

News story: Lord Bridges speech to Alliance of European Metropolitan Chambers

Thank you for inviting me to speak today and for setting up this event.

I have looked at today's agenda and declaration, and listened to some of the discussions taking place. This is all a fantastic contribution to the debate and so thank you for providing it.

It's great to see the representatives of so many of Europe's wonderful cities here in my home city, London.

I was born and brought up in south west London – in SW19 – rather too many years ago, and I have seen London change before my eyes to become the global, multicultural and vibrant city it is today.

And I'd like to start by thanking all those who have made that happen, some of whom are in this room. Mayors past, and Mayor present – but above all the people, the millions of people who make London what it now is.

And it's people – whether in London, or in Madrid, or Dublin, or any of the other cities represented here today – it's obviously them, their skills, their innovation, their culture. It's that which gives any city its distinct characteristic and underpins a city's success.

Look through history: the Turin of Giovanni Agnelli, the Paris of Claude Monet, the Berlin of Carl Siemens – the list is long of those cities which gave birth to great enterprise, cultural movements or innovations that have changed the world.

And I would argue that the hallmark of the success of these cities is that they have been a honeypot for talent: people who buzz with ideas, with energy and creativity. They are cities that have nurtured trade – be it the coffee houses of the City of London or the docks of so many European cities.

They are cities where universities have flourished and innovation has been fostered.

They are cities which, while proud of their own heritage and culture, have enjoyed being part of an international network – a network in which ideas are exchanged and goods traded.

Above all, they are cities that have lead change, welcomed change and embraced change.

Here in London today, we stand on the threshold of a great change – our withdrawal from the European Union. We need to think what this means for London and the cities represented here today.

And so let me make it very clear from the outset that, given the shared success of our cities over generations, while we are leaving the European Union, we are definitely not leaving Europe.

Our history, our culture, our trade is entwined with Europe's. The task before us, all of us, is now to create a new partnership – a partnership the Prime Minister described as deep and special – that enables us to continue to thrive and prosper together.

As the Prime Minister has said many times, we want to reach an agreement with the European Union. We believe that doing so is in our interests and in Europe's interests.

As for the nature of the agreement, it should be comprehensive – with a fair settlement of the UK's rights and obligations as a departing EU member state. And we should come to an agreement on the terms of our withdrawal at the same time as we agree the terms of our future partnership.

Much has been written about whether this agreement is possible. After all, we find ourselves in a unique position. We have been a member of the EU for the last 40 years.

Many of our laws, our regulations and standards are completely aligned with the EU. So unlike other non-EU states who, when they do a trade deal with the EU, are trying to bring down barriers, we are seeking not to put barriers up.

What's more, we obviously do billions of pounds of trade with the EU, as the EU does with the UK – £290 billion of EU goods and services are exported to the UK each year. So, as I say, it is in all our interests to come to an agreement.

But what kind of agreement are we looking for? Let me answer that question by looking through the prism of what makes cities a success. Themes you've been talking about today.

Immigration

First, the success of a city is due to its people and its access to talent.

To win in the global marketplace, businesses right across the UK – as well as Europe – need access to the best talent, drawn from all corners of the world.

Brexit will, emphatically, not change this.

We've made it clear that we intend to take control of immigration. But, in so doing, we need to be sensitive to the needs of businesses, large and small, as well as other organisations such as universities.

So, as we consider what form that new immigration system might take, we're very aware of the impact that different options might have on different sectors of the economy and on the labour market in different parts of the country.

I can't go into detail now, but let me make two points.

First, we'll always welcome those with the skills, the drive and the expertise to make our nation better still. And we very much hope that the same will apply in countries across Europe, where many UK citizens work today.

Second, we wish to see the status of both UK nationals in the EU and EU nationals in the UK resolved at the same time; and to do so as early as possible in the negotiations.

It's good to see that so many of our European partners agree with the simple thought that we must address this issue as soon as we can, as it is causing understandable anxiety for hundreds of thousands of people here and in the EU.

Let us all hope that our shared values, which underpin the open and tolerant societies in which we all live, will enable that agreement to be reached swiftly.

Innovation

Access to talent is crucial, not simply to help the businesses of today to succeed, but to ensure that we sow the seeds for future success by supporting innovators, entrepreneurs, scientists and researchers.

Many of the European cities represented here can, like London, be proud of their universities, and their history of research and development.

We know how important it is for universities, and the research community generally, to be able to collaborate and co-operate. Of course funding is important, including programmes like Horizon 2020.

But these networks deliver other, unquantifiable benefits. And they are European networks to which, without wishing to boast, we believe that our universities contribute a great deal.

That is why we have said that we wish to find a way in which we can continue to co-operate with our European partners, so that we can all continue to benefit from the fruits of such co-operation.

Trade

Talent and innovation are two building blocks of prosperity. Trade is obviously another.

The Government has said that we want trade in goods and services to be as free and frictionless as possible. As you say in your declaration, we need to minimise the barriers to trade and export activity within Europe.

And, as I mentioned earlier, the challenge is to stop barriers being erected between the UK and the EU, be it at the border or bureaucracy behind the border. Some of these issues have been discussed today, such as air freight –

we will be exploring them in great detail.

How we achieve this will be a matter for the negotiation. We're helped by the fact that the UK's standards and regulations – be it on manufactured products or financial services – will be identical with the EU's on the day we leave.

As the Prime Minister set out in her letter to trigger Article 50, we want to prioritise how we manage the evolution of our regulatory frameworks to maintain a fair and open trading environment, and critically how we resolve disputes.

On top of that, as you also say in your declaration, we need to keep Europe moving. Aviation, shipping and freight are obviously key – and we are very focussed on what needs to be agreed to ensure that planes continue to fly between the UK and Europe, and freight continues to flow.

And then there is another issue touched on just now. This is the flow of data – the lifeblood of today's digital economy (especially financial centres), which needs to continue if organisations, private or public, here or in Europe, are to function effectively.

Implementation

And, of course on top of all this, there is the issue of implementing any agreement. Our aim is to ensure that we reach an agreement within the two years stipulated by Article 50.

Once we have such an agreement, in order to avoid any cliff-edge as we move from our current relationship to our future partnership, people and businesses in both the UK and the EU would benefit from implementation periods to adjust in a smooth and orderly way to new arrangements.

To do this, we will all need to continue to work closely together.

Cementing the relationship between Government and business will be critical as we leave the EU.

Great Repeal Bill

We will need certainty as we leave. Which brings me to the Great Repeal Bill. This is a piece of legislation that the Government will introduce into the Parliament at Westminster very shortly.

It will do three things.

It will repeal the European Communities Act. It will convert EU law into UK law. And it will give the Government the power to correct any legal anomalies, so our statute book functions properly from the day we leave.

Now I know that some people in the UK are saying that we should tear up some of the regulations as we leave the EU. Well, I can tell you today, we're not going to do that, for a number of reasons.

First, the vote to leave was a vote to leave, period. Leaving means ensuring that Parliamentary sovereignty is unquestioned and putting Parliament – and, where appropriate, the devolved legislatures – in control. Once that has happened, it will then be up to elected representatives in those bodies to decide what to do. That's for another day. We've enough to do in the meantime.

And the second reason we have taken this approach is certainty. Change is always unsettling, and the more we can do to lessen that uncertainty the better. That's the case for businesses and for consumers.

To that end, we have made clear that the power to enable corrections to EU law will be limited. It is not a vehicle for policy changes, but it will give the Government the necessary power to correct or remove the laws that would otherwise not function properly once we have left the EU.

And the third reason is this means that, on the day we leave, it will be beyond doubt that our standards and our regulations are the same as in the EU.

Conclusion

Lastly, I would say this: facing up to challenges together and seizing the opportunities that will come will be vital for the future of economic growth, not just here but in Europe as a whole.

I know that many of you here will have differing views and emotions about the UK's decision to leave the EU. Some of you here will have voted to leave, others, like me, to remain.

But to all of you – leave or remain, European or British, Londoner or not – to all of you, I say this: let us now look to the future. We all know what our great cities can achieve. Let us build on that success, work together and progress together to make our future better still.

Thank you.