

Speech by
Sir Anthony Bailey, KGCM, OBE, GCSS
Armourers' Hall
Tuesday 23 June 2015

MR PRESIDENT, YOUR SERENE
HIGHNESS, YOUR EXCELLENCIES, MY
LORDS, REVEREND FATHER, LADIES
AND GENTLEMEN,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all at this luncheon held in honour of His Excellency, Mr Andrej Kiska, President of the Slovak Republic who commenced yesterday his visit to our country.

On behalf of all present, I am delighted to warmly welcome Your Excellency to this ancient yet vibrant City of London. May I also welcome senior members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of both the House of Lords and of Common

Council as well as many friends of Slovakia here in London. I welcome too the distinguished delegation of the President and Her Majesty's Ambassador to Slovakia.

Mr President,

This lunch follows Your Excellency's meeting at Mansion House a few moments ago with the Lord Mayor of this great and ancient City and follows your Audience yesterday afternoon with His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales at Windsor Castle. It also follows the highly successful State Visit of Her Majesty The Queen to Slovakia in 2008.

Today though is an opportunity to celebrate the new partnerships continually being forged between our two countries. Partnerships, which are based on a realisation of the economic and political advantages, which we both

can enjoy through working ever more closely together.

This City and its Corporation of London, if you indulge me Mr President, are true global masters of this dialogue and exchange, having forged like no other new and deeper partnerships between countries and companies at all levels for many many hundreds of years.

It is not by accident that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development headquarters itself here in the City together with many other relevant and associated financial institutions including those from Slovakia and the wider region.

We are the leading global financial centre of the world.

The City of London is internationally appreciated as a place of law and order, of contracts fulfilled, and how this reputation, its democracy and its

traditions are considered its greatest strengths.

It is fitting that we dine in the historic and magnificent Armourers' Hall where feasts and events have been hosted since 1346. London, even in those distant days, was no stranger to the concept of European Assembly.

Today's events mark another great moment in the strengthening of ties between our two countries. You are, Your Excellency, the first President of the Slovak Republic, and one of a handful of Slovaks, to receive the Freedom of the City of London which is one of the oldest surviving traditional ceremonies still in existence today. Together with your co-sponsor Sir Gavyn Arthur I would like to invite everybody to join me in congratulating Your Excellency on this distinction.

Mr President,

I don't know if Your Excellency is fully aware of the privileges which come with being a freeman. You can wander through this City with your sword drawn at any time you like; and you have the right, when drunk and disorderly, to be escorted back by the watches – although whether back to Bratislava I am not clear. And there used to be a right that allowed Freemen to bring sheep across London Bridge.

Events like today's offer an opportunity to reflect on what we all too easily forget: that it is just over 25 years since the end of the Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe and what was known in Slovakia as the Gentle Revolution.

As a student of Eastern and Central European Studies, at the School of

Slavonic and East European Studies of University College London during 1989-1991 and later at Universities in Budapest, Veliko Turnovo and Sofia, I was able to often witness at first hand your successful and hard-fought struggle for freedom and democracy which sprung up following the end of totalitarianism, dictatorship and oppression. Joyful events for the entire world and especially for us here in Western Europe as we finally were able to heal this open post-war wound. Such events left an indelible mark on me.

Since then, the reforms undergone in Slovakia have been both enormous and far-reaching: your country joined NATO and the European Union in 2004 and adopted Euro on 1 January 2009 becoming soon a success story of the enlargement. With one of the fastest growing economies in the EU, the Slovak Republic is today one of the best performers among the euro area. The

impressive achievements in innovation, technology and engineering allowed you Mr President to proudly unveil a flying car yesterday during a reception at the Slovak Embassy. I know that many an Ambassador looked on in envy at the opportunity to finally beat London traffic!

Let me also congratulate Your Excellency on your historic election to the highest office of your state last year which follows a series of successes in the business and in the charity work. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the impressive charitable activity of the Good Angel, the biggest non-profit organisation in your country, which you founded in 2006 for the benefit of terminally ill children and their families. Its almost 200,000 donors (4% of the country's population) helped with donations of €30 million to date.

The Slovak Republic is preparing to take the EU presidency in the second half of 2016, which will be another important occasion to promote the country, to strengthen its position within the EU, and contribute to the formation of key EU policies and reforms for the benefit of all member states. I know this was something at the heart of your meeting in Bratislava last week with the Prime Minister David Cameron. I know too that the City of London is ever ready to play its part too.

As highlighted by the Prime Minister, Britain has always played a leading part in Europe and our country has always stood firm in defence of liberty.

Your Excellency,

Mr President, I thank you for making the journey here today from the homeland of Alexander Dubcek, the

leader of the Prague Spring, a pioneer of the freedom of thought and of the defence of human rights.

I would also like to thank your Ambassador to the Court of St James's, His Excellency Miroslav Wlachovský for the great work he does in fostering the bilateral relations between our two countries and capital cities.

On behalf of everyone in this hall, I offer to you and your country, our good friend and ally, the Slovak Republic, all good wishes for the future and may the bonds between the United Kingdom, this City of London and the Slovak Republic continue to prosper.

In speaking at the reception of the Slovak Embassy last night, you, Mr President, said: "Vision without people is but a dream".

And, given the short notice of today's event, I hope Your Excellency will return to Bratislava knowing that so many are here today precisely because of that vision and mindful that our joint relations are at an all time high.

Thank you.