



Foreword by
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 Minister of State
 for Foreign and
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 United Kingdom

Opposite:
 Jeremy Browne MP meets
 HE Juan Manuel Santos,
 President of Colombia

It is a great pleasure to welcome President Santos and his delegation to the United Kingdom. The President has long-standing strong personal and professional links to our country, but this is his first visit as President. It could not come at a better time: this is an exciting moment for our bilateral relationship.

It is now a year since William Hague became the first Foreign Secretary to give the Canning lecture. In his speech he set out his vision for a step-change in the UK's relations with Latin America, building on our considerable historical links with the region. This is a long-term project at the heart of our foreign policy plans, and it is something that this Government feels very strongly about.

Our relationship with Colombia is already close, and has been for many years. We want President Santos's visit to signal the start of an even deeper, broader partnership. It has been clear to me on my own visits to Colombia that it has the potential to be one of Latin America's great success stories. It is already an emerging power with a diversified economy, a growing middle class and a strong, democratic central government. Colombia's economy grew by 4.3 per cent in 2010, with similarly strong growth forecast over the next five years. It has achieved macroeconomic stability.

It is important not to forget the context in which this has taken place. Colombia is addressing a legacy of over fifty years of armed conflict. In the 1990s the country was on the brink of political, social and economic collapse. Since then the security situation has changed dramatically. There has been significant reduction of cocaine production, while murder and kidnapping rates have sharply decreased.

A new Colombia is emerging, but significant challenges remain, particularly in the area of human rights and access to justice. Many human rights defenders and other members of civil society face threats and intimidation. Some are killed for the work

they do. Although the rate of prosecution for extra-judicial killings is improving, impunity for these crimes is still a serious concern.

It was an honour for me to attend President Santos's inauguration in 2010 on behalf of the British Government and hear the visionary speech in which he stated his strong commitment to reform and modernisation. He has set out an ambitious programme in the areas of governance, equality, prosperity and security and committed to a policy of zero tolerance of human rights abuses.

We have already seen important examples of these pledges being put into practice. I congratulate President Santos on the passage of the flagship Victims and Land Restitution Law, which aims to return land to millions of displaced people and compensate victims. The state intelligence agency DAS, which had been responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses, has been disbanded. In September, in a landmark judgment, its former head was found guilty of criminal conspiracy for providing right-wing militias with lists of leftist activists and trade union leaders, some of whom were subsequently killed or imprisoned. Important blows are being delivered to the FARC, which threatens Colombian security and stability.

So, the Republic of Colombia is at a pivotal moment of change at which it enjoys the leadership of a strong President with a strong mandate and vision for his country. President Santos's administration, like the British Government I am part of, will continue until at least 2015. We want to take the opportunity this offers to take our bilateral relationship to a new level.

Despite Colombia's strong economic credentials, at present it is only the UK's fifth largest export market in Latin America. There is so much more potential to be realised. We have set ourselves the target of doubling UK trade with Colombia by 2015. The signs are extremely positive: the export of UK goods to Colombia grew over 30 per cent in 2010 and has grown even faster

in the first half of 2011. It is important and encouraging that the range of sectors in which UK companies are doing business in Colombia is growing. We are supporting this by identifying UK expertise of particular interest to the Colombian Government in support of their modernisation plans. We hope the EU/Andean Multi Party Trade Agreement will cause our commercial exchange figures to grow even more.

Science, innovation and education are central to our common prosperity. We want stronger collaboration in these areas in order to stimulate growth, and to strengthen the links between UK and Colombian education institutions and their students.

Our goal is to bring UK higher education and vocational training institutions to Colombia and the best Colombian students here. Innovative new Colombian legislation provides for ten per cent of royalties from the fast-growing oil and mining sector to be devoted to science and innovation. We want to explore opportunities to develop partnerships between UK and Colombian research institutes and outside companies.

A situation in which a country's citizens' human rights are undermined, undermines that country's prosperity. In Colombia, as in so many other countries recovering from conflict, one of the biggest problems is land access and ownership. The Land and Victims Law will go a long way to help those forced from their land by violence to find some stability for themselves and their families. I saw for myself the difficulties faced by Colombia's large internally-displaced population at one of their camps near Cartagena so am pleased that the UK is taking steps to support the law's implementation, which will be a complex task. Our work with the Colombian government and civil society to tackle other human rights problems, in particular ensuring the protection of human rights defenders and tackling impunity, is one of the cornerstones of our relationship and this will continue.

Despite the huge changes in the last twenty years, the security problem facing President Santos today is serious and beyond the experience of most British politicians. Its impacts, though, are felt on British streets. To improve the security of both the United Kingdom and Colombia, we have a well-developed programme of counternarcotics cooperation with Colombia. We share intelligence, help to improve policing and law-enforcement standards and encourage the promotion of best practice.

With our help, in recent years Colombia has arrested high-profile drugs traffickers, dismantled organised crime networks and seized over twenty five tonnes of cocaine per year, all of which reduces the volume of illegal drugs on the streets of the UK. Our support for this important work is fundamental and will continue.

Strong international partnerships underpin prosperity and security. President Santos took important early steps to improve relationships with Ecuador and Venezuela and has enhanced the active and constructive role Colombia plays internationally. During its tenure on the United Nations Security Council we have found that Colombia has shared our position on a number of issues. We voted together, for example, to protect thousands of innocent Libyans from their tyrannical leader Colonel Gadhafi. We work closely together on the international response to climate change, on which Colombia has shown its leadership by founding the Cartagena dialogue to encourage momentum

in the UNFCCC negotiations. Our partnership on international security issues at the UN and elsewhere will continue when Colombia's term on the Security Council comes to an end next year.

President Santos has a vision which we share for a strong and prosperous Colombia. The areas we have in common are growing. I hope his visit will lead to an enhanced relationship in our traditional areas of cooperation, like counter-narcotics and human rights, but also in those areas where we have made a good start but need to do more, like trade, economic policy, education and climate change. I want our businesses to think Colombia when they are choosing their export markets. I want our universities and research institutes to make Colombia a priority for their international outreach.

We will discuss all these themes during the President's visit. The links between Britain and Colombia have long historical roots, and are set to grow. This visit provides a significant opportunity to take our relationship to a new level and I wish President Santos and his delegation a successful stay in the United Kingdom. 

