

Speech: Foreign Secretary's Lord Mayor's Easter Banquet speech at Mansion House, Wednesday 28 March

My Lord Mayor, Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen.

I'm going to talk about Britain's global role and our work with our allies around the world but I turn first to the events of this remarkable week because never before has there been a collective expulsion of Russian diplomats on the scale that we have seen over the last few days.

As I speak there are now 27 countries that have themselves taken the risk of kicking out people whose presence they deem to be no longer conducive to the public good.

Of course there are many more that have chosen to act in other ways, countries that have issued powerful statements or downgraded their representation at the World Cup.

But by your leave my Lord Mayor and without wishing to be in any way invidious I want to remind you of the full roll of honour:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, United States.

And NATO has either expelled or denied accreditation to 10 Russian officials.

And it seems clear that the Kremlin underestimated the strength of global feeling: if they thought that the world had become so hardened and cynical as not to care about the use of chemical weapons in a peaceful place like Salisbury, if they believed that no one would give a fig about the suffering of Sergei and Yulia Skripal or that we would be indifferent to the reckless and contemptuous disregard for public safety that saw 39 others seek medical treatment, if they believed that we had become so morally weakened, so dependent on hydrocarbons, so chronically risk averse and so fearful of Russia that we would not dare to respond, then this is their answer, because these countries know full well that they face the risk of retaliation and frankly there are countries that have taken action that are more vulnerable to Russia than we are, whether through geography or their energy needs, and I pay tribute to them because they know that their own Russia-based diplomats, and their families, must now deal with the possibility of their own lives being turned upside down.

That is a huge commitment and sacrifice for one country to make – let alone 27 – and I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

But of course I know that these thanks are in a sense impertinent because I

do not for one moment believe that this global wave of revulsion has been prompted solely by Salisbury, let alone a sentimental love or affection for the UK, though I don't exclude the possibility of such feelings somewhere in the mix.

It wasn't about us: it was about all of us and the kind of world we want to live in.

Because I believe these expulsions represent a moment when a feeling has suddenly crystallised, when years of vexation and provocation have worn the collective patience to breaking point, and when across the world – across 3 continents – there are countries who are willing to say enough is enough.

After the annexation of Crimea, the intervention in the Donbas, the downing of MH17, the cyberattacks, the attempted coup in Montenegro, the concealing of chemical weapon attacks in Syria, the hacking of the Bundestag, the interference in elections, there are now just too many countries who have felt the disruptive and malign behaviour of the Russian state.

And Salisbury has spoken not just to Salisbury in South Australia and Salisbury in Pennsylvania, in North Carolina, in Maryland, but to all the tranquil cathedral cities across Europe that could have suffered a similar fate and where people deserve to live free from fear and after all these provocations, this week was the moment when the world decided to say enough to the wearying barrage of Russian lies, the torrent of obfuscation and intercontinental ballistic whoppers.

First they told us that Novichok never existed, then they told us that it did exist but they had destroyed the stocks, then they claimed that the stocks had escaped to Sweden or the Czech Republic or Slovakia or the United States.

And the other day they claimed that the true inventor of Novichok was Theresa May.

In the last few days we have been told that Sergei Skripal took an overdose, that he attempted suicide and therefore presumably tried to take his daughter with him, that his attempted murder was revenge for Britain's supposed poisoning of Ivan the Terrible, or that we did it to spoil the World Cup.

In fact the Foreign Office has so far counted 24 such ludicrous fibs – and so I am glad that 27 countries have stood up to say that they are not swallowing that nonsense any more.

It is rather like the beginning of Crime and Punishment in the sense that we are all confident of the culprit – and the only question is whether he will confess or be caught.

And in these last few days it is our values – and our belief in the rules based international order – that have proved their worth.

Not only has there been a strong and speedy multilateral response from NATO and the EU Council but countries that are members of neither have come forward to show that this country is blessed to be part of a broader

community of ideals.

And I believe there are many British people who have found it immensely reassuring to learn we may be leaving the EU in exactly a year but we will never be alone, and in part that commitment to Britain reflects Britain's reciprocal commitment to our friends, whether through the work of our peerless intelligence agencies or our armed forces or our development budgets.

And that is what I mean by Global Britain, and so I repeat the prime minister's unconditional and immovable commitment: that we will stand by you as you have stood by us.

We will continue to work with you – bringing as we do 20 per cent of EU defence spending, 25 per cent of the aid budget, 55 per cent of the tonnage of the supply and replenishment vessels needed to keep warships at sea, 100 per cent of the heavy lift capacity.

We are with you in Estonia, we are with you in training the armed forces in Ukraine, we are there in Nigeria and in the Middle East, where the fight against Daesh goes on and where the UK has delivered the second biggest number of air strikes after the US.

We are with you in the Sahel – or we will be with you shortly – and HMS Sutherland is now in the Pacific, exercising alongside our Australian friends, and the UK has forces deployed in more countries than any other European power.

And I have last week announced that we are expanding our FCO network, with another 250 British diplomats overseas and another ten UK embassies or high commissions in another ten sovereign posts – with the Commonwealth as a priority especially as we will be hosting its summit next month – so that Britain will have more diplomatic missions than any other European country – exceeding the French by one, news that I am told was received with rapture in the Quai d'Orsay, since there is no more compelling case for more funding than news of expansion in King Charles Street.

We believe in that expansion – and we will go further, especially in Africa, because we believe that a Global Britain is fundamentally in the interests of the British people because it is by being open to the world, and engaging with every country, that the British people will find the markets for their goods and services and ideas as we have done for centuries in that great free trade revolution that made this city the capital of the world and built the Mansion House in which we meet tonight.

When we leave the EU next year, we will re-establish ourselves as an independent member of the WTO and we will be the world's leading proselytiser for free trade.

And it is symmetrically by being welcoming to talent from abroad – as we must and will be – that we have brought to our shores for generations people who want to live their lives without fear of judgment or persecution, to do as

they choose provided they do no harm to others, and it is that ethos of generosity that has made this city not just the most diverse in the world but also the most productive region of Europe.

And today the UK is the biggest destination for FDI after the US, our unemployment is at the lowest for 43 years (I seem to remember some people predicting that it would rise by 500,000), we have the biggest tech sector, the best universities.

And Cambridge University alone has won more Nobel prizes than every university in Russia and China added together and multiplied by 2.

We have the most vibrant and dynamic cultural scene, with one venue – the British Museum – attracting more visitors than ten whole European countries that it would not be tactful to name tonight.

And out of this great minestrone, this bouillabaisse, this ratatouille, this seething and syncretic cauldron of culture, we export not just goods – though we certainly do – but ideas and attitudes and even patterns of behaviour.

I am delighted to say that in both the Czech Republic and in Iceland they mark Jan 7 with silly walks day in honour of Monty Python.

There are now nine countries that have their own version of David Brent, and it is an astonishing fact that both of the two highest grossing movies in the world last year was either shot or produced in this country:

Beauty and the Beast and Star Wars.

And what is the principal utensil of violence in Star Wars?

And where was the light sabre invented?

In which part of London? In Uxbridge and South Ruislip.

And that tells you all you need to know about the difference between modern Britain and the government of Vladimir Putin.

They make Novichok, we make light sabres.

One a hideous weapon that is specifically intended for assassination.

The other an implausible theatrical prop with a mysterious buzz.

But which of those two weapons is really more effective in the world of today?

Which has done more for our respective economies?

Which has delighted the imaginations of three generations of children and earned billions?

Which one is loved and which one is loathed?

I tell you that the arsenals of this country and of our friends are not stocked with poison but with something vastly more powerful: the power of imagination and creativity and innovation that comes with living in a free society, of a kind you see all around you today.

And it is that power that will prevail and it is in that spirit of absolute confidence and security that it is our job now not just to beware the Russian state, but to reach out, in spite of all our present difficulties, to extend the hand of friendship to the Russian people.

Because it cannot be said too often that the paranoid imaginings of their rulers have no basis in fact, they are not ringed by foes but by countries who see themselves as admirers and friends, who have taken this action this week because they want nothing so much as to have an end to this pattern of disruptive behaviour, and who want to live in peace and mutual respect and who hope one day that it will be possible to see ever greater commercial and cultural cooperation between us and the Russian people.

And I believe that day can and will come.

I hope it does.

And if and when it does I believe it will be thanks to the resolution of all the countries that acted in their different ways this week.

We will have to keep that resolve because there is no doubt that we will be tested again and I can assure you that in that test the resolve of the British government and people will be unflinching.