

Ibec President's Dinner

Speech of incoming President, Frank Gleeson



Thursday, 23 September 2021

Good evening everyone,

Welcome to our distinguished guests, as well as the staff and teams working so hard to deliver this event. It is terrific to stand here before you all in person this year.

I want to start by thanking the Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, who has kindly joined us this evening. The Government's support for the workforce and the business community throughout the pandemic has been critical to the survival of many sectors and we thank them for their efforts to date.

I also want to thank Alastair for his leadership and service to the Ibec cause over the past 12 months. Alastair took on the challenge of his Ibec presidency at a time of enormous pressure and change in the business community. Despite this, he helped us all navigate through a most difficult period with his usual professionalism and charm.

Thanks in advance to Imelda, for all the work and collaboration to come. I'm very excited for the journey ahead, together.

To Danny McCoy and the Ibec team – your tenacity, integrity, loyalty, and energy remains the catalyst for the positive impact Ibec can have on our country and the wider European landscape. This year, more than any other, your unwavering commitment to collaboration – through digitisation of meetings and innovation in approach – has brought renewed strength to Ibec members when so many could have fallen away or failed entirely. I look forward to driving, serving, and supporting you, your talented teams, as well as our members, in this ever-important year to come.

Special thanks to my colleagues in Aramark who have supported me and our business this year and as I step into my additional responsibility in 2022.

And finally, my wife Marian and my children – Aoibhinn, Michael, Jack, and Ella – thanks for the inspiration and support that allow me to do what I do, every day.

It is with great pride that I take on the role of Ibec President at such a pivotal moment in our country. None of us could have expected the longevity or severity of this pandemic and I am under no illusions as to the challenge that lies ahead.

Lives have been lost, jobs have been lost, businesses have failed, physical and mental health has been damaged, and our climate efforts have become even more important than ever.

Difficult and challenging as it has been, when I look around the Ibec community I am extremely confident that we can lead the recovery to follow.

In fact, I have the fortune – or misfortune – of having seen much of this turmoil before, having managed through two recessions over my career in business.

As the incoming President, I obviously have the task of looking ahead. But before I set out my “vision”, I want to talk about the other side of the coin: *‘Perspective’*.

C.S Lewis once said, “What you see and hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are”. That quote has resonated with me a lot in the context of the past 18 months. I’m a natural glass-half-full, never-give-up type of person who sees opportunity from adversity. I also relish the chance to show strength and try to grow from every passing challenge.

Everyone in this room is shaped by where they are now, and where they have come from – and I am no different in that regard. I do, however, make sure to acknowledge the importance of the elements that have shaped me... as a business leader, as a father, as a husband, and as a man.

While I stand here this evening as President of Ibec, and CEO of Aramark Northern Europe, business journey had more humble beginnings in the family restaurant and coffee shop business. I left school and spent my early years learning what it takes to serve customers from the ground up.

And while this is by no means an unusual start to working life in the 70s and 80s, I can honestly say that it had a transformative effect on me. I’m a strong believer in life-long learning – whether it’s in college or in the workplace, formal, or informal. I’m proud to say that this combination of learning experiences helped refine and shape how I look at things today.

With office return this week, I can’t wait to support, coach, and mentor my colleagues and clients as they come back to our sites. In fact, you might have seen our own Ibec HR Graduate, Roisín Flynn, on RTE news on Monday!

Roisín is a great example for the importance of Ireland’s re-opening. She faced a final year of university online, and even a virtual graduation. And despite the best efforts of the education sector, we all know this can’t compete with the the true potential of ‘in-person’ learning.

Today, we’re delighted to have her in our office so she can both learn from, and contribute to, our organisation from the absolute heart of things. Something, we will never take for granted again.

An appreciation for people has always been incredibly important to me. From the restaurants, to later roles in retail, fuel and forecourt convenience, boardrooms and

beyond, I have been engrained with an appreciation for service and hospitality that sets the precedent for everything that I do.

In the simplest terms, business success is about saying what you're going to do, and then doing it as well as you can – hopefully better than your competitors! Learning, growing, adapting, innovating... always striving to be the best you can be.

The other side to this story was the time I spent in business that have been successful and unsuccessful. For the Instagram generation, they'd say this gives me an "unfiltered" view of leadership.

With all of this in the 'pot of perspective' I turn to a quote from Albert Einstein. He said "Try not to be a man of success, but a man of value... A man of value gives more than he receives". And that's something I truly believe in.

Success or fail; strive or struggle; I am encouraged to know how battle-hardened, resilient, innovative, efficient, and hard-working the post-pandemic effort will be. Not to mention Brexit...

I can say for certain, that confidence in our resilience will define my term as Ibec President. In this way, I'm very proud of the purpose-driven, service-focused, and diverse role I get to play in Aramark and Avoca.

In Ireland, for example, this includes food services and catering, retail, property services, facilities management, and workplace solutions, and much more. While it's a lot to list off, it's even more interesting and challenging in operation.

Through this diversity in approach, I'm offered diversity in perspective. Tens of sectors, hundreds of sites, thousands of employees – all of which share a single commitment to have an impact wherever people work, learn, recover, and play.

Don't let the Tuxedo fool you, we truly are a 'roll up your sleeves' business. I will proudly carry a chip on my shoulder to ensure that we in Aramark and in Ibec don't leave anyone behind as we drive Ireland's post-Covid recovery.

A great example of this has been Ibec's 'Experience Economy' campaign. I'm completely invested in the intent, and I love how well the execution captures the collaborative mission of this group.

Ibec is for the many, not the few. To Reboot and Re-Imagine our economy, we depend on everyone – all of the businesses and people that lay the foundation to our economy.

This is particularly true of Tourism, Hospitality, Leisure, and Retail. Ireland is world renowned for a "Céad Mile Failte": a friendly, can-do attitude that has served our economy so well in the recent past. Despite the hardships of this pandemic and Brexit, I'm confident that our national hospitality culture will bounce back again.

Creating experiences that matter takes more people than most consumers could ever imagine. This event is a fantastic example of that – from event planners, to chefs, to service staff, to AV technicians, to food and drink suppliers and more, terrific consumer experience is the outcome of many hands at work.

As we say in Aramark, this mission is defined as “Together as One”.

One of the benefits of my role in a US-owned multinational, is the opportunity to lean into the global trends and insights at my disposal. Throughout the pandemic, I’ve seen the innovations, efforts, and campaigns from around the world – from Japan, China, and Korea, to Germany and Spain, to Canada and Chile. The best examples have a clear vision for the post-pandemic world.

Ibec’s ‘Reboot and Re-Imagine’ campaign is honestly one of the strongest and more considered examples that has come across my desk.

It is exhaustive; because we cannot make assumptions or take things for granted. It is holistic, leaving no sector or worker behind. And it is sustainable, taking care to understand and mitigate the emissions and carbon impacts of business on our planet.

When we think about the post-pandemic economy, it would be easy to seek the comfort of how things used to be. But we know comfort is the enemy of real progress.

Instead, we need a renewed focus on innovation, collaboration, and competition on a scale that we have never seen before – all underpinned by an awareness for the impact of industry on our planet. While the challenges of climate investment and economic hardship can create more risk, we shouldn’t forget that it also creates opportunity to do things differently. To do things more sustainably. To do things even better than before.

The sectors that I’m closest to – the workplace, retail, foodservices – will face more transformation than most. But I have no doubt that we can learn from each other to adapt and shape the next phase of Customer Experience.

One that demands we focus on safety-led, frictionless experiences. Despite challenges on labour, or the speed of demand for technology adoption, every organisation should be confident that they can proudly rise to the challenge to operate on the edge of the possible.

With so much at stake, we call on this group to continue to support, protect and encourage the game-changers, no matter how big or small the business leading the pack.

Under my Presidency, and with Imelda’s support, Ibec will champion an economy that is inclusive and beneficial for all – from businesses big and small, to workers, to local suppliers, to local partners, to local producers, and of course, our consumers.

Turning then to a message to the Government, so I may take this opportunity to set out my stall for the year ahead.

While we all must remain vigilant on Public Health advice, we also need to avoid the inconsistency, uncertainty and 'cliff edges' that put the most vulnerable of businesses and workforces at risk. Although we will always be eternally grateful for the support and subsidies that have been critical for the survival of our members, we also ask for the space and time to stand on our own two feet once more.

Finally, as I reflect on my successes, failures, values, and my vision for the year ahead, I want to leave you with a clear understanding that the best is yet to come. The next 12 months will be extremely challenging, and the road ahead is still unclear, but we can **rebuild** even better – maybe, in a way we never imagined.

Together, with government's support, with the business community's backing, and with the efforts of employers and workers across the country, we can drive this economy from the depths of pandemic to the height of our potential.

Thank you again for taking the time to be with us this evening.