want to take this opportunity to warmly welcome our incoming Deputy President, Dalton Phillips. I look forward to working closely with you Dalton and am excited for the progress that we will make together on behalf of Irish business.

I am especially proud to be joined tonight by members of the DeCare Board and leadership team — colleagues whose dedication, talent and agility make everything we do possible.

None of this journey would have been possible without the strong foundation of my family. To my husband, Jarlath, and our dear daughter, Méadbh — thank you for everything.

For those of you I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting, I am Managing Director of DeCare Dental Ireland. DeCare brought private dental insurance to the Irish market more than 20 years ago.

Our Irish headquarters is in Claremorris, County Mayo, where our team of 125 talented professionals supports over 79,000 members and over 600 companies in Ireland and over 7 million members in the United States.

My journey to this stage didn't begin with a traditional climb up the corporate ladder; it began across the Atlantic, when my father took a leap of faith on the West of Ireland—and on me.

My late father, Michael Walsh, profoundly influenced my work ethic. He was born and raised in Claremorris before emigrating to the US in the early 1970s, eventually becoming the CEO of DeCare Dental in Minnesota. He taught me the value of "graft with a capital G" - the crunch and grind required to build something lasting.

In the late nineties, DeCare was hurriedly preparing for the Y2K transition and needed to recruit talented software engineers. We quickly discovered the exceptional calibre of tech talent here in Ireland. Based on that success, my dad felt Ireland would be the perfect strategic location to set up a claims service operation. He asked me to move to his hometown for a two-year expatriate assignment to get it off the ground.

When I packed my bags and relocated from my marketing role in Boston in September 1999, I thought I was moving to the West of Ireland for two years. More than twenty-five years later, I can tell you firsthand: the high-performing talent based outside our major cities is not a short-term fix, it is our true competitive advantage.

If you will, please let me take you back to that move in 1999. The catalyst for my relocation to Ireland was the intense preparation businesses were undertaking for the Y2K transition.

Do you remember the sheer panic? The fear that on the stroke of midnight, computers would read '00' and planes would fall out of the sky?

Looking back, all that global anxiety over two digits feels almost quaint.

Then, we had the luxury of a deadline.

Today, we don't.

Now, we are facing a technological shift that makes Y2K look like an administrative glitch.

Artificial intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept; it is here, and it is rewriting the rules of how we work, how we live, and how we compete.

The world is navigating a profound reordering of the global trading system. Public policy must once again actively pursue growth rather than passively expecting it.

Just as we prepared then, we must strategically, confidently and deliberately prepare now.

As your President, my focus will be on three core policy themes: equipping our workforce for the AI era, creating a fairer ecosystem for entrepreneurs, and finally delivering on balanced regional development.

Reskilling and AI

First, we must future-proof our workforce. I intend to fiercely continue Colin Hunt's advocacy in this area. We are entering a once-in-a-generation period of technological change by AI and digitalization that has the potential to transform our labour market and be the home to the world's most competitive AI native workforce

Ireland consistently ranks as one of the most highly educated workforces in the world, but we are not moving fast enough on structured lifelong learning.

We have a clear solution at our fingertips

- We must immediately release the €2 billion surplus currently sitting untouched in the National Training Fund.

- We must deploy this funding to rapidly expand programmes like Skillnet Enterprise led networks and Springboard+. and reinstate learner subsidies for Microcredentials

It is economically unjustifiable to sit on a cash pile while the global economy undergoes a fundamental rewiring

The best way to shape the future is to invest in the people who will build it.

Entrepreneurship

Second, we must back the risk-takers. Small indigenous businesses are the lifeblood of our communities and a dynamic force within our broader economic ecosystem. **They are the creators, the innovators, and the disruptors.**

While Ireland remains an attractive place to start a business, we must ensure it is just as easy to operate and to scale. Cost competitiveness is often most acutely felt among smaller firms.

To create a genuine environment for growth and unleash entrepreneurial potential, we must move beyond taxation alone and tackle the dense administrative burdens weighing down our founders.

There are ways to do this

- We must commit to radical regulatory simplification through an expanded '**SME Test**' to protect scaling firms from disproportionate red tape
- Our entrepreneurs must be able to secure the external investment necessary to turn vision into reality
- We must simplify the access, and take-up of, critical taxation support measures and grant schemes to support growth requirements

By dismantling these barriers, we empower business owners to do what they do best: innovate, secure the investment they need to scale, and create the high-quality jobs of the future right across the country and indeed globally.

Infrastructure, connectivity and regional development

Third and finally, world-class public infrastructure is the critical foundation of economic growth, global competitiveness, and quality of life.

Resolving regional deficits in transport, energy, water, and housing is crucial if businesses across Ireland are to maintain productivity, compete for talent, and trade internationally.

Speaking as a business leader in the West and having had the pleasure of serving two terms as Ibec West Regional President, I see daily that the resourcefulness of our workforce remains our true competitive edge. But to safeguard existing enterprise and convince the next generation of foreign direct investment to choose our regions over competing global markets, that human potential must be backed by high-capacity utility and connectivity networks - because ambition for our regions without world class infrastructure is just noise.

To protect national resilience, **capital spending must be prioritised above all other fiscal demands.** That means protecting budgets in **real terms**, rebalancing the planning system to put the common good first, and streamlining processes to accelerate project delivery on the ground.

Taoiseach, colleagues. We are at a crossroads.

The truly seismic shifts in technology and global trade will have a more profound impact on a small, open economy like ours than on almost any other. When I arrived in Claremorris in 1999, I thought I had a two-year job to do. Instead, I found a lifetime of opportunity.

The challenges we face today, cannot be solved with short-term thinking or two-year timelines. They require a commitment to building something lasting.

Taoiseach, earlier I spoke about the need for 'Generational Solutions.' Both government and business together must rise to the generational ambition of Irish enterprise to deliver.

We ask you to look past the immediate political cycle, to clear the regulatory quagmires holding back our entrepreneurs, and to bring an unapologetic focus to building an economy that can withstand whatever comes next to ensure continued growth and prosperity. We want to look back 10 years from now and say that this was the moment Ireland chose to back its risk-takers, the family business, the start-up that created jobs we had not yet imagined, the multinational that chose to reinvest here as part of their growth strategy.

In return, you have our absolute commitment. Ibec and the leaders in this room will be at the forefront. We will work in partnership with your government, **deploying our capital**, driving innovation, and providing the collective leadership required to navigate this transition.

Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot leave this stage tonight without acknowledging that after 75 years, Mayo has finally brought the All-Ireland back to the West. We talk a great deal in business about resilience, but waiting three-quarters of a century for a victory is the ultimate masterclass in perseverance. My late father, Michael, who I spoke of earlier, played centre half back for the Mayo Senior team in the 1960s. He would have been immensely proud to see this team prove that when you have talent, belief and a deliberate plan and stay in the fight long enough, the breakthrough will come.

And in that spirit, Another Maureen, Maureen O'Hara, once said, 'Above all else, deep in my soul, I'm a tough Irishwoman.'

That is exactly the kind of tough, unbreakable spirit Irish business needs to channel today. Every person in this room has a role to play

Because the future is not something we predict. It is something we build — together.

Thank you, and have a wonderful evening