

Republic focusing too much on Northern Ireland in its Brexit planning

By Colm Kelipe

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The election of Donald Trump as US President 'needed to be taken into the Irish government's thinking'

The Irish Government is too focused on Northern Ireland in relation to Brexit, to the detriment of other aspects such as trade and Ireland's industrial policy, the head of the Irish Exporters Association has claimed.

Simon McKeever told a manufacturing conference outside Dublin that the Irish Government's thinking is too narrow.

Mr McKeever said it and enterprise agencies needed 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 needed to be paid to Ireland's 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 needed to be placed on the direction of Ireland's relationship with the EU.

He said the Government needed to think about the State's industrial policy for the coming years in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President.

"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, head of life sciences, engineering and industrial tech at the IDA, said the inward investment agency was "actively promoting" Ireland as an "English-speaking safe haven within Europe" following 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 are 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 from 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.

"The new Trump administration and the uncertainties around that, and the potential of trade wars, would probably be much more impactful to IDA's business in the near to medium-term," he added.