

# Energising bilateral commerce

## INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS SLADEN MBE

VICE PRESIDENT, BRITISH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN MEXICO AND COUNTRY HEAD, BP MEXICO



**CHRIS SLADEN** graduated in geology from Southampton University and holds a doctorate from Reading University. During his 28-year career with BP he has lived and worked in more than 40 countries, including Russia (Siberia), Vietnam, Mongolia and China. He is author of more than 25 publications on energy, including industry trends and technology and is a sought-after keynote speaker at many conferences worldwide. In 2001, he was made Professor Emeritus at the State University of Irkutsk in Russia and in 2002, he was awarded an MBE for his contribution to promoting investment and commerce.

### **How would you sum up the role of the Chamber in the development of UK-Mexican trade and investment? What do you regard as its most significant achievements to date?**

The British Chamber of Commerce in Mexico was established in 1921 and since then has been active in contributing towards mutual understanding and co-operation in UK-Mexican commerce and business. Perhaps the most significant achievement is the very fact that the Chamber has prospered for more than 85 years, and continues to grow and attract new members.

The Chamber has around 250 members, including large, medium and small companies predominantly of Mexican & British origin, but also of many other nationalities, as well as overseas members and individuals. Members come from a wide selection of business sectors including education, energy, finance, healthcare, legal, travel & tourism, to name just a few. In total, the Chamber regularly reaches out to well over 5,000 people in the world of commerce.

Within the Chamber, you can find members with immense knowledge of doing business in Mexico, and in total, there are many thousands of years of experience! Some of our senior members have been active in commerce in Mexico for over 60 years; they are a fount of knowledge for people who wish to understand the realities and practicalities of conducting business in the country.

A key characteristic of Chamber members is their willingness to share experiences and discuss the issues relating to business in Mexico. In my own case, I would like to thank all the members who have helped me develop an understanding of Mexico since my arrival in 2001, and I continue to find the Chamber a place for enormous insights into business in the country.

### **How do the Chamber's activities complement those of organisations such as UKTI? What unique products and services can it offer UK companies doing business in Mexico and vice versa?**

A principle activity of the Chamber is to organise events – sometimes breakfasts, lunches or larger all day conferences – which enable members to interact and meet key players in a particular sector. These events provide a deep understanding of business in Mexico. The Chamber typically organises 30-40 such events every year, and is without doubt one of the most active Chambers in Mexico. Many of Mexico's ministers and key decision

makers, past and present, have given speeches at events organised by the Chamber, as well as the heads of leading institutions, regulatory bodies, visiting CEOs and business experts, and also Ambassadors of various countries. For all of us in the Chamber, these events have helped enhance our comprehension of Mexico, how our business world is evolving, and what one can anticipate in the future. This all helps when shaping business plans, creating sustainable businesses and deciding investment strategies.

The Chamber also offers a range of services including provision of office space, an extensive database of business contacts, a 'Bolsa de Trabajo' service for people seeking job opportunities, regular newsletters and information. I recommend the Chamber website ([www.britchamexico.com](http://www.britchamexico.com)) as an excellent place to begin to find out about our activities.

We work closely with UKTI and other government institutions, both in Mexico and the UK. Equally important, we also have links to numerous Chambers of Commerce and other business organisations throughout the UK, Mexico and other countries and this can be of help for companies interested in investing. Amongst our Mexican members are many of the country's leading companies, which I think reflects the importance and relevance that they see in connections and trade with the UK.

### **As the organisation's incoming President, what is your vision for the future of the Chamber? Do you favour closer cooperation with government or a more independent approach?**

First, I would like to congratulate the current President, Vicente Armendáriz, not just for his work over the last two years as President, but for a lifetime of service to developing the Chamber. And I would also like to acknowledge most warmly the dedication of the many past-Presidents and other individuals who work tirelessly to develop the Chamber, bringing benefits to its members whilst broadening and deepening the Chamber's reach. All these people have volunteered, and continue to do so, their experience and valuable time totally free of charge. I intend to continue those traditions whilst developing the Chamber to meet members' requirements in a rapidly changing global business landscape.

Going forward, I see not just greater collaboration with governments but also closer co-operation with many other institutions and organisations. I see a future that has many more 'joint activities' and 'joint events',

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and an increasingly diverse membership.

I would like the Chamber to expand its relationship with universities so that students who are interested in business can hear about the real-life experiences of doing business in Mexico, the UK and elsewhere, and be better-prepared for entering the business world. Also, I think we can do more to support young entrepreneurs who are creating their own companies and getting started in business in Mexico.

There is no doubt that 2009 will offer many challenges, particularly in view of the current world economic recession. At the Chamber, we are working on various ways to assist our members; this includes simple actions such as freezing our Chamber membership fees, but also, far more importantly, developing a programme of events featuring key speakers and leading authorities who can analyse the economic situation and discuss their expectations going forward. We have already held five events along this theme in the first two months of 2009, all of which have been very well attended.

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### **What is your view of the current state of the UK-Mexican economic relationship? Where do you see the greatest potential for its expansion?**

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During the time that I have been living in Mexico, the economic relationship has clearly grown. Notably, there have been very large investments in both directions, from Mexico to the UK, for example CEMEX, and from the UK to Mexico, for example HSBC. The growing relationship is also seen in our Chamber membership which has increased steadily over the last 5 years; it is a signal of what is happening. As Mexico seeks to diversify its markets, and as reforms bring new investment opportunities in Mexico, I see this as being reflected in an ever closer and deeper relationship.

No doubt you have seen the study that suggests Mexico's economy will expand rapidly over the next 30 years to become the world's fifth largest economy by 2040. This assertion is under-pinned by Mexico's large, young, workforce, good levels of education, a land and seas rich in natural resources and energy and a key geographic location. So, I see potential for expansion in almost every sector.

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### **How significant, in your view, is President Calderon's State Visit to the UK? What do you expect it to achieve in concrete terms?**

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I see the visit in the context of a deepening relationship between Mexico and the UK. I see an opportunity for the leadership of two of the world's most dynamic countries and economies to share understanding and insights on world issues and on the challenges that each country faces, and to increase the network of contacts that each country has. I see it as an opportunity for Mexico to more deeply understand the culture, heritage, skills and values of the UK, and vice versa. Both countries face challenges

of sustainability for economies and businesses, and issues such as long-term security of energy supplies. In concrete terms, I believe the State Visit can and will bring both countries closer together which ultimately will bring many tangible benefits in terms of policies and approaches to world issues, investment, sustainable business, the environment, education for example.

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### **What kind of delegation will the Chamber be bringing to London for the visit and what sort of programme can the delegates expect?**

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We anticipate around 20 Chamber members will be active in an extensive programme of events that have been designed to coincide with the State Visit. To help in creating the programme, we have collaborated with numerous organisations such as ProMéxico, Canning House, the CBI, The Mexican Foreign Trade Council (COMCE) and the London Chamber of Commerce & Industry, to name just a few. The programme will enable our members to 'network' so as to meet new contacts and potential business partners, and also to attend events that help create a better understanding of doing business between the UK and Mexico, as well as to see and discuss the investment opportunities that exist.

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### **Your own company, BP, has had business in Mexico for many years; how do you see Mexico's energy sector developing in the medium term and what opportunities exist for companies like BP?**

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Our business presence in Mexico covers approximately 50 years, 95 per cent or more of our staff are Mexican, and our activities focus on trade of oil & gas and other products. Amongst the items that we sell into Mexico are natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), liquefied natural gas (LNG), a wide range of lubricants and also aluminium. And from Mexico, we purchase various other products, notably crude oil from PEMEX. We also collaborate on technology & science with PEMEX, the Mexican Petroleum Institute and with leading Universities across the country.

The energy reforms which were passed in October 2008 will offer the opportunity for new and different forms of contract in the industry. We will be looking closely to see how these contract models develop over the next year as they may bring new investment opportunities. We believe we have many skills and technology that can contribute to meeting Mexico's future energy security, so that its economy can continue to grow and prosper. For example, we are recognised as a world leader in offshore deepwater exploration, production & technology. We are well known for our skills in finding large new oil & gas fields and also as a leader in alternative energy development & innovation. With these qualities, I believe, BP can contribute to both the medium and long term challenges of sustaining and further developing the industry in Mexico. **F**