

For most UK businesses – regardless of size or sector – success is intricately linked to the fortunes of the localities and regions in which they operate.

Across the country, there are tens if not hundreds of thousands of what I like to call ‘civic businesses’. These are firms with a deep and abiding commitment to their local communities, owned or managed by individuals who are passionate about the places where they live and work – and the life chances of the people they employ. Both UK- and foreign-owned, these companies believe that making a profit and making a local contribution go hand-in-hand.

For many of these civic-minded firms, the Prime Minister’s decision to go to the country came as an unwelcome distraction from the long-overdue task of fixing the fundamentals of the British economy. ‘More noise from the politicians at Westminster, rather than focusing on the practical stuff,’ was the refrain I heard repeatedly around the regions, even from those who understood the Prime Minister’s desire for a government requires a strong mandate to negotiate Brexit.

Civic businesses are the beating heart of Chamber business communities across the UK. Today, the British Chambers of Commerce publishes an election manifesto firmly focused on their needs.

The simple message to all political parties is that the 2017 General Election cannot – and must not – be just about Brexit.

The winner of this election could achieve the best Brexit deal possible, yet still preside over failure, if the barriers facing local and regional business communities here at home go unresolved. Fixing the fundamentals is all about skills, infrastructure, digital connectivity and local growth policies that enable UK firms to hire, invest, trade and build the future economy this country deserves.

To put it simply, the next government’s economic record will be judged as much about unlocking the potential of local business communities across the UK as it is about achieving a sensible Brexit deal. We need to hear a lot more about devolution and local growth during the election campaign if we want to see businesses powering the country through the Brexit transition and beyond.

The current government, with leadership from Business Secretary Greg Clark, has already begun to recognise the potential of our cities, towns and counties in the emerging Industrial Strategy. After the election, the next government must ensure that ‘place’ remains at its heart – building on the existing competitive advantages that our regions have to unlock the growth potential of the whole country. An Industrial Strategy that sweeps away the practical barriers to local growth will do more for the UK’s bottom line than backing the latest technological fad.

The next government must also set a far clearer long-term view on devolution – both within England and to the devolved nations. In many English business communities, frustrations run high at the lack of progress on the transfer of power and resources

away from Whitehall, which means that crucial decisions are often delayed and much-needed investments go unfunded. Clear decisions are needed around who has responsibility for what, who takes decisions, and who pays.

As we leave the EU, a new UK regional development funding system is needed, too – as infrastructure and training programmes in many of the nations and regions have long been bolstered by EU structural funds. This system should give areas the autonomy needed to enable them to use monies flexibly for local growth priorities, rather than be dictated and over-managed from the centre.

The next government will also need to work with local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, quangos and Devolved Administrations to up their game. Procurement policies will need to be reshaped to better account for their impact on local growth. And the next government must put in place rules that prevent public sector bodies from trying to replicate the work done by private sector firms in the provision of business support. This results in the misuse of taxpayers' funding to compete with and undercut the work of established businesses, and generates mistrust on both sides.

The civic businesses that drive prosperity and job creation in our towns, cities and counties deserve more than just a 'Brexit election'. The parties vying to form the next government must demonstrate that they will put in place the policies that give these businesses the confidence to take risks, train, hire, export and invest during a decade of transition and change. The decisions that are made about the shape of the UK's domestic business environment over the next five years will matter as much – if not more – than the eventual Brexit deal to our future prosperity. It's high time for Westminster to recognise this – and to act accordingly.