

Jimmy Burns interview with British Ambassador in Madrid Hugh Elliott for *La Revista*, the digital magazine published by the charity the BritishSpanishSociety Full Transcript.

### **HELPING BRITISH TOURISTS CAUGHT BY THE PANDEMIC**

JB...When you became ambassador last summer, you could not have imagined what was coming. How have you been coping?

HE First of all, Jimmy, it's been a new experience for us like everybody else. We have never known anything like it all. And I guess for us, like everybody else it's been strange. We have been adapting. We have been doing our best. We've been thinking of all the people who have been caught us. **Between our two countries we've had over 60,000 people dying from this virus. More than anything else it's been a big human tragedy. And although we've been in lock down for a long time there have been people who haven't been in lock down, doing a lot of work, caring for others in every shape and form.**

So, as we think of our own situation, we are looking at graphs and numbers but this is about humans, and the number of people affected worldwide is just terrible That is what we have in mind. But against that backdrop what has it been like for us personally?

**The main focus for the British embassy was immediately to help Brits in Spain because of course we had about 200,000 or so British tourists, we had to help get back. We worked with the Spanish to make sure this was compatible with the lock down instructions**, to ensure that airlines continued to run, to ensure that hotels were still open so that people could still have somewhere to stay on the way home.

**We had great cooperation from the Spanish government at every level** . It's been fantastic. It hasn't been easy for Brits here. It hasn't been easy for everyone But by and large everyone has managed to get home. And we are in touch with those who are still here. Flights are very limited, but they are still running. So, there are still routes home which is a good thing.

On a personal basis, we are of course very lucky because we have the residency which means I can go out in the garden although I must confess that I have spent most of my time like many holed up in the house in front of this particular screen...

### **JB HOW HAS IT AFFECTED THE AMBASSADOR PERSONALLY**

HE **We've all had to adapt. It's been strange not having our kids with us--they are both studying in the United States so they are still there ...We have not been able to do lots of things but we've also been doing new things. My wife Toñi started doing regular online Yoga classes which she is offering for embassy staff and families and people all over the place. She is a Yoga teacher. So, all sorts of new opportunities are coming up out of all this...**

### **FUTURE OF TOURISM**

JB Can we move on to the key issue for many of our community of British and Spanish which is tourism. What can you say about the weeks and months ahead.

HE We are talking all the time as you would expect given the links that there between the two countries. Lots and lots of contacts...Of course during the first stage of the process the conversations with the Spanish tourist authorities were very strange because they were all about helping people go home rather than helping people go out and visit and go on holiday-the opposite of what we were used to doing. But everybody has been extremely professional extremely helpful.

**Looking ahead what may happen? Where are we right now, and we are talking about the middle of May? We have the UK and Spain, like many other countries recommending against all but essential international travel That is the base line of where we are. So international tourism isn't something that can take place on that basis.**

**Secondly, we are both countries trying to do the same thing which is to juggle a very complicated situation. The British prime minister putt it very well, coming down the mountain is harder than going up it. You have to navigate extremely carefully on the way down.**

**Both the Spanish and UK governments have plans that are comprehensive. They are trying to put safety first. They are trying to open up the economy as much as possible consistent with protecting people. And of course, tourism is a very important part of that. But at the moment it is too soon to say when international tourism will resume. We simply have to take these things step by step.**

We have to see how successful the de-escalation measures are, and where we get to. The Spanish plan is moving to the new normal by the end of June at the earliest. So, we are looking to see whether the steps in that direction are successful and when the conditions are going to be right for tourism to resume.

**We all of course want it to happen.** We are getting a lot of calls from British people asking when they are going to be able to come out to their second home or for a long stay in Spain. But the reality is that that is not on the cards right now. In the immediate future we have to see how the de-escalation goes...

JB But the key question is can British tourists who have enjoyed their Spanish holidays for many years or who have second homes, can they hope at all that this side of autumn they are going to be able to go to Spain and vice-versa, can Spaniards dream of being back in the streets of Westminster looking up at Big Ben?

HE It's a great question and the simple answer is that we simply don't know. Right now, the UK is requiring international travellers to quarantine two weeks on arrival. Spain has announced similar quarantine measures which will kick into force on the 15<sup>th</sup> May. So that is the reality we are living right now. But we are trying to manage this de-escalation in a way that keeps the virus under control and protects people's lives. **Obviously, we are all very keen to get back to international travel and tourism and people going out to second homes as soon as possible but only**

**when conditions are right and this can be done safely. Right now, I can't tell you when that is going to be. It would be ridiculous to pretend that I could.**

JB I see all that but as you can imagine sitting were I am in London reading and photographs in the Spanish media this morning of people already on beaches and in Terrazas having their tapas. I am sure I am not alone among many Brits wondering why aren't we there?

**HE The question is what is it safe to do. We are not advising right now that people should travel internationally to Spain or anywhere and that is because we don't believe the conditions are right, and that it is safe and appropriate to do so. So, what we are doing, is staying in touch, to make sure that we are successful with the de-escalation measures so we can get back to movement as soon as it safe to do so. But we have to be realistic about this. We've seen in the news this week that one individual in South Korea has infected large numbers of people potentially. We see in Spain that the de-escalation measures are very carefully thought through. Hotels are not open for normal business. Communal areas are not open. So, you can't have a normal holiday in Spain right now. You talked about *terrazas* opening -that is not the case in half the country.**

**It's difficult. we all want to move around more but we need to be patient and we have to be successful because if we are not successful on the health front the rest is not going to follow. So let's make sure we win the battle against the virus first.**

### ***FUTURE OF ANGLO-SPANISH RELATIONS***

JB In terms of British-Spanish relations and investment. Do you see this reducing as a result of corona virus, or is this opening up new opportunities for a reinforcement of the bilateral relationship?

**HE. The strength of the relationship is extraordinarily strong, broad and deep: people to people, business to business, culture to culture , school to school , university to university. All these relationships are deep and strong and we are living them in a different way, in a new way. The relationship is not diminishing, it is exploring itself in in different ways.**

I like the way you described this with the launch of the BritishSpanish Society's online newsletter Puentes, with the anecdotes and articles you've been publishing. We are all learning and telling new stories about how we are living this strange and difficult and tragic process together, how we do business at a distance. We've learnt that much more is possible than we thought before hand.

**Obviously, there is a lot of work to do to ensure that trade flows are kept moving, the exports of primary goods from Spain to the UK are really important...there is a lot going on there and we are doing it in different ways...It's not always easy but I think it's quite invigorating to know that we can do things in a different way.**

Just thinking of our Spain network and our own team of consulates around Spain we are talking to each other in ways we never quite talked to each other before. Now everyone is in front a screen sitting at home, it doesn't matter where you are any more. But that is not to say that the core of relationships which is people to people contact, and face to face, and the depth of being present is not something we are not missing. Of course we are. But I think we shall come out of this, and we've also learnt new things too.

## **BEYOND BREXIT**

JB. Can I move onto the issue of Brexit. Do you see a deal at the end of this year as possible and if so what can you say to millions of EU citizens and UK citizens in Spain who stand to be affected- and what kind of guarantees can be part of that agreement?

HE A clarification. When we talk about Brexit-we have actually left the EU so what we are talking about is not about Brexit but about our future relationship with the EU.

In terms of the timing of our negotiations this week round three took place. The negotiations are going on virtually but they are comprehensive, across the whole piece. We have another round at the beginning of June and we hope we will be making progress. We think not least given the starting point and the amount we are already agreed, there is room to make a deal by the end of this year across the full framework agreement. Not least because what we are asking for is something that is totally based on precedent. **We are asking for an ambitious free trade agreement, zero tariff zero quotas, but not a lot of special provisions, and obviously a lot of other agreement that sit alongside in areas of mutual interest such as fighting crime, air services. There is a lot to do. Are we going to achieve it? Yes, I think we can.** In terms of UK citizens that of course has been a major focus, and I and my network of consulates have been trying to explain to over 350,000 British citizens living in Spain how they are affected. Health care is probably the top concern and the right to health care is protected by the withdrawal agreement.

**One message we are giving to Brits in Spain is that you need to ensure that you are legally residing in Spain before the end of 2020 to enjoy the full benefit of these rights.**

And then there is a question arising out of the corona virus because it has not been possible to go and get registered during the lock down period but we have plenty of time left before the end of the year and we are very optimistic that things will open up in time for the few who haven't registered yet as the vast majority have...

JB I get it that the residents in Spain you mention need to register their status but what about the thousands and indeed millions of other British and Spaniards who have travelled between the two countries and have been entitled to EU health cards but do not have residential status you talk about.? So, what happens to people like me?

HE: **Well as you know for British tourists, the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) may no longer be valid from the end of the transition period and it is one of the things that we are looking to see if we can put in place a reciprocal**

arrangement to make sure that they have reciprocal rights or health insurance. There are 18 million British in 2018 who came to Spain, and around 2.5 million Spaniards who went to the UK in that year and we want to try and get that tourism back., and make sure that it works as well as possible and we have to keep working to ensure people get the information so they know exactly how they stand and what they need to do, and the conditions for moving between the two countries.

JB It seems listening to you that you are hopeful that we will get a trade agreement with the EU and that reciprocal agreements will finesse details to the benefit of Spaniards coming to the UK and British going to Spain. Is that being too optimistic?

HE No I don't think it's too optimistic. Things will change. People should not expect things to be the same. As being outside the EU will not be the same as being within it. We've talked about residents being a separate case to visitors. The details about how you will move around, whether you are tourist or a professional ...these are things which need to be fully worked through....in the negotiations. **I am optimistic that there is a strong shared interest in maintaining open and very fluid connections**, that goes without saying....

## **GIBRALTAR**

JB On Gibraltar, the chief minister Fabian Picardo is reported to be encouraging A-level students to benefit from the online Spanish language learning resources and stressing the importance of bilingualism for the new generation of Gibraltarians. Are you confident of a UK-Spanish agreement on the future of Gibraltar emerging from an agreement with the EU?

HE We have the detailed and constructive and positive agreement in the withdrawal negotiations which led to a protocol on Gibraltar which established new collaboration in a series of areas that matter to people on the ground Gibraltar and in the Campo de Gibraltar around citizens' rights, customs, and police cooperation, around tobacco and the environment. The protocol and the associated memoranda of understandings envisaged meetings taking place through committees. They have been very constructive. The first one was held in Algeciras. The second is due to take place in Gibraltar. We are looking at the precise modules and timing of that. These things like everything else have been affected by the situation with C19. But overall, **I think what we got is a very clear understanding that there is a shared interest in the prosperity of the area**, even more so now given the hits that all our economies are suffering because of the impact of the virus and the lockdown. There is an awful lot that we have in common is what I am trying to say...and there is a positive spirit behind that...**Of course the UK and Spain have very different positions on the question of sovereignty but on the practical questions of collaboration there is a lot in common...and as we had positive conversations in the first round I expect we shall have positive and constructive conversations in the next round as we talk about our future relationship with the EU.**

JB The Cervantes Institute reached a cooperation agreement with the British Council earlier this year. Is there a prospect of the Cervantes Institute reopening in Gibraltar?

HE L I can't possibly comment on specifics like that. We are taking these things step by step. What I can say is that there is a very good understanding of shared interests and there is a strong and positive will to make progress and to continue this very constructive collaboration...and of course to ensure a fluid movement across the border in the interests of the prosperity of the Gibraltar side and the Campo de Gibraltar side...

### ***The BritishSpanish Society***

JB Finally Ambassador As you know the BSS was founded as a charity in 1916 in the middle of World War 1 and two years before the Spanish Flu outbreak -the worst pandemic in modern history prior to C19. The BSS has shown great resilience, surviving earlier pandemics and World Wars as well as changes in regimes Emerging from this crisis and with the challenges we face. What role do you see for the BritishSpanish Society in Society as it continues its mission of building educational and cultural between the two countries? And what final word of encouragement can you give the BritishSpanish Society in community, our members and supporters, and how we should endeavour to reach out to people who might want to join us?

HE: I think the BritishSpanish Society is a fantastic organisation. And as you know I have been closely involved with it well before this job, so I am delighted to remain involved in it. The fact that it has endured, and is going strong after so many years is testament to the fact that you have got it right. You've got your focus on something that is lasting and important because it is at its heart is interpersonal relationship, and because you are about education, about people and their development

What I hope will come out of these times we are experiencing is the need to develop our bilateral relationships around scientific collaboration, and the whole area of health care. In business terms medical products and pharmaceuticals are among the top exports going both ways between the two countries.

**I really think that it is quite exciting that we are learning new ways of doing things. The government commitment is there, the business commitment is there, the person to person commitments are there. Some aspects of our lives are in abeyance, some are carrying on in different ways, some we are reinventing. And I think it is exciting what the BritishSpanish Society is doing particularly around the reinventing. It is really important as are the relationships which are not going away.**

JB Thankyou on behalf of our members. I take your point about doing things differently, but also the importance of physical engagement and I am looking forward to being back with you and your wife Toñi on that wonderful manicured lawn of the British

ambassador's residence in Madrid when we hold our next BritishSpanish Society in Society reception there. Something to look forward to.

HE You say wonderfully manicured lawn.... **Maybe it was symbolic but when the virus was taking hold a storm blew in Madrid and one of our glorious pine trees came crashing down on the lawn. Happily, no one was hurt but we are in the process of re-manicuring and replanting vegetation. It might take a bit of time but we look forward to being with and all the friends of the BritsihSpanish Society when it's safe to do so.**

JB For sharing that wonderful symbol of regeneration and hope, a final thank you.  
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