

Coventry and Warwickshire Automotive Dinner – 12th November 2018

It is a pleasure to be with you all at Coombe Abbey for the Automotive dinner.

Thank-you to Jonathan Browning and his team for organising this dinner, and for all your efforts for Warwickshire's Automotive sector.

Jonathan's passion for great cars and outstanding engineering has taken him all over the world, and I'm delighted that our automotive industry has such a well-respected and high profile champion.

Of course, before he joined us, he was at British Cycling. We're all glad he got off his Bike and took this job!

It is a pleasure to follow Dr Ralf Speth. I've known Ralf for many years, since he was a graduate student at WMG.

From his excellent speech, I'm glad to say he obviously learned a lot!

Now, it's a great sin to speak for too long when the main courses are about to arrive, especially when you've had two excellent speeches already.

So I just want to reflect briefly on the past and future of the region's automotive sector.

In the industrial revolution, Coventry and Warwickshire became the home of new journeys - of bicycles, cars and aeroplanes.

The first car owned by a King began its journey in Warwickshire.

Millions had their lives changed because of the industry and innovative spirit of this city and county.

It was a combination of talent, vision, skills, infrastructure and innovation that put Coventry on the front rank of global car manufacturing.

Great Cars and Great Companies were created here.

Now, I came to Coventry in 1980.

Although our rich industrial heritage and skills remained, many thought our decline was inevitable.

The City and the County were being tested once more.

We saw independent companies close and a talented, dedicated workforce shrink and seep away.

Even Jaguar Land Rover once stood at the point of extinction.

There grew a belief that for Coventry, designing and making cars that wowed the world was a past glory.

Yet the spirit of renewal lived.

It lived in the workforce, the talents and the passion for cars of the region.

I came to Coventry to help our automotive industry by founding Warwick Manufacturing Group.

I had been told I was living in the past.

In Warwickshire, we needed our past to inspire the future.

For four decades now, I have worked with Coventry's businesses, suppliers, designers and engineers.

Many of the firms here tonight have long standing partnerships with WMG.

You have always inspired and motivated me.

We have endured some hard times together.

I remember when Ratan Tata last came to WMG.

The first time he came to Warwickshire, he thought there was no innovation capability left in the UK.

He even asked me why I wanted to send him to Coventry.

But I knew we had talent.

I had faith in our future.

I knew we had designers, and innovators and a supply chain hungry for a chance to shine.

I took him to see the companies we worked with at WMG.

Ratan was amazed at the quality of the people he met.

He saw that given an opportunity, we could do something extraordinary.

He saw the fantastic work small Coventry businesses were doing in advanced automotive design and supply.

So in 2005, Ratan brought the Tata Motors European Technical Centre to Coventry

In 2008, as we all know, Tata bought JLR.

Since then, Tata has invested on a vast scale.

Now JLR is spending three billion on product creation and capital investment in a single year.

That stands alongside the investment by Geely, by Horiba Mira, and by the LEP itself.

Over the last two decades, we have shown that automotive innovation is not merely our proud heritage, but our exciting future.

It took all of us, working together, to achieve this.

Now we must renew that leadership once more.

We do so in the face of much uncertainty.

Whatever your view of our future relationship with Europe, there's no doubt that it lacks a degree of clarity.

That places particular challenges on our industry, relying as we do on a European market for so much we produce.

What leadership do we need to overcome the challenges of today?

To prepare for the future, I think three issues require our sustained attention.

They are People, Products and Place.

We need to invest consistently in both.

For our people, it's essential that we offer growth and renewal.

I see this as a challenge of education and skills.

We need, all of us, to offer all of Coventry's people the chance to shine.

That means supporting education, investing in schools.

It means supporting our Universities and Colleges as they grow.

Crucially, it means offering apprenticeships and lifelong learning to all.

At WMG, I like to think we are playing our part in this work.

Our Academy for Young Engineers was founded in 2014 and has already become one of the best performing schools in the City, with ninety-eight per cent of our students leaving for further education and employment.

When we look across Warwickshire, we can see achievements such as the Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre, The Warwick Trident College, the MIRA Academy and Jaguar Land Rover's partnership with Warwickshire College's Apprenticeship Centre

We have an excellent network of schools, colleges and Universities in Warwickshire, but we must not be complacent.

Our challenge is to extend those opportunities to all our citizens.

We should ask ourselves if we're doing enough to help people grow after they leave full-time education.

Are we using the funding of the Apprenticeship levy to the maximum?

Are we offering lifelong learning to all our employees?

If skills retraining is needed, is it of the highest quality?

Are we offering our Business owners, especially in the SME sector, enough support to grow as leaders and managers?

We have hugely talented people in Coventry, and we must give them the chance to make the most of their abilities.

That means investing in and supporting professional and skills development.

How do we work together to ensure the leading firms pass on their learning to all our industry?

Next, we must ensure we invest in Coventry and Warwickshire as a place.

As we know, Business can invest anywhere in the world.

So we need to ensure our County is continually making itself attractive to global investors and entrepreneurs.

We have an excellent record of investment.

Our efforts at renewal must be sustained and consistent.

We need to ensure we invest in housing, in our road, bus and rail network, that we offer Business space and support to expand.

We are fortunate that, despite the pressures they face, Our Councils both stand willing to help, on everything from Connected vehicles to planning to the City of Culture - which will help attract potential recruits.

We need to do all we can to leverage that support for the good of the whole sector.

Finally, we need to invest in the next generation of Products.

At WMG, we're spending a billion over ten years on our new National Automotive Innovation Centre.

With our industry partners, we've invested over a hundred and forty million pounds on Battery research as part of our Energy Innovation Centre and will make a similar investment in the next two years.

As a city, we're leading work on creating a world leading environment for Connected and Autonomous vehicles, as UK Autodrive showed just last month.

We've seen world-leading firms like Horiba, Bosch, Ricardo and Geely, all here tonight, invest in our community.

We have world leaders in Motorsport, working on the cutting edge of high performance vehicles.

We're all know about the massive investment in Whitley, once more making Coventry a world leader in automotive innovation.

The scale of that investment is attracting others, from suppliers to entrepreneurs to scientists.

Thanks to our investment, our hard work and our faith in our people, Coventry has the critical mass of research, the talented people and the right attitude in our leaders to make things happen.

I want to close by paying tribute to all those who are working so hard for this new beginning.

Many of you are here today - from Business, our two Universities, the Councils and the LEP.

You know our proud past - as a cradle of innovation, a hub of industry and commerce, a titan of manufacture.

You know the skills, the dedication, the camaraderie of our people.

As leaders, we must now work to bring that heritage, that spirit of innovation, those valued skills together for our future.

If we do, we have a shining chance to improve lives, protect the environment, create prosperity and offer opportunity.

We can renew Coventry and Warwickshire by backing our people to create new products in this place.

Together, we can honour our past triumphs by investing in our future success.