I'VE not always agreed with the Chambers of Commerce. To my mind, they are all too often trying to protect vested business interests than working to build a high-value economy that benefits everybody.

I had a run-in with national Chambers in the early 2000s around devolution. They were extremely sceptical, arguing against the additional costs a directly elected Assembly might potentially bring.

Paying a few pounds per person embodied everything for them malignant about 'red tape', bringing only direct costs for their members. Their beady eye for the balance sheet stopped them seeing the indirect benefits of regional self-determination or a powerful North Eastern in Westminster.

But their accountants’ gaze proved invaluable this week when the North East Chambers cast their eye over the recently released Treasury Brexit impact assessments. They spotted that, under the most likely scenario, leaving the European trade area is going to cost the North East 16% of GDP.

And to their great credit, the Chamber didn't mince their words, accusing the Government of taking us for idiots. In a finely argued piece, their policy director Ross Arnold argued the only Brexit win possible was avoiding the coming economic meltdown that our expulsion will bring.

To put it into comparison, that 16% drop is comparable to the shock that Eastern European countries experienced with the collapse of socialism. But in contrast to the case of Poland, which immediately began a protracted bounce-back, the Brexit costs are a long-term permanent loss.

Poland's economy is now five times larger than when communism collapsed. The strongest driver of economic growth in Poland was a massive inflow of investment into the country.

This was partly driven by wage differentials, but the most important factor was its everincreasing integration with the European Union, firstly through foreign aid, then preparing to join, and finally in full membership.

Poland's real growth spurt came around its accession into the EU in 2004 when trade barriers within Europe disappeared. Despite what leading Conservatives say, we shouldn't trivialise the massive burden that trade regulations impose.

I organised a conference in 2001 in Gdansk, and the opaque tariffs we had to pay to bring in our own programmes, publicity material and even delegate bags almost broke us. Fast forward to 2005 and, freed of these barriers, we devoted all our energy to organising a fascinating and enjoyable event.

So what Ross saw in these Brexit scenarios are the corrosive drain of these newly imposed bureaucracy that many Chamber members face next year. If you face a fine of a hundred thousand euros for every hour late your components arrive at Fiat in Turin, then three hours at a customs post in Calais is suddenly an expensive luxury.

When we're expelled The Chamber urges politicians to tell us now what they secretly know that's going to stop us facing the Common External Tariff when we leave the EU in 2019. Because the simple if unpalatable truth is that the World Trade Organisation's Most From the EU in 2019, it'll take several years to negotiate a Favoured Nation rules mean that once you're outside the Customs Union, you face the same tariffs as everyone else.

In the meanwhile, here in the North East we are abandoned by Westminster to a future of poverty. So now's the time to draw the same conclusions that the Chamber do, even if it's too politically unpalatable to explicitly name.

We have to stop Brexit, stay in the Single Market, and devote our energies to building a knowledgeintensive and high-productivity economy that benefits both bosses and workers. ? Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Enschede in the Netherlands.