



ADAMANT FOR DRIFT

Mending the Broken Reed of British Foreign Policy

Speech to Global Strategy Forum, 1pm, Tuesday Oct.27th, at the National Liberal Club,
Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

By David Howell (The Rt.Hon Lord Howell of Guildford)

“The world is no longer defined by powerful regional blocs or spheres. It is defined by powerful global networks”

Preface

Our foreign policy defines us. Clear and confident international purpose, well articulated, however complex the issues, gives us pride and purpose at home and provides a focus for our national loyalties.

At a time of almost universal concern and uncertainty about the course of economic events, and when financial turmoil could yet spill over into civic and political disorder and into irresistible pressures for protection, leading to the downfall of the whole liberal trading order, and a time when our parliamentary institutions are discredited and a real crisis of political legitimacy looms, the need for clarity and definition in our national role and purposes becomes more necessary than ever.

I know that opinion pollsters and election strategists tell us that foreign policy is not of much interest to voters. Domestic issues are said to always come much higher up the agenda.

But this is misleading and I believe the experts are posing the wrong question. Our positioning in the world and our international connections give our lives meaning. They tell us what to be proud of, what common causes and loyalties bind us together and prevent further social disintegration right here at home. These are not abstruse matters or the preserve of the chattering classes. They are central to daily and family life and the hopes and feelings which sustain us.

And it is this very central matter about which I propose to talk today.

A New Landscape

It is surely now time for a clean break and a new strategic direction, a new tone and a new philosophy, so as to best position ourselves in the amazing new network world that has evolved around us.

1. Within this new network the USA remains a great and powerful nation. But its unipolar moment has passed. It no longer leads the world because in an age of networks there is no single 'top dog' leader in the old sense. The theme becomes team co-operation, not team leadership, and even less 'going-it-alone'. Pax Americana is no more. President Obama shows he understands this (although do all those around him?). His Cairo speech was blessedly free of the lecturing tone and talked more of respect, encouragement and working together with other (non-Western) powers. He has a lot of errors and damage to undo, not least the colossal strategic error which removed Iran's enemies and promoted Iran as the leader of anti-Westernism, leaving America's reputation in the Middle East and the Gulf, and I am afraid Britain's as well, in tatters.

2. Power has shifted not only away from Washington but from the whole Atlantic axis. Western hegemony no longer rules OK. The rising power centres are in Asia – China, India, Japan, the whole Chinese diaspora of South East Asia and to a growing extent in Latin America. It is from these directions that forces, influences and hard resources (cash) are

now coming which will bear most strongly on our own future fortunes. The groundwork is being laid not just for a new economic pattern but for a complete replacement of the US and dollar-dominated financial and political order.

3. The European Union is Britain's local regional club, so to speak, and it has achieved a great deal. But the EU today is very different from the EU of only a short while ago – which in turn is totally different from the EU we first joined almost three decades ago. 20th century visions of Europe as a bloc or super-power are substantially outdated. The world is no longer defined by powerful regional blocs. It is defined by powerful global networks. Neither the Lisbon Treaty aficionados nor the majority blocs in the sadly remote European Parliament have grasped this. Good Europeans should be looking in radical new directions and leading our region away from the tramline thinking embodied in the now dated Lisbon texts.

4. Power has not only drained away from the Atlantic capitals to new alliances and groupings. It has slipped away from all nation-state governments as more than one and a half billion people tap into the world-wide web and make their mark on opinion, events and markets, with inevitably increased volatility in all sectors. We live in an age of networks, soft power, sub-governmental and non-governmental linkages between states and societies, requiring new diplomatic machinery to keep track of it all at state level.

5. The world's (and our own) energy mix is changing fast, downgrading to some extent the importance of oil in the medium term, but over the coming decade making Britain massively reliant on imported gas, as the North Sea supply fades. This changes our priorities and relationships with Middle Eastern suppliers, with Russia, with the Central Asian gas producers and with Turkey, which emerges as one of the key energy channels between east and west, as well a growing mediating influence in the labyrinth of Middle Eastern and near Asian issues which bedevil global stability.

New Questions for British Policy

This new landscape, with Western hegemony in clear decline, presents immediate and important questions for British policy:

- Do we now have the right stances and tones, as well as the right distribution of diplomatic resources, in our relations with Washington, with Brussels and with the new rising powers of Asia and the Middle East ?
- Do we have the right military and security dispositions to meet these new conditions? The military are flexible and ready as always to perform even the ugliest tasks (as now). But they have to plan ahead and they DO need a clear definition of the nation's security priorities and purposes within which they have to act. Are they getting it? And especially are they getting a clear picture over our involvement in Afghanistan, with Pakistan and in areas like Somalia and Yemen, the new breeding grounds for terrorism?
- With the nuclear non-proliferation regime in need of renewal, and with a new global determination in evidence to move to a nuclear-free world, have we dovetailed our role in this process with our national security priorities?
- Are the international institutions of the 20th century the right ones for the new century? We take pride in belonging to so many of them – NATO, EU, UNSC, WTO – but are they still the best channels for projecting our aims and guarding our security today?
- What about the G20, in effect replacing the G8. How do we manage our position with this new forum? What about the new groups on the stage, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Group. Are we investing in the Commonwealth as a power network of the future, embracing as it does almost 2 billion people across continents and faiths in some of the fastest growing and most dynamic nations on earth?
- Europe is our neighbourhood and we must remain committed to its stability and prosperity. But are we right to invest so much time and effort in EU institutional

reform, to put so much of our overseas development efforts through the EU machinery, and to place such emphasis on EU defence structures?

- National energy security is paramount. Have we adjusted our foreign policy priorities to our new pattern of energy needs, environmental imperatives and climate change concerns described above?
- Perhaps above all, do we have the right Ministerial and administrative systems here in London to adjust, flexibly and swiftly, to the new conditions, and the right balance and coordination between our major departments concerned with overseas affairs?

A blunt 'NO' has to be given to all these questions. One only has to ponder for a moment on the new realities to see how hopeless inapposite all the policy stances behind these questions have become, as well as the systems we have currently to administer them.

Asia Still Rising

The rise of Asia as a global force – predicted by some of us over a decade ago - has become something of a cliché. Together the so-called JACIK countries (Japan, ASEAN, China, India, Korea) now have a GNP equivalent to the EU, and if measured on purchasing power parity terms, much larger than either the EU or NAFTA. The combined official reserves of these countries are much larger than those of the EU and the US combined. Global recession may have lowered the numbers all round, but the relative positions remain the same.

- (Incidentally it is disappointing that not only the policy-makers, but the leading commentators, have been dismally slow in perceiving the shifting balance in a non-Western direction. Some of us were warning over a decade ago that Atlantic and Western hegemony were being challenged, not only economically but politically, culturally and in scientific and technological fields. Yet only a few days ago a distinguished FT political commentator was writing that 'the market no longer belongs to the West', as though it was some new insight to be shared with FT

readers! We have to move forward our understanding of world trends at more than this glacier speed if we are to avoid sinking out of sight).

It is not just a matter of super-competitive manufacturing imports from Asia. It is only now dawning on the West that Chinese technology and advanced scientific research, especially in such fields as nanotechnology, are racing ahead. Standards in business and scientific education, long believed to be the monopoly of the West, are not only matching but beginning to surpass Western levels, with the likelihood that the flow of business students is starting to reverse in a West to East direction.

Combine this intellectual and academic momentum with Asia's ethos of hard work, scrupulous saving and intense commitment to children's education and advancement and the pattern emerges which a decade or more ago I christened 'Easternisation'. Then I argued, and today we are now seeing, the emergence of cultures more suited to the information age than Western attitudes. This, I contended, would lead to the rise not only of economic power and influence in Asia, but would place nations like Japan, India, China and Korea, and even the smaller nations such as Malaysia and Singapore, at the centre of global events. Their full cooperation would be needed – indeed their leadership - in resolving all key global issues – a message that still has not reached all American policy-makers.

Has it reached our policy-makers here in the UK? Not if the withdrawal pattern of British embassies and agencies – from Latin America in particular – is anything to go by!

Looking Beyond Europe

As Foreign Secretaries come and go, quarterly and annual reports continue to flow from the FCO asserting the same priorities, sometimes shuffled a bit to meet new fashions (such as climate change), but essentially with the same message. The priorities are the European

Union, and the UN, plus the customary genuflection in the direction of Washington. Barely a mention of the amazing Commonwealth network. The old Adam – a fear of being ‘left out’ of the European integration show, still dominates FCO thinking. When the incumbent Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, addressed the assembled ambassadors and High Commissioners at Lancaster House on June 8th, about Britain’s goals there was no mention of the Commonwealth at all, to the amazement of several listeners – only pledges to strengthen the European Union (in the wrong way) and the United Nations.

Yet if we rely on ‘The EU partners’ or ‘EU common foreign policy’ to promote or defend our interests we do so at our peril. The UK’s history, experience and connections (the Commonwealth again) give it a potentially huge advantage in relating to the new power centres of the post-Western world – advantages that most other EU members have no interest at all in promoting.

EU cooperation is certainly indispensable on some fronts. But I very much doubt whether the EU ‘strengthens our clout in Washington, Beijing or Moscow’, as David Miliband was proclaiming only yesterday. It almost certainly does the opposite, with our views being frequently blended down into a fuzzy and ineffectual EU consensus.

Added to that our Foreign Policy administration and policy-making *corpus* has great difficulty, quite understandably, in grasping that international relations are less and less a matter between governments. No one likes facing that their role has shrunk. There have been commendable efforts to make space for more independent linkages and agencies, notably through the British Council and support for the BBC World Service.

What is missing is an understanding that under the influence of globalized communication and the worldwide web the whole fabric of international relations has already changed. Power and influence are flowing through new channels, as Manuel Castells reminds us in his penetrating new work ‘Communication Power’.

As Professor Anne-Marie Slaughter, Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and one of President Obama's key advisers, has explained, modern states are not disappearing as the fashionable 'end of the nation state' theorists would have it, but they are disaggregating into separate functionally distinct parts which are creating a new pattern of informal internationalism. New network structures similar to the Commonwealth are ideally suited to operating and getting the best returns for our own country from this new world. And this points up how utterly foolish the foreign policy-makers in the UK have been over the past decade or so in failing to develop this colossal potential for a nation like ours.

Thus, for example, the possibilities for enhancing our national security through Commonwealth network co-operation, well understood by the professional military, have been wholly neglected by the policy strategists in Whitehall.

The Commonwealth structure is weak today, not least because it is startlingly under-resourced. The British contribution works out at about 20p per person per year, as against £54 per person to the EU. Yet even in its attenuated state it constitutes as a huge reservoir of soft power and influence. A more ambitious and better-resourced Commonwealth, prepared to harden somewhat its international response to world issues, and to welcome the association and support of other like-minded democracies, could deliver influence and reach for British interests which other nations would envy.

New Machinery

But perhaps the most important and immediate issue of all is how to establish the right machinery to push forward the new agenda and repair the enormous damage to our standing which a decade of unsteady hands at the foreign policy tiller has bequeathed to us.

Lord Hurd of Westwell, the distinguished former Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, has spoken of a ‘malaise’ developing in the Britain’s once much praised Foreign Service, and of a ‘hollowing out’ of the Foreign Office, in London (Lords debate 26th February 2009).

Both he and many other well-qualified observers have expressed unease at the extraordinary imbalance that has developed between the tight funding of the FCO and the far larger resource allocation for the Department for International Development, now with a budget four times that of the Foreign Office. If the two departments were united in their perceptions of foreign policy goals that would present no more than a problem of inter-departmental co-ordination. But DFID does not see things this way. It has become, in the words of Conservative spokesman Andrew Mitchell, *‘perilously close to setting out its own foreign policy’*. The impression is left that while it may have worthy aims, it is not too interested in the national interest, except in the very vaguest terms.

More than one former Foreign Secretary has pleaded – after leaving office - for the total overseas efforts of the internationally concerned departments, including both DFID and the Ministry of Defence, to be looked as one, and the balance of their budgets assessed in a coherent and strategic manner under the supervision of the directly interested Ministers. The Conservative proposals for a National Security Council would help greatly in bringing this fragmented and dislocated situation together.

The Changes Have Arrived

Meanwhile, a dispiriting picture emerges. At a time when we should be forging new alliances with the powers that will affect our destiny, when we should be vigorously promoting new and more flexible structures regionally for the EU, when we should be building up the Commonwealth as the ideal soft power network of the future, at a time when we should be massively strengthening and modernising our security forces to meet



asymmetric threats, when we should be redirecting our development and aid policies, when we should be reconstructing our overseas Ministries to get a better resource balance and upgrade our whole diplomatic resource, we are doing none of those things.

This leaves us with an international stance without focus, adamant for drift and governed by querulous indecision disguised as strategy. It leads directly to national loss of direction, purpose and cohesion, and opens wide the way for social division. It endangers our own future, weakens our contribution to international goals and projects an image of defeatism and lost confidence. It also demoralises those very able foreign policy practitioners and diplomats who remain and find themselves wired into the wrong administrative structure travelling along the wrong tracks.

The global context has changed. Within it we need a new foreign policy direction, based on a deep and intelligent analysis of the new world conditions, and we need new government machinery to operate it successfully and with confidence and vigour. Our amazing country, built on its amazing and dazzling past, and still full of talent and vitality, deserves no less. The chance for change is coming. Let's hope it's not too late.
