

Lord Howell of Guildford- speech to CFCC 22.04.24

UK Treaties and Alliances – the New Dilemmas of the 21st Century.

Comments to the Conservative Foreign and Commonwealth Council Meeting, 22nd April 2024, 6pm, House of Lords by Lord Howell of Guildford, former Secretary of State for Energy and for Transport, former FCO Minister for International Energy Security and Minister for the Commonwealth; former chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and of the House of Lords International Affairs and Defence Committee.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the then British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, (the Third Marquess) deplored the way public opinion was entering into the delicate realms of national strategy and foreign policy.

He feared that too much popular involvement in the nation's foreign affairs would be very dangerous and that the cacophony of fragmented and volatile public opinion had no place in the tactful diplomatic handling of relations and interests between the great powers.

The noble Marquess, who was not only Prime Minister but Foreign Secretary at the same time, was of course right in the context of the then world he knew. But that world was fading fast and he was wrong if he imagined that the trend to popularisation and open debate on every aspect of our country's international relations could be halted. Indeed he could scarcely have imagined the state to which we have now come, in which communications technology gives every interest, every institution, at every level of society and in every part of the kingdom, an international platform – a platform of both power and confusion.

Views both baked and half-baked go out for instant circulation to a hungry media and in effect turning everyone who chooses into an author and new source

The great Lord Salisbury would, I am sure, have quickly seen how difficult it would become in the digital age to distil a clear statement of the nation's direction and purposes out of all the babble of views, and how impossible it would be to keep Britain's grand strategy under the roof of one Department of State. Perhaps his decision to keep the Foreign Ministry and the Premiership in one pair of hands – his own – was more prescient than it seemed at the time.

Something is Missing

That something has gone missing in our whole foreign policy stance, that it seems to have lost its focus, is certainly now widely recognized. Where we now stand in a fracturing and now intensely dangerous world of deep distrust, turmoil and barbarous violence is far from clear.

The latest expression of concern about this comes from a group of very distinguished former diplomats and practitioners who want to see a new approach, a new coherence in overseas policies and a wider involvement by all departments of Whitehall in the nation's external reach and influence. They also want to mark this by moving our diplomats out of Gilbert Scott's palatial Foreign Office building in Whitehall, with its huge rooms, gilded ceilings and wide imposing corridors, and into a bright new building.

There, so they believe, brainpower will be inspired and language found to articulate the country's new mission and purposes in an utterly transformed world.

Their report has attracted a good deal of criticism, some of it unfair. Yet in a way they are still clinging to some of Lord Salisbury's concerns and viewpoint. They still see foreign policy as an area for governments to shape and diplomats to implement through their skills and machinery. And the language of great powers and top tables still dominates.

Yet missing is an appreciation that much deeper forces are now at work in the age of internet governance, from which need to come a much

more profound understanding about the way the world now works, and how the UK fits into and adjusts to it.

The New Insights Needed

First amongst these insights is that our relations with other nations, and with other groupings and alliances, are now increasingly in the hands of networks and their platform owners, which are interweaving at every level, many of them outside, or at the edges of, government reach.

Professional speaks to professional, creative arts source to creative arts source, scientist to scientist, research lab to research lab school to school, university to university, magistrate to magistrate, lawyer to lawyer, parliamentarian to parliamentarian interest group to interest group, investor to investor, scientist to scientist. And I'm afraid, criminal to criminal as well.

The evidence that this distinguished galère of experts haven't quite grasped all this massive and constant interchange, let alone the darker side of the world-wide web, comes from a key omission from their Report. There is no mention anywhere of the UK's membership of the biggest global organization of all on the planet, which is the modern Commonwealth, to which about a third of humankind is signed up, with more countries, especially in Africa, showing an interest in joining all the time - or at least with being in closer association.

No treaty or family of treaties binds this enormous association together and membership is voluntary. And while there is a central Secretariat it is very low profile.

But that is largely because the issues and interests binding this vast group together today are outside the traditional patterns and values which many used to think the Commonwealth was all about. And it is because the planetary ubiquity of electronic connectivity makes new 21st century concerns the property not just of governments and diplomats but of people in their hundreds of millions.

This is what I try to explain in the latest edition of my little book about the Commonwealth today, which I call ‘The Mother of All Networks’. Please do take a copy.

The tiny silicon chip, loaded with literally billions of transistors now on each one of them, has taken the monopoly of communication away from officialdom, as surely as the printing press took power and influence away from the rulers and high authorities five or six hundred year ago, but infinitely more quickly, on an infinitely greater scale and with infinitely greater social and political consequences. Digitalisation has acted like a gigantic clean blood transfusion to peoples through every cell of the Commonwealth network.

While all the fundamental values of the Commonwealth Charter remain they are being overlaid today by new concerns and a new vocabulary. Even such labels as ‘developing countries’ now jar and sound faintly patronising, while the grand and simple labels of the 20th century, such as ‘the free world’, East and West, the axis of evil (or its anti-western riposte, the axis of resistance’), have all been overtaken by the complexities of a multipolar world of shifting ‘sides’, alliances and interests.

The independent nations of this new world order, large, growing and still small alike, have been brilliantly described and named by a former Director of Chatham House, Sir Robin Niblett, as ‘the neo-non-aligned’. They should not be confused with the much fewer non-aligned of the last century who angered John Foster Dulles by failing to distinguish between liberal free world values and the dark tyranny of Soviet Communism.

Today’s ‘non-aligned’ have no particular wish to conform to a polarized conception of world or to be under either the Chinese or the American hegemon. Many of their peoples are watching Britain closely and ready to stay very friendly, but not impressed if the British look too much like the puppets or poodles of Washington, with its simplified Manichean global view and its hankering to ‘lead the world’ again and

return to a lost dream of a restored age of American primacy, which did indeed exist post World War and again, for a short time, after the break-up of the USSR. That kind of thinking will drive young and independent nations, or drive Britain away from its real friends.

The Direction of National Travel

All this still seems to be absent from much of the thinking of foreign policy and strategic experts, whether past or present, and absent with it the language to express well the relevant direction in which the British nation ought now to be travelling.

What, in essence, are the truly big ideas which will fill its sails. And remembering that a nation or society a peace within itself is far the best influence for peace more widely in the world, what are the policies that might lift governments back into the position of authority and respect they once enjoyed, and enable people to trust their leaders and their central government, giving them their wholehearted consent to pilot the country through new and uncharted waters?

In a populist age the sustainable and reasonably clear answers are going to come *not* from the State and its surrounding coterie of pressure groups and 'advisory bodies' but from its citizens, who after all, give the State its legitimacy and its financial resources.

The winning ideas will be those that are drawn from a profound understanding of the way the world now works, pierce through the fog of information overload and are promoted with wisdom and conviction. No use for leaders to rely on clever ad men, public relations experts who miss the real mood, or fashion-obsessed focus groups. And no use drowning a nation's citizens in endless promises of detailed policy goals that an increasingly sceptical public doubts will ever be achieved, and certainly not by central government.

Higher living standards, more funds for every cause and for every public infrastructure need, familiar 'better tomorrow promises' that never materialize - these sound doubly dubious, especially at a time when other measured voices are warning of the need to prepare for war and to think in hard terms about practical survival rather than partisan nirvanas of universal welfare and more for all.

And no use, again, relying on the old ideological rallying calls of the past, when neither the collectivist state nor the marketplace plainly any longer have all the answers, and common sense shows clearly that a skilled and innovative mix of the two is now needed.

With all the detail in the world available on the Web in continuous flood, the message people really want to hear from their leaders is how this bewildering flow makes sense, what the real underlying truths are and where it all is leading. They seek deep reassurance and guidance as to where they belong, what the nation they inhabit now stands for and what position it aspires to in the new global landscape.

Well above all the usual bread-and-butter wants — about which they have heard so many unfulfilled pledges — people are ready to have their minds open to realistic and honest outlooks, both the dangers and new possibilities, for themselves and for their children, and to have their imaginations fired about the future.

Forty Years Ago: A Nation to Love?

To some degree Margaret Thatcher, after a slow start, succeeded almost 40 years ago in reinvigorating the UK, which was a deeply dispirited and demoralized nation when she first took over. But that sense of pride and purpose has long since melted away and now a new uplifting lead is once again crying out to be articulated. Everyone needs a country to love, and the moment for a profound renewal of the nation state, as wise former U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali once described it, has truly arrived.

Where should the British now look for that sense of renewal? Some British voices have continued arguing that the answer is a return to the European Union. That, they claim, is where Britain's destiny lies. These voices are not as strong as they were, but they are still influential. Others put the trans-Atlantic relationship with America as the top priority.

But in reality the first step to restoring national confidence and unity is to show that while the British are, and will remain, good Europeans (it is after all their immediate neighbourhood), and while relations with America should always remain solid, a modern nation like Britain need

not see itself as bound to either entity when it comes to its global positioning, and that its interests and potential go far wider.

The world is now a network in which confident and agile nations of all sizes can play their part with a mixture of alliances and bilateral links all round — and especially links with the rising powers of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

It will not surprise many to know that one voice of true authority to have spoken out most consistently down the decades in support of this vision of renewal for Britain, and for all its citizens, is a royal one. It is that of the late Queen Elizabeth II, who clearly set out where the best future for Britain may now lie. “In lots of ways”, she told the nation in her 2009 Christmas Day broadcast it is the Commonwealth that is “the face of the future.”

What she said is probably what most British people feel, although it may not show up on the surface of opinion polls and tests. (It happens also to be statistically true as well, since two thirds of all Commonwealth citizens are under twenty-nine) .

The British are not anti-European, and certainly not anti-American. And nor are they nationalist in the narrow, obsessive sense that some who call themselves Conservative proclaim. But they do long to make their own special contribution on the international stage, and the Commonwealth of 56 nations, with others queuing to join, offers an amazing soft-power network through which that can be done. The foreign policy ‘experts’ should listen to them.

The political leaders who follow this royal guidance will strike a deeper chord of sympathy and assent than anything that can be achieved with promises of good times round the corner. They will also be following popular instincts as opposed to official instincts. In doing so they will be offering the framework for a truly big new idea around which a divided and disoriented nation can loyally unite, and thereby regain for government, of whatever party, and of Parliament (both Houses) the trust, authority, respect and capacity to meet great challenges that, for the moment, it seems to have lost.

In a network world a nation like the UK, with its history and experience, and its connections, can be most effective if it works at a

certain distance from block and superpower thinking . 'Solid but not slavish' is the neat and correct summary long ago by William Hague, former Foreign Minister, of how UK-US relations should be. Containment but cooperation is the sensible guide for dealing with the Chinese giant.

The New Players and the New Commonwealth Network

This clearing of the air about where the UK should stand now opens the way for a vigorous and creative development of UK links and interests with the new players on the world stage - many of whom happen anyway to be Britain's old friends who in recent years have been looking on with some dismay while British policy has neglected them in favour of the EU.

Top of the list come the rising nations to whom power, both economic and political, is fast shifting away from the old Atlantic axis . This is a trend about which one hears little from either US presidential candidate. Both still speak as though America automatically possesses international leadership.

What neither they nor large sections of the US media have grasped, but what the present Foreign Secretary ,David Cameron seemed to perceive way back when he was Premier, is that while America is still a mighty economy, its size no longer delivers overwhelming influence. New power centres and alliances have grown. The world is now multipolar and more complicated .

The vast network of the modern Commonwealth provides Britain with a quick way into these new alliances and interests, notably through links with India, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore ,Bangladesh and Canada - to name but a few of the new global players- and also through the good offices of Japan.

Indeed the list of 'new friends' on which the British should be working much harder is not limited to Commonwealth members, close though they can be , thanks to common language and common values and ,well, sheer informal friendship.

Waiting for the British to craft much warmer and stronger links are, for example, the Japanese, who now long for a restoration of the old early 20th century intimacy.

We thought we had sealed a new closeness with Japan in the nineteen seventies and eighties, when Japan moved in, saved our battered motor industry and rid us of the worst trades union restrictive practices of the time. The 2008-9 world financial crisis and Brexit drove them away, but now they are back seeking closer alliances than ever through a massive combat aircraft project and all kinds of security alliance links. Some Middle East Gulf states, too, Kuwait, for example, or Oman, who always admired the British and wonder where they have gone during the present upheavals. Even some of the newer EU members who look uneasily at Brussels and remember Britain's old loyalty to Europe's smaller and more easterly states are ready for more friendship ties despite our EU departure, or may be because of it!

As for the other new giants like China this is the time for the UK to establish its own distinctive relationships, well away from American or EU preconceptions and postures. This needs a lot more subtlety, and experience, than the American approach.

On the one hand we should certainly be alive to spreading Chinese intrusion in smaller Commonwealth countries, with offers not just of development aid and shiny new roads, sports stadia and railways, via the Belt and Road Initiative but also of security support. This is where Commonwealth members like the Solomon Isles group, or East Africa coastal states, or Caribbean countries should have full British support in protecting themselves.

China's habit (alleged) of bugging its products, such as cars and white goods, should also be shown up as infantile and appropriately exposed, ridiculed and halted.

On the other hand, Britain has everything to gain from Chinese trade, as well as from its advanced technologies in some areas. Chasing China out of all cooperation on rebuilding the British civil nuclear power sector may have satisfied some Sinophobe impulses but Chinese skilled

involvement could easily have been managed without endangering national security. Too late now, the Chinese have either gone or are on their way. A major plank in our Net Zero strategy has been sawn off.

Conclusion: Defence and Security: The Dilemmas which can be Resolved

So in sum any new British leadership lying ahead would be wise to listen much more closely to what comes from below than from the narrow expertise above. This is anyway the route along which technology, with all its potential dangers, is taking the world. The State which tries to take on more and more, encounters less and less success in doing so.

Perhaps in modern world conditions, the sphere of diplomacy, where failure can lead so easily to violent conflict, is now too serious, requires to operate on far too wider front and demands so much more popular consent, to be left only to diplomats.

In the UK we can expect to see and should welcome a Parliament not only filled with higher quality Members regaining more trust and respect, but insisting on more powers over treaty agreements, alliance commitments and international linkages, mostly through far stronger Committee systems for calling the Executive to account. Almost alone amongst parliaments in the democracies, the Westminster Parliament allows the Government of the day to dictate the overwhelming bulk of the legislative agenda and the size and pattern of the Budget, and hence our general strategic direction in new world conditions.

In a sense, the recent role of the US Congress in foreign policy, and the recent decision to release major resources for Ukraine, where delay has been frustrating and has caused much head-shaking, is the democratic pattern of the future and the way to put the popular seal on difficult choices and keep it there.

Again, on climate issues and policies, some easing of the pace and pressure the pace of Government laws and measures has been denounced as surrender on green issues. Yet it is the obviously popular

and consensual view to proceed with policy change at a sensible pace, rather than by the outcry of evangelist committees and lobbies who have the Government's ear, which is going to produce sustainable and timely results and keep the path most open and on schedule to a decarbonized future

Again, in the arcane and publicly poorly illuminated area of defence spending, where pundits and retired generals deplore the small size of the British regular army, there is now a wiser popular approach, tested and put into practice by several of our Scandinavian neighbours . This combines a regular core force with large numbers of reserves of men and women prepared to be involved in a degree of combat training, technology readiness and back-up. In Britain an army of at least fifty thousand could be mobilised ,some in High Readiness Units almost immediately. The guess must be that in practice many times more could be swiftly mobilised in the present climate, following the past decade of quiet preparation in transforming the old Territorials into a large modern reserve of armed forces.

In the digitalised industrial and service age, the workforce from which this motivated military reinforcement has to come has radically changed in character. Yet scarcely any mention of this appears in the corridors of Whitehall or Ministerial comment or Parliamentary debate or Reports.

The citizens' army in the digital age will depend on much wider conditions and on grass roots willingness and readiness rather than Ministry of Defence or Foreign Office planning! And trans-Commonwealth defence and military cooperation, also quietly growing, is a relatively unsung side of overall deepened defence readiness and capabilities.

Strategically , overall diplomatic and defence policy should be guided by a bold and profound critique of American misunderstandings of the new world, and an equally bold critique of the wrong direction in which too many are still trying to take the EU .

That in turn will open the way for a truly constructive UK interdependence within the global network, whilst remaining in its balanced role as good club member of a reformed Europe, keeping a sound but carefully calibrated friendship with America, and sustaining its pivotal membership of the Commonwealth – which is emerging as the perfect resilient and flexible model for 21st century effective global relationships.

Seen this way the apparent dilemmas of Britain's repositioning in an ex-EU and multipolar world become little more than the dilemmas of its inner foreign policy tribe, struggling to adapt to novel world trends.

The commonsense message of a wider public is that power has greatly shifted in the digital age of ever growing networks and giant platforms, both globally and within our own society, and will shift further. How quickly the policy-makers adjust to the new situation and the new priorities and crises will determine whether our future is primarily one of disorder or survival and progress. Hopefully the understanding will come soon, as the dangers mount daily.

Then, at last, to borrow a phrase, we may be truly in a better position to 'take back control'!
