

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and thank you for inviting me to speak with you.

Business leaders, are frequently asked to talk about economic issues, about Brexit, about our education system and the wide range of factors that affect our economy, our enterprises and our national competitiveness. Our topic today covers many of these important issues but perhaps not in the usual fashion. As a company, Virgin Media is supportive of diversity and inclusivity inside and outside our workforce. This is because we **know** that these are factors which support our competitiveness and market standing as a digital, broadband and entertainment leader. But most importantly because they are the essentials of an ethical approach to Business.

As you may know, Virgin is the owner of the TV3 Group, and as part of the upcoming season I would urge you to watch our documentary series 'True Lives' which, among other issues, will include a programme on Syrian refugees, their arrival and integration into a community in the west of Ireland. The programme focusses on the many challenges facing the group and indeed their host community as they seek to make a fresh start away from war and suffering in the Middle East. It's a very human thought provoking story and a source of pride for our Broadcasting team. And very topical for today's discussion.

The group of people we are speaking of here today are amongst the most vulnerable in our society.

They **don't know** what the future holds from one day to the next, we can only imagine the uncertainty and anxiety they constantly feel at the lack of clarity and the indeterminate nature of the processes that we have put them through. It is also a poor reflection on our better selves – because in our country there are people living in a form of internal exile.

Ireland is the land of **the open secret**. In terms of secrecy, usually it's best if a secret can be uncovered. However, it's an odd thing, and perhaps a peculiarly Irish one, that some of our most conspicuous failures were never secrets at all.

On the subject of asylum seekers, there isn't any secret. The facts have been in the open for years, and as a society we have simply ignored the issue. We employ again, the same strategies that we employed before. We first physically separate people and by doing so we make them a group apart. This deadens responsibilities, and it leaves those we now call 'them' not as individuals with real lives and single stories, but as an anonymous group, who are seen as a problem.

Is it our long suffering asylum seekers who spend years in cramped accommodation, with shared cooking facilities and a weekly pittance to call their own? Thankfully overt hostility is limited, and we also thankfully have a marked absence of a far-right anti-immigrant movement. However, it's as if morally, physically and economically we have first omitted and then '**othered**' asylum seekers from our society. And because they're just out of sight, they are beyond the scope of the public mind and the public conversation.

I'm really conscious that we have today a panel of former asylum seekers who have successfully integrated into the Irish workforce and Irish society. As a business leader my first thought towards them is; thank you. Thank you for enlarging our society and our culture. Thank you for bringing your unique culture energy and your skills. Thank you **most of all** for bringing the energy and commitment that comes with starting a new life, in a different country with a **different** culture and tradition. I believe Ireland is a better place because you're here and we are lucky to have you.

There are many aspects of government policy which can be described as baffling. Asylum policy seems constructed to make sure the cold welcome we give people will ensure applications are reduced and a by-product of that approach is to ensure integration will be non-existent. The failure to integrate is a critical mistake as we have seen time and time again in European countries which have far higher emigrant populations. Notwithstanding the integration issue Ireland is reaching a near full employment situation with over 2 million people now at work and the rate of unemployment is likely to drop below 6% in the near future.

The pace of economic growth is such that there are a range of pressure points in the labour market which will impact on our country's competitive progress. The availability of skills and talent is one such factor and it would make a lot of sense to enable our new immigrant population to gain qualifications and to join the workforce in a productive capacity, sooner than later.

The modern Ireland which began to emerge only tentatively in the 1960s, was by any comparison with the rest of the western world, an extraordinarily homogenous place.

There was a sameness and a self-imposed limitation on what we could do and deliver. As generation after generation of our youngest and best people left, we somehow shrivelled and became smaller because **we** were left behind by the wider world.

The turning point came when **we** turned **outwards**.

Creating opportunity over the nearly sixty years since the 1960s, albeit with marked downturns, created wealth to invest in education, in housing, and in health.

This came from our successful engagement with the world including the then EEC.

We can only prosper as a small nation, on an underpopulated island on the margins of Europe if we firstly embrace and then succeed in a global environment.

That requires competing and succeeding at the level of individual enterprises. It means delivering at government level in critical policy and infrastructure, and realising that though we are located on an island, we cannot thrive by being apart. We are deeply connected to the world and to its problems and opportunities. And along with the opportunities we pursue comes responsibilities to participate and to contribute.

Enforced idleness doubles down on the ‘othering’ and the isolation that I spoke of earlier.

It increases costs to the state, which then filter into public conversation as resentment. It diminishes the self-worth and the self-esteem of those unable to contribute to our society.

Equality and justice, are **hallmarks** of societies that prosper.

It is a strength of our society that so many, not just asylum seekers, have chosen to come here.

It’s also potentially a great story of excitement and enhancement. But to be successful that difference must be celebrated, and newcomers accepted. With over 12% of our population from ethnic and racial minorities, a thriving Ireland is now a place of people from many backgrounds.

We can all see that fundamental demographic change has already happened and will be lasting. Many people from ethnic minorities are native Irish, many more are Irish citizens. This shows we can build an Ireland where there is no ‘them and us’, only ‘us together’.

In Virgin Media Ireland we recognise we are lucky to have approximately 15% of our workforce who come from abroad. Our diversity makes for a much better company and ultimately a much more successful Irish business. We want to be a Business that reflects modern Ireland.

As we await legislation based on the recent Supreme Court ruling and as a leading employer we are happy to play our part in the greater diversity that new legislation should enable. I sincerely hope asylum seekers, once they are freed to work, will seek and achieve roles within Virgin Media

So in conclusion ladies and gentlemen.

Justice, equality and diversity are essential attributes of a successful and civilised society. All countries have a right and an obligation to police and to protect their borders. But in Ireland we have had a vacuum in asylum policy that has led to a group of vulnerable people being marginalised and forgotten. Worse still the absence of policy has been aggravated by an endless process that consumes, eats up people's lives, including the lives of children.

Do **you** remember when you were five and couldn't wait to be six? You told everyone you were five and a half... Time seemed to go so slowly, because you were restless to grow up.

Imagine if you can, that time taken from a child. Year after year, when you are not like other children. You don't enjoy the same life. You can't plan for fulfilment of the same hopes, nor can your parents or family.

Well that is the reality of direct provision, and that's not good enough.

We **can** protect our borders, we can have an effective immigration policy that lives within our international obligations. We can have processes in place that make decisions fairly and promptly and we can have those processes underpinned by an appeals procedure that offers safeguards. We can also have implementation measures that properly assess rights to asylum and deal with cases that are found to be non-genuine.

BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY... We can be a generous, open and welcoming society that offers much to those who come especially as they seek refuge from the **worst** that our World has to offer.

The story of immigration therefore is one of **new beginnings** and **new opportunity**. And what we do **today**, will define how **WE** are remembered long into the future.

Thank you very much.