

Vote of Thanks

Vintner's Hall

Thursday 23rd May 2013

Mr Anthony Bailey, OBE, GCSS

YOUR SERENE HIGHNESS, YOUR
EXCELLENCIES, MR MAYOR, MY LORDS,
DEPUTY MAYOR, REVEREND FATHERS,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

As someone who has been associated with Albania for the last twenty-five years, it gives me great pleasure to respond with a vote of thanks to Your Excellency's most informative and enjoyable speech, held today in the company of so many senior members of the Diplomatic Corps, prominent friends of Albania here in London and the United Kingdom as a whole.

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

As the Lord Mayor said this morning, today is an opportunity to celebrate the new partnerships 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.

And I hope that you will be able to take this message back, not only to your city but your country too.

Considering the international assembly we have gathered here today, it is fitting that we eat in this Vintner's Hall where, 650 years ago, Henry Picard, a Vintner and then Lord Mayor of London, held a magnificent feast for five kings, Edward III of England, David II of Scotland, John I of France, the King of Cyprus and the King of Denmark, plus the Duke of Bavaria and, somewhat alarmingly, the Chief Hostages of France.

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, I believe, Mr Basha, the first Mayor of Tirana and the first Albanian, to receive the Freedom of the City of London and, I would like everybody to join me in congratulating you on this distinction.

In reciprocating, it is also interesting to note that our 685th Lord Mayor, Alderman Roger Gifford, joins the much-loved Sir Norman Wisdom as a recipient of the rarely bestowed 'Gratitude of Tirana'.

We all too easily forget that it is just over 20 years since Albania was rid of one of the worst Communist and Stalinist regimes in the world.

Since then, the reforms undergone have been both enormous and far reaching – but more importantly, Mr Mayor, under your careful stewardship as Foreign Minister, Albania joined NATO, as Minister of Interior, Albania signed the Schengen Agreement and, thanks to your personal leadership in both these high offices, the reforms you have been responsible for driving through, Albania is in the process to join the European Union.

Great advances for the people of your country and in such a short period of time.

A few months ago, Albania marked a very special anniversary - the Centenary of the struggle for your national independence.

Here in London's Porchester Terrace, thanks to your support and that of your government and through the ever industrious Albanian Ambassador to the Court of St James's, Mal Berisha and the City of Westminster authorities, there now stands a statue of that towering Albanian warrior-hero, Skanderbeg, whose epic and selfless fight in the defence of European civilisation in the 15th century is an example to us all.

May I also add, how pleased many of us were by the decision of your government and Your Excellency in ensuring the long awaited repatriation and State Funeral of the remains of the late King Zog I, and other members of the Albanian Royal Family, from their exile in Paris to a new royal mausoleum in Tirana. This was an important step in righting an historic wrong.

The centenary wasn't just about the past, it was also about the future - a wonderful opportunity for Albanians to celebrate who they are and for the world to witness your country's new image, its investment opportunities, the considerable state and municipal reforms being enacted and, of course, Albania's on-going modernisation in partnership with Britain and your other allies across the world.

Mr Mayor, I thank you and your wife, Mrs Basha for making the journey here today from the homeland of the Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

I hope your visit to this and our other great British cities will be the first of many. I know Glasgow awaits your soon.

On behalf of everyone in this hall, I offer to you and your country, our good friend and ally, Albania, all good wishes for the forthcoming democratic elections to be held in June and may the bonds between the United Kingdom and Albania continue to prosper.

Finally, in thanking you once again may I ask all present to stand and raise your glasses in a toast, to the Mayor and Citizens of Tirana.

“THE MAYOR AND CITIZENS OF TIRANA”.