

Forging a long-lasting legacy

By H.E. DAMION POTTER

HER MAJESTY'S AMBASSADOR TO THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA



DAMION POTTER was appointed British Ambassador to Panama in August 2017. Prior to this, he was Deputy Representative and Director of International Trade in Taipei. Previous postings include Moscow and Sweden. He holds a Masters degree in 20th Century History and a BA Honours in History and French from the University of Warwick.

Relations between the UK and Panama stretch back more than 400 years. Indeed, it was the failure of the Caledonia Colony scheme in what is now known as Darien in Panama that eventually led to the Union between Scotland and England in 1703. As a result, Panama has had a profound role in shaping Britain.

Since then, Panama has continued to grow, in huge part due to its famous canal. With over 13,000 ships passing through the canal in 2017, bringing in over US\$2.8 billion of revenues, it is a crucial part of the economy and Panama's position as hub of Latin America. However, Panama is much more than a link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. In the past two decades it has become a centre for finance, commerce and tourism.

120 global brands now base their regional hub in Panama, enjoying safety, stability, quality of life, dollarisation, low taxation and relative ease of doing business. All this and more have supported a growth rate of 6 per cent annually over the last two decades. For example, Copa is the most interconnected airline in the region, with direct flights to more than 74

destinations. Convenience, the relatively cheap cost of living and the beautiful beaches attract pensioners who see Panama as a great place to retire.

In 1953, Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, visited Panama on her first visit as Monarch outside the Commonwealth. Sixty-five years on from the visit of Her Majesty and our bilateral relationship continues to flourish. The visit by the Secretary of State for International Trade last August kicked-off a year of close co-operation with Panama, which has included the signing of a bilateral treaty on education, an agreement to automatically exchange tax information, and a subsequent visit by the first ever Prime Ministers' Trade Envoy to Panama. All of this has kept the UK firmly in the minds of Panama's leadership, and built momentum ahead of the first official Presidential visit to the UK since 2011.

The President and his delegation will participate in substantive policy discussions with counterparts in the British Government, covering the full range of government-to-government links. Lunch at Buckingham Palace and a visit to Parliament send a powerful signal of the importance of the



Right: HRH Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh being shown around the control tower at Miraflores Locks on the Panama canal in 1953

relationship. The rest of the programme will focus on the opportunities in Panama for the private sector, including an investment event jointly hosted by Secretary of State for International Trade; a business breakfast at Mansion House; a speech on values at the London School of Economics; back-to-back commercial meetings; and visits to both Westminster Technical College and Anglia Ruskin University.

There are three main themes for the visit aligned with our objectives for our relationship with Panama:

PROSPERITY AND TRADE

Panama's trade and logistics links into Latin America have attracted a growing number of UK companies, which use Panama as a base for regional operations. The UK remains Panama's fourth largest direct investor. Increased trade and investment needs to be protected by strong, well enforced regulation. Working together with the UK and others, Panama aims to pass crucial legislation to strengthen its anti-corruption framework, identify tax evasion, and tackle illicit financial flows, strengthening the UK's economic security too.

The President will host Panama Invest, a chance for UK companies to hear first-hand from others how they use Panama as a gateway to Latin America, and to see just how much the country has to offer for those looking to trade in the region. A breakfast at Mansion House, co-hosted by Lord Mountevans – who attended the opening of Panama's Canal expansion as Lord Mayor in 2016 – and Minister of State for Trade Policy, Greg Hands, will also showcase the opportunities in Panama's financial services sector

PEACE AND SECURITY

Panama's position at the heart of global trade routes also, unfortunately for the country, attracts criminals involved in illicit trafficking between the Americas and Europe. We have had British law enforcement teams in Panama for over two decades, working closely with their Panamanian counterparts to try to mitigate that threat. Reinforcing this close working relationship, particularly in the face of new emerging challenges, is an important goal of the visit. We look forward to partnering with Panama to tackle illegal wildlife trade – together we can make a change in the global fight against this transnational crime and threat to endangered species. On Foreign Policy, Panama has worked with us on North Korea, Daesh, and has recently taken a leading role on Venezuela.

PEOPLE AND VALUES

Since 1989 Panama has been a stable democracy and positive example to others in the region. President



Varela has made addressing education a priority. The UK's commitment to education is clear, and the Foreign Secretary has made ensuring 12 years of quality education for all girls and boys a priority. We are also world leaders in the delivery of education. UK companies have won tens of millions of pounds of contracts in this sector and are well positioned as Panama's partner of choice, including as a destination for over 650 English language teachers in British colleges.

The President's visits to three leading UK Universities and Technical Colleges, meetings with Chevening Scholars and Panamanian teachers, and a public speech will be a chance to celebrate our joint commitment to education, and highlight shared values more widely. The President will also meet young British Catholics who will travel to Panama for the Pope's visit and World Youth Week in January 2019.

The visit by the President will have a huge impact and long-lasting legacy. The range of high-level meetings will show Panama that we value our people-to-people and cultural links our trade and investment; and the work we do together to improve peace and security in our own nations, regions and the world.

But the UK and Panamanian relationship is much more than one off interactions. Like Panama, the United Kingdom is opening a new chapter in its future, one that will be founded upon economic openness, free trade, and a firm embrace of global opportunities. These shared values will ensure we write this next chapter together.

Sixty-five years on from the visit of Her Majesty our bilateral relationship continues to flourish

Above: Casco Antiguo (dating from 1673 and a World Heritage site) against the modern city skyline