



**Introduction by
The Rt Hon Lord Hurd
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Chairman, FIRST
Advisory Council**

The current visit of President Aliyev to Britain is particularly timely. He is of course no stranger to this country. I have a vivid recollection of joining in the welcome he received on his first visit as President in December 2004. My memory stretches back to earlier discussions with his distinguished father, the chief architect of the modern Azerbaijan, who impressed everybody with his spirited sense of Azerbaijan's interests, always expressed with a robust wit.

Britain and Azerbaijan have different political systems and this fact will occasionally result in moments of friction and criticism. But more important is the solid base for co-operation between us. Both countries have a substantial and practical interest in the stability of the Caucasus. We in Britain recognise that Azerbaijan nowadays plays a global as well as regional role of increasing importance. Our Ambassador to Azerbaijan recently reaffirmed on behalf of Her Majesty's Government that the UK supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the solution of regional conflicts in accordance with international law.

Because of our close economic links with Azerbaijan we welcome the memorable fact that she has possessed the fastest growing economy in the world during each of the last three years, with GDP growth of over 20 per cent, per year. The UK is the largest foreign

investor in Azerbaijan, primarily within the oil sector. The prospects for further development are bright. The recent successful visit of the Duke of York served to focus attention on the fact that some 150 British companies are active in Azerbaijan, taking advantage of its massive opportunities. These opportunities spread from oil and gas through the field of financial services, in particular banking, insurance and leasing through infrastructure projects to consumer goods across a wide range of choice. The opportunities for our higher education sector are striking.

Given the central position of the expanding oil and gas industry in the prosperity of Azerbaijan and in the prospects for co-operation between our two countries, we in Britain follow closely the policy of President Aliyev in organising this expansion. We welcome the remarks which he recently made in Moscow about the needless politicisation of some of the relevant issues. It is in all our interests that oil and gas should flow without political complications to all destinations where it is needed for sustainable growth. This year negotiations for the Nabucco pipe line, now reaching their crucial stage, are a notable part of this process.

President Aliyev will find no shortage of issues for discussion, and no shortage of friends of Azerbaijan in Britain who will welcome him as a leader of a country with whom our links grow steadily closer and more fruitful. **F**