

Partners in a globalised world

By GILES PAXMAN

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO MEXICO



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was Minister and Deputy Head of Mission in Paris before his appointment as Ambassador to Mexico. He has also served as Counsellor, Political and Institutional Affairs in Brussels at the UK Permanent Representation to the EU; Counsellor, Economic and Commercial Affairs in Rome; Head of Chancery in Singapore; and worked on Environment, Consumer Affairs and the Internal Market in Brussels. As the UK representative in Mexico he has been working to further strengthen commercial, political, cultural and bilateral relations between the two countries, through programmes like the Global Opportunities Fund and the Chevening Scholarships.

When I arrived in Mexico three and a half years ago, one of my first trips was to the town of Real del Monte in the hills to the north of Mexico City. As we drove into this small mining community, the roadside stalls incongruously advertised 'delicious pasties'. My host explained, over mouthfuls of an extremely hot and tasty pineapple and bean pasty, that miners from Cornwall had brought with them their favourite local delicacy when they came to Mexico early in the 19th century, equipped with the most modern technology of the day to re-open the rich local seams. Their names and legacy live on in the charming 'English Cemetery' overlooking the town and in the games of football played each week throughout Mexico.

This experience was repeated in countless variations over subsequent months. I came to understand just how much British engineers, traders and industrialists had contributed to Mexican economic development since Britain became the first country to recognise Mexican independence in 1823. Mexican friends would excitedly point out that an English architect had designed this, or a Scottish engineer built that. Today, Britain remains a major investor in Mexico and our bilateral trade has been increasing rapidly since the signature of the EU/Mexico Free Trade Agreement. We could, however, do much better. There is no shortage of opportunities in Mexico for companies that take the trouble to look. Indeed, many British companies see Mexico not just as a market in itself but as an excellent way to access North America through NAFTA.

Today's Mexico is a very different country from the land of cactuses, sombreros and mariachis that many British people think they know. The mariachis are still there, but so are a large, young, dynamic workforce; a market of 107 million consumers; huge biodiversity; abundant natural resources; marvellous beaches; scenery and culture; and a 2,000 mile border with the US. That is why most analysts and commentators now recognise Mexico as one of the key emerging economies. Like most countries, Mexico has been hit by the economic crisis and, like many, it needs to do more to improve its competitiveness in a globalised economy, but the trend for this country, which is already the world's 12th largest economy, is resolutely upwards.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Britain's relationship with Mexico has broadened and deepened over recent years. In the UK we have come to realise that Mexico can be a powerful ally on key issues of

the global agenda such as multilateral trade, climate change and modernising the international institutions. Meanwhile, under President Calderón, Mexico has been seeking to diversify its economic relations and play a more pro-active role on the world stage. Britain has been supporting these ambitions. Increasingly, British and Mexican ministers and officials are to be found comparing notes in the corridors of the world's international meeting places. And increasingly we are finding that when we work together, as a long established industrialised democracy and a rapidly emerging new global player, there is much that we can achieve together that we cannot achieve separately.

Climate change is a case in point and an area where President Calderón has been providing strong, clear leadership. Mexico was the first emerging economy to publish a climate change strategy and will soon be the first to bring forward a detailed action plan for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. By doing this they have shown that it is possible to pursue policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality whilst at the same time laying the foundations of the new low carbon economy of the future. Over recent years, therefore, Britain has been keen to collaborate with Mexico as it strengthens its democracy, builds strong institutions and strives to compete more effectively in the globalised economy. We have been doing so not just through our day-to-day diplomatic contacts, but also through programmes such as the Strategic Programme Fund and the Sustainable Development Dialogue (see inset).

At the same time, and with the help of the British Council, we have been helping up to 2,000 young Mexicans to enrol at British universities every year, and many more to come to the UK to study English. There, they meet British students over a glass of Mexican beer and a plate of nachos or enchiladas. At the same time, young British tourists are travelling to Mexico in ever larger numbers – second only to the US and Canada. This increasing fascination amongst our young people in what is going on in each other's countries is perhaps the best investment in the future of our bilateral relationship.

Meanwhile, the British diplomatic presence in Mexico has been growing to match the increasing range and variety of our bilateral relationship. President Calderón's State Visit to the UK is not just a recognition of this increasing closeness. It will also provide a basis for even closer relations in future.

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