

Inter-Gulf Conference '97

Selected Highlights of Jim Sillars's speech Summarising the Conference proceedings.

I believe this has been an excellent conference and it is certainly far superior to the two that I attended in Doha in 1993 and in Riyadh in 1994. I also believe the structure and, in a sense, disengagement of the BBGs from the commercial councils as such - not having a joint meeting but having a BBG meeting - has been a very, very good move. And I think that we have to measure the conference against the objectives. The main objective is spelt out in the theme: "How does British business improve its place in the market", and there is also an implicit objective in the interaction between the BBGs in the Gulf building understanding, co-operation and cohesion at the regional level year upon year. I think the answer in both cases is 'yes'.

The other thing which I believe is of exceptional value has been the sessions on the SIGs. At Scottish Enterprise in Scotland where we have a responsibility for developing Scottish industry and inward investment and export, we are actually paying money on what we call the cluster policy, that is, bringing people together in exactly the same field of activity in joint discussions on matters of common interest. We are pouring quite considerable resources into that and your SIGs are exactly what we are trying to do north of the border, which is cluster people who can cross fertilise ideas without in any way damaging their own individual commercial interest. I was extremely impressed this morning by the level of discussion and the information that flowed in those three meetings that were taking

place. And it has also brought forward the inherent capability, and in fact the unique position, of the BBGs in the Gulf to give positive assistance at the most important level of all - the market level. It's folk like yourselves who actually do the business, therefore the information and knowledge you have is actually quite unique. There's also been a secondary theme and that is relations between the Gulf BBGs. I think the conference has strengthened the ties. And there's been a deeper understanding arising out of it. The BBGs are a source of market information, trends and business opportunities. There's no question about what has emerged (in our discussions) i.e. that there is no clear and effective line of communication to the people that matter, when business opportunities and trends are identified by the BBGs and the people that matter are British companies who would have to do the business.

Getting business information to targets. I can offer no immediate solution. I believe the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce could assist as we do have resources. We are improving our services to our members and also United Kingdom companies as a whole. If the BBGs want to link with the Business Links, along with Michael Blandford I am sure that we can help to actually do that. This is something I am taking back to discuss with Lord Prior and Abdul Karim, the Secretary-General, to see just exactly how we might be able to fit in with that line of communication. Talk to the Committee for Middle East Trade, talk to the

Area Action Committee of the DTI, because we all gather once a month in an Area Action Committee for the Gulf, where we try to co-ordinate our activity and cross fertilise ideas. Then come back in and maybe have a meeting with a representative body of the BBGs to report back what our attitudes are, what our ideas are, what the reaction is, to see if we can actually make progress.

Finally, I would like to thank you for the honour of being the Chairman of this conference. It has been a very, very pleasant duty indeed. It's been a valuable experience for the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, because we have a duality in our makeup; we are more than half Arab to be perfectly frank. But we have a big British input into our life. We believe that we can work effectively with the BBGs, for Arab companies as well, and in a sense we speak the same language. At the macro level, the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce probably knows more in the broad reaches of Arab policy and economic policy than BBGs will. Because we cover all the Arab world, we have intimate links with Arab governments and the Arab Chambers of Commerce, and the Arab private sector, and we are therefore privy to information which might not be available; and unlikely in some areas, to be available to BBGs. But, you definitely know more than we do, than we will ever do, of where it is happening for business, and you have got an unsurpassed knowledge of the market place which people like me from the Chamber never can have.

Continued overleaf