

‘THE BRITS ARE COMING’

HIS EXCELLENCY TOM FLETCHER, BRITISH AMBASSADOR TO LEBANON, APPEARS TO BE NOTCHING UP ‘FIRSTS’ BY THE BUCKET LOAD. FOR STARTERS, BEING AN AMBASSADOR IS HIS INAUGURAL ROLE IN SUCH A POSITION. AND CONTRARY TO THE ADVICE OF HIS ADVISORS IN LONDON, HIS EXCELLENCY TOM FLETCHER INSISTED THAT HIS INAUGURAL POSITION WAS TO BE AS AMBASSADOR TO LEBANON. A DECISION HE HAS NOT REGRETTED SINCE HIS ARRIVAL IN LEBANON IN AUGUST, 2011.



An active 'blogger', he personally updates his blog daily; he is also active on Twitter. It was on the latter that he hosted a 'Twit Up' with Lebanese Prime Minister Mikati, a 'first' for a UK Ambassador and a Lebanese Prime Minister. More recently, a 'Twit Up' occurred between himself and Lebanon's 'Queen of Pop', Haifa Wehbe; a prospect which, he admits, set his nerves jangling more than anything else so far in Lebanon.

On meeting the Ambassador, most will notice how young he is. Approachable, energetic and dynamic, he revels in the challenges and opportunities that living and working in Lebanon brings. He readily admits that '...the longer you are in Lebanon, the more you realize how much you have to learn...

... It is a bewildering country with extraordinary contrasts. I don't think there is any other country in the world where an Ambassador spends a third of his time dealing with potential instability, security and political issues and another third of the time working on trade promotion, such as high-end luxury brands, etc. The contrasts are extraordinary. There can't be anywhere else where an Ambassador has such a big, close-protection team, yet spends a lot of time jumping in and out of luxury British cars to help trade promotion, or visiting the most extraordinary restaurants. I can't think of anywhere else like that. It is this that makes Lebanon so fascinating.'

This is his first role as an Ambassador. Yet his previous roles as a diplomat the world over - in Kenya, Paris, China, The States, and so on, including being Policy Advisor in Foreign Affairs for former Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and the present British Prime Minister David Cameron, ensured his political prowess and enabled him to make inroads in Lebanon.

His Excellency, Ambassador Fletcher also seeks alternative ways in which the relations between Britain

and Lebanon can be developed. One way is to highlight certain connections between the two countries, by using the occasion of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee as a catalyst. A British Week, for example, has been organized at ABC, Achrafieh from 12th June. Held under the patronage of H.E. Minister of Tourism Mr. Robert Fadel and H.E. British Ambassador Tom Fletcher, the event promises to show the very best in music, fashion and some of the quality brands of both Britain and Lebanon.

Another way to connect is through Arab culture, of which the Ambassador confesses he is a great fan. 'My wife and son play Arabic music nonstop at home...' The British Ambassador has enlisted the voice of Lebanese singer Tanya Kassis to sing anthems for the Embassy's Queen's Jubilee Party, including a concert at the Lebanese Prime Minister's office in the Serial.

'It is about making those connections and showing that it isn't just about diplomatic relations that are traditional and staid. It will be great British music sung by a Lebanese artist. It is a way of presenting the relations of the two countries in a different and less formal way,' the Ambassador says.

Keen to point out that 'The Brits' have a lot to offer to Lebanon in terms of its fashionable and leisure image, he adds, 'Brits invest a lot here. A walk around Beirut reveals that a lot of Brits run and own some of the best bars and restaurants. There are British D. Js and British music and so on. *Time Out Beirut* is run by a Brit. And of course *Adam Levant* is run by a Brit; all of which shows great dynamism, creativity and a partnership between the two countries.'

Talking about the collaboration between two countries, H.E. Ambassador Fletcher pointed out that he is '...extraordinarily passionate about this partnership and very ambitious for

it'. He does not want to come to the end of his three years here and think that he has just been 'treading water'. 'There is an amazing opportunity to take this relationship [between the two countries] to a different level.'

The Ambassador admits that Ambassadors always say that and that it is the kind of platitude they always come out with. However, he is absolutely serious that a deepening of relations will be done in a tangible way. 'You can judge us on our results,' he says.

The Ambassador then went on to describe how Lebanon and the United Kingdom are two countries situated both on the edge of two different continents. 'They are two countries that always have done their best when they look outwards across the sea; trading, writing, dreaming, and so on. In that respect, we are both extremely natural partners.' He went in to say how the English language is now the world's language and, here in Lebanon, the number of children learning English has increased rapidly; thus, presenting another opportunity for Lebanon and for the United Kingdom to become closer.

'I believe that the business relationship between the two countries is another area which can be further encouraged to become even more dynamic. We are hoping to bring over new British brands into this market. There are already many 'top-end' brands here - Princess Yachts, HSBC, Bentley, Jaguar, Lotus, Vivienne Westwood, Alexander McQueen and other Fashion Houses, whom we are in touch with to bring out to Lebanon, and whom we will use as the launch pad for 'British Week' in June.'

He then spoke about Britain being a place for the Lebanese to visit, saying how that even though that tradition can be seen throughout the Capital, there is a raw, modern edge to it. 'I believe that it has a lot in common with Beirut. In Beirut, you cannot walk

out of the door without being aware of its heritage, such as the Romans, the Phoenicians, and so on. Also, Beirut is a vibrant city.' He went on to say how first and foremost, a stable Lebanon provides an extraordinary hub for the rest of the Middle East. 'Personally, I think Beirut should be the Middle Eastern capital. It has class and energy, so is a great hub for the British. The Lebanese are great business people and everywhere they go they make money. So linking up with them gives us all a great network for the Middle East; creating a good market for our products.'

The Lebanese are great middlemen and wholesalers', says the Ambassador, in broaching the subject of what Lebanon can offer the UK. 'The fruit and vegetables are amazing here, and we appreciate them. Plus, there is the new Lebanese gas sector, which will be huge in the coming years. There are a lot of opportunities. Bringing tourists to Lebanon is another option.'

Admitting that part of the relationship is diplomatic and political, Ambassador Fletcher keenly pointed out the importance of relationships between the two countries' sporting people, businesses, between school children, such as linking Lebanese and British school children on big screens, Skype and interactive whiteboards via the British Council.

'It is important that British children can have a firsthand view of Lebanon and vice versa. Ultimately, if we are to co-exist on both, and all, Continents then there has to be that kind of exchange and understanding. It is not just about us, who are in our suit and ties. The Lebanese get knocked around by frustrations and so on, but they keep going. They have an amazing resilience; they are just so talented to do all of this in three languages, and make money wherever they go.' the Ambassador concludes.

