

British envoy highlights rail ties

In January this year, I was honoured to be asked by British Prime Minister Theresa May to be the first-ever U.K. trade envoy for Taiwan. The prime minister's instructions were clear - support economic growth by building on the U.K.'s already strong relations with Taiwan, maximize bilateral trade, and generate real and long-term economic benefits for both markets.

One of the reasons the prime minister chose me for the role was the deep affection I hold for Taiwan - I was until recently the co-chairman of the British Parliament's British-



Taiwanese all-party parliamentary group (one of the largest British parliamentary groups of its kind), and I have been a regular visitor to Taiwan over the years, coming here 15 times since 2000. I am delighted to be back again today, this time to lead a delegation of British rail companies seeking business partnerships as Taiwan gets ready to revitalize its rail and underground infrastructure.

Railways have been a passion of mine for many years. More than that — they are in my blood. My father left school at 14 to work as a clerk on the Great Western Railway in Birmingham, and his grandfather was a top link engine driver with the same company.

I worked at the British Railways Board headquarters as a communications adviser to successive chairmen for almost 20 years, and I have co-authored two books about the social and political development of Britain's railways during the second half of the 20th century.

So I am in the very fortunate position this week of combining two of my great passions — Taiwan and railways. And the timing of my visit could not be better. Britain's railways have undergone a renaissance in recent years. Over the past two decades, passenger numbers have doubled to an average of 4.5 million a day, and Britain is now recognized to have the safest and fastest growing railway in Europe. Historic railway stations, such as St. Pancras, King's Cross and Liverpool Street in London have been transformed into architectural masterpieces. Waterloo Station in London has just become the first transport terminal in Europe to handle 200 million passengers in a year, and our rail success story is set to

continue, with the Cross Rail program (a major new infrastructure to improve journey times across London) already 75% complete. Plans to develop "High Speed 2" to increase capacity to meet the strongly growing demand for rail travel and accelerate journey times between London, the Midlands and the North are already well advanced, with the necessary legislation about to complete its passage through our Parliament.

Britain's businesses specializing in rail have, of course, been central to this success, and have built up huge expertise and experience as the U.K.'s railways have been transformed. I am delighted to be bringing experts from 17 of these companies with me to Taiwan this week, as well as their representative body the Railway Industry Association (RIA). RIA enjoys a long-standing and close relationship with Taiwan railway authorities: indeed, in the last 10 years the British Office here in Taipei has partnered with both to organize more than 30 trade missions in both directions. So our relationships are strong, our trust levels are high, and our desire to work collaboratively for mutual benefit is firmly established.

All the members of the mission and I and are greatly looking forward to meeting with the Taiwan railway industry over the next few days, to sharing our experiences, and to building ever-closer partnerships as Taiwan embarks on the latest stage of its exciting plans to develop a modern, safe, sustainable and environmentally friendly railway infrastructure truly befitting its vibrant and fast-moving economy.

While we work together to help develop a rail and underground network that is fit for the 21st century, we will not forget the marvellous railway heritage that both Taiwan and Britain are blessed with. I have the honour to serve as the president of Britain and Ireland's Heritage Railway Association, and I chair the Science Museum's railway heritage advisory board. This weekend I am greatly looking forward to visiting the Alishan Forest Railway again, and to discussing the establishment of a sister agreement with one of our leading narrow-gauge railways in Wales.

My very first engagement as trade envoy back in January was to welcome a delegation from the Taiwanese railway industry to London. It is fitting that I am able to repay that compliment this week, and play my part in cementing what I am sure will continue to be a really fruitful and constructive relationship between the railway industries of Taiwan and the U.K.

[Lord Faulkner is the U.K. prime minister's trade envoy to Taiwan]