

Brexit focus needs to be more on trade, less on North - exporters told

By Colm Kelpie

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Simon McKeever

The Government is too focused on Northern Ireland in relation to Brexit, at the expense of trade and industrial policy, the head of the Irish Exporters Association has claimed.

Simon McKeever told a manufacturing conference that the Government's thinking was too narrow. Mr McKeever said the Government and enterprise agencies need to be conscious of the fact that in the coming years there could be a north Atlantic trading bloc encompassing the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, while the EU moves towards a more federalist agenda.

More attention needs to be paid to our industrial strategy for the coming years, he said.

"I think that we as a country are looking at Brexit in too narrow a confine," Mr McKeever told the National Manufacturing and Supply Chain conference.

"I think we're looking at it as the Ireland/UK relationship, and it's a very important issue - Northern Ireland and the common travel arrangement, -but our government seems to be completely focused on Northern Ireland to the detriment of all the other aspects of this."

Mr McKeever suggested greater focus needs to be placed on the direction of Ireland's relationship with the European Union and the direction of that relationship.

He said that, in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president, the Government needs to think about the State's industrial policy for the coming years.

"I think our thinking is very narrow. I think we need to think a lot bigger. I think we need to be thinking five, 10, 15 years down the road. The whole Trump factor needs to be taken into this at the moment," Mr McKeever said. "I get a sense that, other than Northern Ireland, there's nothing going on."

Barry Heavey of the IDA said the agency was "actively promoting" Ireland as an "English-speaking safe haven within Europe" in the wake of Brexit.

He said there were four manufacturing-related sectors in Ireland - pharmaceuticals, medical devices, microelectronics and food sectors.

With the exception of agri-food, he said the sectors were not making major contingency plans as they will "find a way to work around" Brexit.

He said he did not expect a major flight of investment from Ireland by IDA-backed companies as a result of Brexit, and that from a manufacturing point of view, the IDA sees Ireland as an opportunity to win investment.