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## Christmas Message 2020



**Peter Collecott CMG**, co-Chairman of the Ambassador Partnership, was the British Ambassador to Brazil from 2004 to 2008. Since then he has advised multinationals, governments and NGOs on business, political and sustainable development issues.



**Richard Schiffer** is an international lawyer qualified and licensed in the UK and the USA (Illinois). He is a founding partner, Co-Chairman and General Counsel of the Ambassador Partnership LLP. Richard was a pioneer in bringing to the UK the use of mediation for the resolution of commercial disputes, founding and Chairing the ADR Group from 1989 to 2016.

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The past year is, for many of us, probably one to forget – but few of us will be able to do so for many years, unless, of course, there is worse to come!

It is difficult to remember that at the beginning of 2020 Boris Johnson had just scored a major victory in the British General Election, appeared to be dominating the UK political scene after many years of parliamentary and societal wrangling over Brexit – a word banned from his political lexicon as he enthused about massive expenditure on infrastructure as part of his “levelling up” agenda. When the UK formally left the EU on 31 January, after 47 years, no-one really noticed. However, now, at the end of the year, we are still hanging on to see whether a battered and weakened Johnson is prepared to annoy his new, Brexit-committed, backbenchers by doing a compromise deal with the EU - in order to avoid a “hard Brexit”, and the further economic disruption that would bring.

Johnson’s hand has been complicated by the two other main events of 2020 – the Coronavirus crisis, and the ending of the Trump Presidency in the US. Coronavirus has dominated political, social and economic life for three quarters of 2020, and is not about to loosen its grip before the northern Winter is over, and mass vaccination begins to win the battle. The UK and the US have been particularly badly hit, which is hard to understand, given the depth of the medical and scientific expertise in these countries, and the scale of resources thrown at halting the pandemic. The sad fact is that both countries suffered from societies deeply split by issues of identity and thus deeply sceptical about advice from scientists and politicians, particularly those they opposed. Moreover, both Governments proved incapable of rising to the needs of the pandemic – Trump’s through deliberate negligence, Johnson’s through incompetence magnified by a public health function sapped of its previous strength by a decade of austerity. It is no comfort that other Governments, such as Brazil’s, have followed a similarly disastrous path; and certainly not that

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authoritarian Governments, such as China's, proved more adept at controlling the virus. Indeed, in geopolitical terms, Coronavirus has added to the sense of disillusionment with the West, and Western leadership, among friends round the world; and offered further opportunities to China to increase its influence and brandish its leadership credentials; and, closer to home, for authoritarian leaders, such as those in Hungary and Turkey, to increase their control.

Meanwhile Coronavirus has wreaked massive economic damage across the globe, and will continue to do so. The Ambassador Partnership is not the only small business to feel pleased that it has proved adaptable and resilient enough to survive. Many businesses, both large and small, have not, or will not as we all begin to reshape our lives to living with the virus and with the economic recession and the deep social consequences which the pandemic has brought. In addition, Coronavirus has given added impetus to massive changes already underway, from the expansion of online shopping, to remote working and the rapid advance of new technologies, artificial intelligence in particular, and added to growing inequality. If these changes are not to decimate whole areas of the service economy and produce large-scale and long-term unemployment, including among the middle class, we need the notions of "building back better" and "the green revolution" to move from being political slogans to well-planned programmes of change, led by Governments, but with strong private sector buy-in and popular support. To achieve this our Governments must move back from populism and identity politics, and become more consensual, agile, programmatic and competent; and to value co-operation within a rules-based international system, rather than disparaging it.

The advent of a Biden Presidency gives us some hope in this direction. His task of repairing damage from the Trump years will probably be easier internationally than domestically. Rejoining the Paris climate change agreement and the WHO, and confirming the US's commitment to NATO, will be easy wins; re-entering the JCPOA with Iran, let alone restoring some stability in the Middle East, and rebuilding confidence in American foreign policy among troubled allies, will be less easy; and building a more nuanced relationship with China a considerable challenge. At the same time a President Biden will have to address the still escalating Coronavirus epidemic in the US, try to moderate the deep divisions in American society and politics which Trump deliberately exacerbated, and thus start to restore Americans' faith in their own polity. His success in these domestic tasks will be determined in large part by whether the Republican Party can shed its thrall to Trump, and the Democratic Party can come together round a moderate Biden agenda.

2021 is likely to be another turbulent year, as we transition to whatever the new normal in society will look like post-Covid, while coping with the economic effects of the virus which will be with us for years. The world may look very different in twelve months' time – but we hope it feels better and more hopeful. In the meantime, we will all be living through a far from usual Christmas and New Year. However, we trust that, nevertheless, you will be able to enjoy a rare period of relaxation and good-cheer within your selected Christmas bubbles, and to recharge your reserves of resilience and optimism to help face the challenges of the months and year ahead.

*Christmas greetings and happy holidays to all*

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**Tracey Stewart**, Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

[tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com](mailto:tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com)

[www.ambassadorllp.com](http://www.ambassadorllp.com)