COBCOE Gala Dinner 2010
HR Speech

Your Excellencies, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends, Colleagues and guests,

On behalf of my Executive, I am delighted to welcome you to the COBCOE 2010 Annual Gala Dinner. It is a great pleasure to welcome not just many good and long-standing (I never use the word “old”) friends and colleagues, but also many new people who will be experiencing (if that is the right word) COBCOE for the first time. Even though these are very difficult economic times, both for our member Chambers and, for that matter, COBCOE, we are still growing. In 2005 we were 17 members, working loosely together. Today I am pleased to announce that the British-Kosovo Chamber has agreed to join us as our 33rd member. Welcome!

I would like to welcome particularly Lord Michael Hastings, our special Guest of Honour, who will be speaking to us later in the evening. Lord Hastings is the KPMG global Head of Citizenship and Diversity. The tradition in many of our member chambers is that after the speaker has spoken, he receives a small gift as a token of appreciation. But bearing in mind Lord Hastings’ title, we thought that we would take a different approach this year, and do as they do in India, welcome a speaker with a gift. This is a special welcome shawl comes via Friends of India; it was sold by illiterate ladies in a village in Tamil Nadu, Southern India to raise money for tailoring machines, together with a card, handmade by them, and signed on behalf of the COBCOE Executive.

I appreciate that there are some dangers in making a gift before your speaker speaks rather than afterwards. After all, if the speaker does a lousy job, you can always refuse to hand him the gift. On the other hand, I can see that there are some advantages with the Indian approach. If the gift is known at the outset the speaker may be worried that we might take the gift away if he doesn’t do a good job. So, Lord Hastings, we are delighted to have you with us, and I hope you enjoy the shawl, at least during the first course!

We may be thanking Lord Hastings in advance, but there are many people I want to thank for their tremendous work over the past few weeks to make this conference such a success. We have had a record turnout for our Training Seminar, as well as for the Gala Dinner (as you can surely see). None of this would be possible without the dedicated work behind the scenes of our Director, Marketing and Communications, Anne-Marie Martin, and my assistant, Edith Herger. Thank you both for a fantastic job. Thank you also to all the Presidents and officers of our various member chambers who work without remuneration giving up considerable time to promote their chambers and bilateral trade with the UK.
There is another person I want to thank, even though unfortunately he cannot be with us. At the Annual General Meeting which we just held, Jeremy Jennings stepped down after ten years as a member of the Executive and as our Treasurer. Jeremy has done an incredible job for COBCOE, helping hold it together when we went through a rocky period a few years ago and making sure that our finances are as sound as they can be in these difficult times. He tried to keep me, as President, under proper control for the last five years. Of course he failed, but nonetheless his support and counsel have been invaluable. In recognition of this, last night the COBCOE Executive unanimously voted to elect Jeremy Jennings a Fellow of COBCOE. This honour has only been given twice before in the history of COBCOE, also to individuals, one of whom is with us tonight, Keith Levinson, who made a personal and invaluable commitment to COBCOE and for whom we are their legacy. Although Jeremy cannot be with us tonight, since he had to fly off to Argentina, this evening should not go by without recognition and appreciation of his great support.

I am particularly grateful to the Members of Parliament, from both Houses, who are with us tonight. The political community in Britain are at battle stations of course, and we know that this will be a real cliff-hanger of an election. The fact is however, whichever government is sworn in after the election, it will have the difficult task of trying to repair badly damaged public finances. Personal and corporate taxation is already at the limit, and, we would argue, too high. Turn the screw further and you damage the engine, you cut the ground from under the wealth creators who will lead the way to recovery. So inevitably public spending is going to be cut heavily. The budget tomorrow may already show the way. This will depress the British economy at a time when business is fighting to move out of the recession. Clearly the solution to this dilemma is to increase British exports of goods and services, which is why it is essential not to cut government financing for support of British trade overseas, however tempting that could be. Rationalise and reallocate absolutely, but do not cut.

It is also why the role of COBCOE, and its member chambers operating across Europe, is going to be more important than ever in providing business networks for British exporters to tap into what is essentially now their home market. We stand ready to work even closer with the incoming government to contribute the ideas and support on the ground needed to achieve this. Chambers of commerce are a vital part of such a strategy because of what I call the "paradox of the internet". We are now overwhelmed with data, but business people still need to qualitatively assess their current and future business partners. They also need personal contacts. Chambers of commerce are at their best providing networks and platforms for businesses to talk to each other. For British business, COBCOE is the obvious network across continental Europe. So we have a challenging time ahead of us, and we take our responsibility seriously.

But not too seriously. Tonight is for all of us to enjoy each other’s company in these wonderful surroundings. I look forward to talking to you again after the main course to introduce our Guest Speaker, but in the meantime I wish you bon appetit!