

Northern Ireland sometimes gets characterised as a naval-gazing backwater, where overly conservative views and inward-looking discussions dominate. But whilst we have to acknowledge that there is some truth in this, I don't think we always get enough credit for the many things from here that are out of this world. Recently, NI's creative talent was on display at both the Superbowl and the BAFTAs, and is set to be showcased in Hollywood soon as well. Many companies from here are high achievers on a global scale too, and on the sporting front, the Irish Rugby team is currently world number one. It's also encouraging that NI PLC is looking to the stars as well, with the UK Space Conference coming to Belfast later this year.



So whilst there is still too much focus on the past in Northern Ireland, there is also plenty of emphasis on the future too, with lots of new industries and sectors being developed and exploited. The space industry is one that provides opportunity, as space will have a huge role in addressing many of the challenges facing the human race over the next few decades. We've already heard a lot about Northern Ireland's expertise in cyber security, including a recent announcement about Belfast-based ANGOKA's role in cyber security for driverless vehicles. Some of these companies are world-class even if we don't know their names. It

seems that we're also looking beyond the worldwide web too, with the next frontier being outside of this planet.

Outside of the Armagh Planetarium, people will perhaps wonder what space has got to do with Northern Ireland. But we already have space-focused businesses based here including Skytech who do software for space stations and Collins Aerospace who makes things like space suits and have a facility in Killeel. And believe it or not, there is already a NI Space Office, a NI Space Leadership Council, and a NI Space Specialist Interest Group. The UK Space Conference taking place at the ICC (International Convention Centre) in Belfast in November, provides a major opportunity to put NI's growing space sector on the map, and it could be a launchpad to send our space sector into orbit and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs.

But it's not just the space sector. There are many other industries and opportunities that we are exploiting well and can capitalise on in the future. One thing we've done really well in Northern Ireland is to develop our tourism and hospitality sector and there is still a big opportunity on the business tourism front. The very fact that we are able to host the Space Conference is due to the investment that was made in creating the ICC, a world-class facility that is an engine for boosting business tourism. The UK Space Conference will see around 2,500-3,000 delegates from across the UK and beyond coming to the city. It will not only help put NI on the space map, it will also see up to 3,000 people spending money in our hotels and restaurants. And it will allow them to see all that NI has to offer, including showcasing its talent.

The kind of visionary infrastructure investment that brought us the ICC as part of long-term planning that is now bearing fruit, needs to be adopted in other areas. At present, we are best in class in some areas of infrastructure, including telecommunications. However, we are at the other end of the spectrum in relation to water infrastructure, electric charging,

and in aspects of public sector service delivery. So, we are reaching for the stars in some areas and rooted to the floor in others.

We need inspired thinking in how we shape the future of the Northern Ireland economy. We need to shoot for the stars, but we also need a plan to get there. Without a functioning Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, this is simply isn't possible. We can't do long-term planning, we can't have multi-year budgets, we can't execute delivery and no amount of ambition will bring success without earthing it in reality. We need the politicians to turbo-charge their efforts to get back into government and get an Executive off the ground.

We also need the politicians to get on the same page as the likes of Magherafelt-man Jonathan Anderson who created the outfit that Rihanna wore for her Superbowl performance, and Ross White, who was one of the directors of an Irish Goodbye which has been nominated for the forthcoming Oscars in terms of boosting Northern Ireland's reputation. We want Northern Ireland politics to be trending on social media for the right reasons, including for creativity and delivery. Watch this space.

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