

# An important relationship

## INTERVIEW WITH BEN CHAPMAN MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY VIETNAM GROUP



**BEN CHAPMAN**

has spent his career mainly in the Civil Service. Latterly has served as Commercial Counsellor in the UK Embassy in Beijing (1987-90) and as Director of the DTI for the North West (1991-95). His roots are in North-West England and he has represented the constituency of Wirral South since 1997. In the course of his Parliamentary career he has served as Minister of State at the Departments of the Environment, Transport & the Regions (1997-99), DTI (1999-2001) and Culture Media & Sport (2001-05). He has served on numerous Select and Backbench Committees and he presently chairs the All Party Parliamentary Vietnam Group.

### Please explain the remit and role of the Vietnamese All Party Group which you Chair.

The All Party Group for Vietnam, of which I am the Chairman, comprises politicians from both Houses who take an interest in Vietnam. In our bilateral relationship with Vietnam it is very important to nurture the links between the legislatures and we are making a priority of developing the relationship between the National Assembly of Vietnam and the UK Parliament. In a sense this relationship reflects the wider development of relations with Vietnam which are becoming ever closer. We conduct our exchanges via formal visits and review trade, investment, political and social issues. As Vietnam develops politically, economically and socially, the areas where our cooperation can flourish are increasing and the role of the All Party Parliamentary Vietnam Group becomes even more relevant.

I believe the relationship with Vietnam is very important both in economic and political terms. Vietnam's non-permanent seat on the Security Council makes it a pivotal nation in Asia; there are clear commercial opportunities; we have a significant Vietnamese community in the UK and Vietnam is becoming an increasingly open society – so building the relationship at all levels is very important for the UK's national interest. I believe the All Party group performs a key role in this regard and acts as a friendly counterpart organisation as well as being able to conduct frank and open discussions with our Vietnamese counterparts.

### The Vietnamese economy is growing at some 8 per cent per annum. To what extent are you involved in encouraging trade and investment?

Our commercial relationship with Vietnam is currently more investment rather than trade based. The UK has significant investments in Vietnam with companies such as BP, Shell and Premier Oil as well as Prudential which is a major employer. I think there are important opportunities in the service sector – especially higher and further education and environmental consultancy as well as high-end manufacturing products. The Vietnamese do have a significant advantage in having lower labour costs for a highly skilled workforce and they will be moving up the manufacturing value chain in the years to come. Vietnam will also gain considerably from their recent accession to the WTO though membership does bring challenges and responsibilities.

### Do you sense that the Vietnamese are serious about economic liberalisation and integrating their economy not only with the ASEAN region but the wider global economy?

I am certain that this is their intention but there is always a dichotomy between what is still a communist structure and the capitalist system and it is matching the two together that is the key issue for Vietnam. Given Vietnam's communist heritage they are liberalising in a way that fits with their development goals – it appears that the economic process is moving forward without implications for the political process. Traditional thinking postulates that political and economic liberalisation are closely linked – one flows from the other, but in the case of Vietnam, and indeed China, this theory needs to be re-examined. I also think that in some circumstances a centralised leadership and rigid planning cycles can combine effectively with a capitalist approach and Vietnam is demonstrating this.

### What is your personal experience of Vietnam – your relationship with the people, the authorities – what are your impressions?

I have visited Vietnam on holiday and business and have always enjoyed a wholly positive experience. They are friendly, intelligent, hard-working people and I have had no difficulties on any level. Vietnam is a country of rich diversity – between the business and Government sectors, the diversity of landscape and the urban-rural variations, for example Ho Chi Minh City and the Central Highlands. We would do well to develop an enduring relationship with the Vietnamese people.

### What are the implications for the Prime Minister's visit to the UK?

I think the visit of the Prime Minister of Vietnam, HE Nguyen Tan Dung, is indicative of the rapidly growing relationship with Vietnam and is to be wholly welcomed. There are a range of mutually beneficial opportunities that will be discussed from the political, commercial and social aspects. It is very encouraging that the Prime Minister will be accompanied by a major business delegation and this will provide a good platform for the exchange of commercial ideas. The Prime Minister's visit is a very important step towards an ever closer relationship with Vietnam which both countries wish to expand and deepen. 