Obed Mlaba — the right stuff for London

BUSINESS DAY | Mar 12, 2014 | EDITORIAL

The new South African High Commissioner to London Obed Mlaba will try to bring new energy to the relationship with the UK.

It was more than refreshing to read remarks by the new South African High Commissioner to London, Obed Mlaba, the former mayor of Durban, in this newspaper on Monday.

Mr Mlaba stood up stoutly for his new posting, declaring that South Africa and the UK are "true friends" whereas our relationship with our new biggest trading partner, China, was "just about what they pull out of our ground". By that he means, of course, that most of our business with China consists of the ores our mining companies and our miners dig out of the ground and export to the Chinese so that they may turn them into cheap manufactured goods to be exported, some of it back to us in South Africa.

Mr Mlaba showed a strong bias to business when he ran Durban, and it is clear that he will try to bring new energy to the relationship with the UK.

It is not a moment too soon. The UK is our oldest trading partner and our ties run deeper there than with any other country on earth. It may not be comforting to many people now in the governing political elite, given Britain’s destructive and too often heartless role in our history, but there are important elements of that history which, should we choose, we can today exploit for our mutual gain. The British — British companies, British intellectuals, British tourists, British churches, British diplomats and British sportsmen and women — know us better than any other nation knows us.

What’s better is that they feel a bond with South Africa which, despite the many stones we now throw at them, is still strong.

London remains the centre of global finance and the home, now, of some of our biggest industrial and financial corporations. It is immensely important that the investor community in London is kept "on side", and Mr Mlaba may be just the person to see to it that it happens. Speaking out about his mission was the right thing to do. The fact that he springs from the heart of President Jacob Zuma’s ANC is no small matter either.

This is not to denigrate our ties with China. They are very important but, for the moment, different.

It is in Britain where we lay the groundwork for our relationships with the industrialised world. The quality and vitality of our diplomacy in London, because it is where we still have so many friends, has never been more important.