

# A voice for the business community

David Senior reviews Professor Bob Bennett's tome on chambers of commerce

**T**HE interest of most chamber members is in their chamber's current activities: the lobbying for or against a particular government policy or news of a new service. Only at AGMs or in occasional policy statements by the president or chief executive is there an opportunity to put these individual initiatives in a wider context.

It is therefore particularly welcome when a well-informed outsider can look inwards at a chamber or the whole chamber network over a period of time and see how the business community was able to develop means of working together to influence public policy and bring about reform.

Professor Robert Bennett spent some time in the 1990s looking at the British Chamber network with its then director-general, the late Ron Taylor, and reviewing how it might best serve the needs of the business community in the 21st Century.

That project clearly whetted Professor Bennett's interest in the whole chamber scene – an area which, apart from a few individual chamber histories, has not attracted much strategic interest, despite the contributions of many thousands of business leaders over more than two centuries.

Bennett has now filled this gap with a

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monumental work – *Local Business Voice: the History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland and Revolutionary America 1760-2011*. In nearly one thousand pages, Bennett looks at how businessmen came together, the subjects which interested them and the policies they advocated and challenged – with varying outcomes.

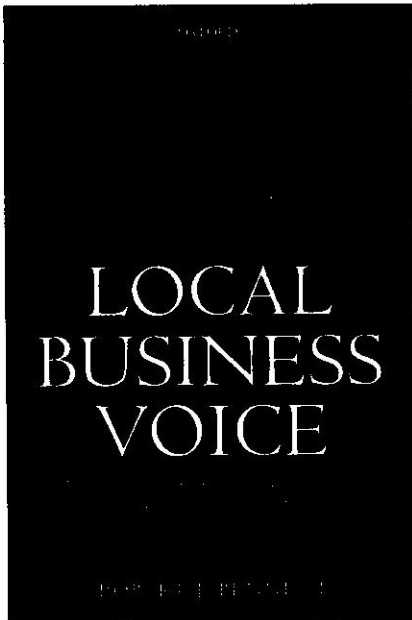
He identifies such pioneers as Malachy Postlethwayt, who, as early as the 1750s, wrote extensively on trade matters and on the commercial rivalry with France, suggesting that Britain could learn from the "superior role of French institutions" and – of particular current interest – her support for manufacturing industry. A century later, ideas for the role and structure of

chambers of commerce were further refined through the work of men such as Leone Levi, who played a leading role in the creation of the Liverpool Chamber.

Bennett outlines the growth of chambers in major British industrial and port cities in the 19th Century and describes the various attempts to set up a permanent chamber in London, which were frustrated by government opposition. Bennett does not explain why, after so many setbacks, the initiative to set up the London Chamber in 1881 finally did succeed – perhaps because it had the full support of Sir William McArthur, who as Lord Mayor, an MP, an international merchant and a prominent Methodist churchman had the influence and the range of contacts to bring the enterprise to success.

This book is a major work of scholarship, filling many gaps in our knowledge of the role of the business community and its leaders in influencing policy and ensuring that institutions were created that could establish constructive dialogue with national and local government and ultimately with international organisations such as the European Union. It provides an unrivalled source of information and reference for anyone with an in-depth interest in the background and history of chambers of commerce.

David Senior was deputy director of London Chamber of Commerce, 1983 - 1989



*Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland and Revolutionary America 1760-2011* by Professor Robert J. Bennett. Published by Oxford University Press