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Glenn Vaughan of the British Chamber of Commerce | EU & Belgium discusses the importance of the Belgium-UK relationship, the role of healthcare and the life sciences within that, and how the Chamber's work is evolving in the run-up to Brexit.

The British Chamber of Commerce | EU & Belgium is at the heart of the UK's European relations as well as its Belgian ones; could you tell us more about its strategic role?

There is a long-standing relationship between the United Kingdom and Belgium and the same issues and concerns are shared amongst the two countries from a multinational business perspective. Our role as the British Chamber is to promote the significance of business between the United Kingdom, Belgium and the European Union. Our members are companies from the UK, but also from Europe and all over the world. The corporations we work with all have a stake the success of the UK-Europe relationship, in other words, beyond just the Union. So, our role is to ensure the success of Europe as a whole and our focus is to foster an environment that enables the creation of value for all countries.

Speaking specifically about the UK and Belgium how would you describe the relationship of the countries historically?

The relationship between the two countries is an enduring one and significant for both sides. Belgium and the United Kingdom are often considered getaway markets for multinational companies – an entry into Europe. The United Kingdom attracts companies thanks to its openness and ease of business, but also its familiarity to other English-speaking markets such as the United States. On the other hand, Belgium has a strategic location in terms of logistics networks for instance and is able to be a centre of added-value services in a wider European context thanks to the language and business skills – and openness as well.

In the field of healthcare and life sciences, there is a strong bond between the two countries in terms of investment. In general, the United Kingdom has a strong footprint in the sectors due to the fact that it is a science-based country with world-leading universities and science clusters. Similarly, Belgium is a crucial market and has a particular position in the EU and worldwide for healthcare and life sciences, as exemplified by the significance of clinical trials in the country. That’s reflected in the footprint of a British company like GSK Vaccines in Belgium and vice-versa with UCB’s investment in the UK.

These leading positions on the global Healthcare and Life Sciences industry foster collaboration between the two countries and justify the interest of British-based businesses.

How has Brexit shifted your priorities in leading the chamber?

Brexit has of course been a point of uncertainty for many members of the British Chamber. Nevertheless, it does not change the priorities and role of the chamber which is to promote UK-EU business and achieve success for Europe as a whole. As Brexit has been confirmed and we take steps towards a hoped for new agreement, many questions and concerns will have to be answered and many more challenges are going to arise in the next year.

The stated aim of the United Kingdom government is to secure a position for a free trade agreement similar to the one the European Union has with Canada, in addition to other agreements. We want to see the highest possible level of collaboration between the United Kingdom and the European Union. That’s the very strong message we hear from member companies, wherever they come from. We are focused on making sure that the negotiators hear this message and supporting that collaboration for the future.

Can Brexit in a way create new opportunities for Belgium to grow its pan-European significance?

Taking the political and economic context of Brexit, I believe that Belgium emerges as a natural place for companies with a strong UK base to increase their investment in Europe. Indeed, with Brexit, many companies will have to manage some of their activities within the European Union's single market. Having an attachment to the continent and a foot inside the single market through Belgium is a way for companies with UK-based management to ensure a beneficial relationship is continued. As a matter of fact, many organizations have made changes to their operations and more will come along in this regard.

Belgium has a lot to offer in attracting these post-Brexit investments. It looks like a natural place to be as it is geographically close but also culturally similar. The country's strengths include its multilingual and multicultural environment and very open economy which reinforces its unique value.

For the Healthcare and Life Sciences sector, there are further advantages. The industry is constantly innovating, changing, adapting to new regulation, government and pricing policies.

What are the strategic issues being on top of the Chamber agenda today?

The strategic aim of the British Chamber is to ensure the attractiveness of a complete European ecosystem with the United Kingdom an essential part of that. Right now, sustainability and digitalization are central concerns for our members.

We have the European Commission's new Green Deal that has been presented and it is high within our agenda. Environmental topics concern all countries and is a recurrent concern across all industries; it is just one contribution to a wider sustainability goal. Tackling the climate crisis is a core issue for the Chamber and its members.

The next point is digitalization. It is a crucial point for globally competitive economies. That's not just an issue for the private sector but also the public sector and health services where issues such as Big Data and Artificial Intelligence have great potential.

The success of Europe is in the core of our mission. It could be easy to forget but there are many competitiveness fundamentals that we need to get right to ensure the economic success of Europe.

While figuring out ways to answer sustainability and digitalization; we have to think about what it will mean to succeed as Europe and compete in a global context.

Currently, what steps is the Chamber taking to create a more favourable business environment for companies in Belgium?

The Chamber focuses on a business environment that is open for business. Indeed, being open has a whole variety of implications such as being open to people, with an aim to attract talent, ideas, and innovation. This could apply in the regulatory environment of innovation regarding finance or tech transfers for instance. It is a real challenge for Europe to be open and to foster a climate that reinforces innovation.

In healthcare, the increasing number of new therapies such as cell & gene and immunotherapies are highlights of innovative approaches that require a regulatory system that supports them. Healthcare systems also need to be open and adaptable to get the most out of these innovations. We're working with members to help key stakeholders and decision-makers understand the potential for such innovation to deliver real improvements.

Any final message?

Belgium can be a great place to do business and is of course at the heart of the EU, but more than that, it is central to the successful relationship between EU and UK. That's hugely important for Europe's success. The country is a natural place to build and to connect businesses; it might be overlooked by some but very much worth taking time to look at it.

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