

# Building on historic ties

By **H.E. ROLANDO DRAGO**

AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHILE TO THE UNITED KINGDOM



**ROLANDO DRAGO** was educated at the Universidad Técnica del Estado, the Universidad Católica de Chile and the Diplomatic Academy of Chile. He began his career in the Chilean diplomatic service in 1980, and held numerous positions in Chilean Embassies and Consulates around the world, including in Peru, Greece, China, Singapore, Italy and South Africa, before being appointed Chile's Ambassador to Indonesia in 2006. He was subsequently Ambassador to Venezuela (2007-09) and Cuba (2010-14) before assuming his current role as Ambassador to the United Kingdom in 2014.

Rt Hon Hugo Swire MP,  
Minister of State  
at the Foreign and  
Commonwealth Office,  
talking to Ambassador  
Drago, Chile Day 2015

Presidential visits are perhaps one of the most exciting moments in the professional life of any ambassador. They symbolise the excellent level of relations between two countries. They also give the opportunity to consolidate what has been achieved, and can mark the beginning of a new stage of even deeper bonds.

The visit of President Michelle Bachelet to the United Kingdom has these elements. The relationship between the two countries is going through a particularly noteworthy stage on all levels. The UK is the fifth main investor in Chile and the second destination of Chilean exports in Europe (copper excluded). We understand the importance of Britain and particularly the City of London as a source of investment. Every year our highest economic and financial authorities come to the UK heading the biggest business delegation out of Chile in what has become a tradition: "Chile Day", which this year has the added value of having the presence of President Bachelet.

The bilateral links, however, go much further than trade. There are new areas of exchange that are expanding. Perhaps one of the most relevant is education. The UK has become the favourite destination for Chilean students of Master's and PhD

degrees. Over 40 per cent of young graduates awarded public scholarships have chosen universities across this country. We are talking about around 800 students that are building networks, doing joint research and bringing back home the best of what the UK can give them. We want to expand the links that already exist between Chilean and British universities. The agreements to be signed and discussions to be held during the presidential visit should further contribute to increasing the number of joint ventures between academic institutions. In recent years, delegations of prominent institutions from both countries have visited one another to explore possible associations and some British Universities, such as the University of Edinburgh, have even opened offices in Chile.

We also want our innovators to learn what the UK is doing to create the proper environment for technology to progress. We are working with our British counterparts to increase the areas where sharing experiences leads to more cooperation and, in doing so, contributes to Chile's development. In the past year we have been working on issues such as cybersecurity, citizens' participation in local governments, PPIs, gender and renewable energies.

We are both maritime nations and as such we have a



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sense of responsibility in protecting our oceans. Some months ago our country took the lead as the host of “Our Oceans” conference, in which representatives of many countries – including the United Kingdom – discussed how to ward off threats to the oceans. We also feel a responsibility for protecting people from threats from the ocean. Chile has excelled in saving those at risk at sea. This brings me to an important anniversary that we are celebrating this year. I am referring to one of the most memorable episodes of Antarctic Exploration: the rescue, in 1916, of the entire crew of the HMS Endurance, commanded by Sir Ernest Shackleton, marooned on an island close to Antarctica. It was a Chilean navy officer, Luis Pardo, who managed, under the most extreme conditions, to save the lives of all 28 people. We have planned several activities this year to commemorate this feat.

It is impossible to talk about our bilateral links without referring to our history. Since the beginning of our time as an independent country we have been close to the UK. I believe “common history” has been essential as a framework in which cooperation and trade has flourished, so it is important to keep this history alive. Our founding father, Bernardo O’Higgins, received his education in Great Britain, and every August, for the anniversary of his birth, we commemorate with a ceremony in Richmond, where he lived for three years, with the presence of the mayor and local authorities; our Navy was born thanks to a Scottish Admiral, Lord Thomas Cochrane, to whom we pay homage every 21st of May at Westminster Abbey as a way of celebrating Navy Day. This year we will be honoured by the presence of HRH The Princess Royal.

So many names come to my mind when I think of British people in Chile. I could cite names like Maria Graham, Charles Darwin, John Thomas North, Marianne North, Thomas Somerscales... There are also several British surnames that are now common Chilean names. The late President, Patricio Aylwin, the first democratically elected President after the military regime, who sadly passed away some weeks ago, is a good example of one of the thousands of British descendants that have become prominent citizens.

Although small in size, there is an important Chilean community in Britain. A big group came as refugees in the 1970s and was well received from a network of solidarity organisations created in this country, whose members we recently recognised at a ceremony in London, with the presence of the leaders of several organisations.

Chileans in the UK have also made a contribution to the arts, academy and sciences. Some of them have even been honoured by the Queen.

In our embassy there is a wall with the portraits of each ambassador to the UK, starting with José Antonio de Irrizarri in 1818, at the beginning of our life as an independent country. Seeing those images, I appreciate that the solid relationship between our countries is the product of many years of cooperation. All my predecessors have contributed to strengthening our links. Today, the visit of President Bachelet it is a good excuse to reflect on how we can use these centuries of friendship as a platform to go even further. There is still so much to do in terms of education, energy, innovation, trade, science, the arts... I think we are ready to move on to the next chapter. **F**



Admiral Lord Cochrane, the first Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Navy