

Speech: Lord Mayor's Banquet 2019: Foreign Secretary's speech

My Lord Mayor, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm delighted to be able to address this occasion for the first time.

One duty of all the Ambassadors here is to compose 'diptels', diplomatic telegrams, filled with wise and penetrating judgements on events in the country where they serve.

Many years ago, a British Ambassador wrote this diptel about his host country, which I will not name: "The majority of ministers are unimpressive and a few we have found frankly bizarre...Anyone who is even moderately good at what they do tends to become a national figure."

I'm sure your assessment of the British government is quite different.

But I suspect that a certain word beginning with "B" has appeared in a thousand diptels over the past 3 years. Thanks to Brexit, British politics has certainly not been dull.

Mind you our greatest constitutionalist Walter Bagehot would have been most disappointed because he wrote: "Dullness in parliamentary government is a test of its excellence, an indication of its success." On that basis we have definitely failed the Bagehot test.

Today I want to look beyond Brexit. I will argue that whatever the Brexit outcome, Britain's role at the heart of global affairs is potentially more vital, more necessary and more significant than it has ever been.

But that we cannot take such a role for granted: if we want a central position on the world stage, we must earn it. Indeed we must rediscover the art of statecraft for which Britain was rightly famed.

Brexit: a vital test

Let's start with Brexit itself. In 2016, the British people were given their voice and they used it.

"You tell us," they told the political establishment, "we are a great democracy. Now we're going to find out if that's true. Because we've just asked you in a democratic referendum, one you said you would respect, to do something most of you are dead against."

Then the test got even tougher when the government was deprived of its majority.

And now those same voters – and the rest of the world – are waiting to see if Britain, the home of parliamentary democracy, will pass that test.

And pass it we must, by leaving the EU cleanly and properly. To do so is to live up to a democratic promise. And to fail would betray the promise of a democracy.

It would also fail the values that Britain has always stood for. How could we defend democracy on the international stage if a large part of our population believes we are ignoring it at home?

But as democrats we must also remember the 48% who voted to remain. Because all of us – on all sides of the Brexit debate – are both citizens and patriots. So we need a Brexit that addresses the concerns many have about the type of country Britain now becomes.

We must never forget that throughout its history this country has opened its doors to people from all over the world – making, incidentally, this extraordinary city of London one of the most open and outward-looking in the world.

My 3 children go to school in London. They are also mixed race, fiercely proud of both their Chinese and British descent – and as their father I am proud that nowhere else in the world could an ethnic minority feel so at home.

We must show that nothing will change this generous spirit. Britain after Brexit will never pull up the drawbridge, haul down the shutters or put up a sign saying ‘foreigners not welcome’.

We will never stop being open to the world, as we see from our universities where 440,000 international students are enrolled, more than anywhere else bar the United States.

Those numbers, incidentally, continue to rise – with applications from both EU and non-EU nations going up last year – and that is a good thing because international students are both the cause and the effect of something else, namely that in the international rankings 3 of the world’s top 10 universities are British.

They come to study at our great universities and they make them great by coming. Which is why Cambridge University alone has produced more Nobel Laureates than every university in Russia and China combined – but a third of those prizes in the last decade were won by academics from overseas.

Britain’s role after Brexit

Britain’s global role, of course, is much older than our membership of the European Union. Since becoming Foreign Secretary last July, I’ve visited 29 countries and met 58 foreign ministers, representing nearly a third of the members of the United Nations.

Wherever I’ve travelled, I’ve found something very startling. Britain is held in far higher respect abroad than we sometimes have for ourselves at home.

In part that's thanks to our economy, far more resilient than many predicted; our superb armed forces; our excellent diplomats and the soft power of remarkable British institutions like the BBC and the British Council.

But the main reason for that respect is much more fundamental. It lies in the role played by the United Kingdom – alongside the United States – in building an international order after the horror of the Second World War that has stood the test of time. For all the problems in the world today, the last 74 years has been arguably the most successful period in the history of humanity.

When I was born in 1966, half the world's population lived in absolute poverty. Now it is less than 10%. At the same time, diseases have been eradicated, life expectancy has soared, deaths in conflict have fallen and the number of democracies has more than doubled.

Many of the great international institutions, the pillars of that order, find their origins here in London.

The first headquarters of NATO was in Belgrave Square and the Alliance's first secretary general was Churchill's former military adviser, Lord Ismay.

The first meeting of the United Nations General Assembly was in Westminster Central Hall – a few hundred yards from my office. The first acting Secretary General of the UN was a British diplomat, Gladwyn Jebb.

The World Bank and the IMF were conceived by the leader of the British delegation to the Bretton Woods conference, John Maynard Keynes.

We can be proud of what has been achieved by people from every corner of this United Kingdom. But we cannot be complacent.

As Lee Kuan Yew said: "Friendship in international relations is not a function of goodwill or personal affection. We must make ourselves relevant so that other countries have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity."

So how does Britain ensure its relevance to the survival and prosperity of others?

Dual focus of British foreign policy

Some countries focus on threats to their values from human rights abuses. Others focus on threats to their security, including from Russia. Britain does both.

We are the only G7 country that delivers both the NATO target to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence and the UN target to spend 0.7% on aid. We have always championed democratic values alongside the security needed to protect them.

And with our unparalleled connections across Europe, the Atlantic and the

Commonwealth, we are uniquely positioned to build an invisible chain linking the democracies of the world to help us all withstand the challenges ahead.

But to do that we need to achieve a post-Brexit national renewal. Tonight I want to argue that must be based on 3 essential pillars.

Three pillars of national renewal

1. The economy

The first is economic strength, the essential precondition for any country wishing to play a global role. That is because economic power both strengthens soft power and finances hard power.

So we need to put fuel in the engine of the British economy with an ambition to be not just the fastest growing major European country but one whose growth stands favourable comparison with any developed nation.

In the coming decades, the balance of economic success will shift decisively to those countries which embrace the white heat of artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, driverless cars, drones, robotics, life sciences and the internet of things – what is known as the fourth industrial revolution.

Britain starts with 2 immense advantages: our capacity to invent and the strength of our universities. We are currently fourth in the Global Innovation Index, ahead of both the United States and China. We have more top universities and more technology start-ups than any other European country.

In short the country that transformed the world with some of the greatest feats of invention – from the steam engine to the jet engine, from the light bulb to the television, from penicillin to the World Wide Web – has the potential to be the world's next Silicon Valley.

We should not underestimate the huge national undertaking involved: the pace of change is rapid, the competition intense and time is short. But we did it with the first industrial revolution in dynamic British cities like Glasgow and Manchester; with ambition and courage we can place ourselves in the vanguard of the fourth one too.

2. Hard power

That is the route to prosperity. But whilst prosperity is important in its own right, it should always have a social purpose. In my last job I argued that the proceeds of turning around the economy after the recession of 2008 should first benefit the NHS. I believe that a profound transformation of our skills base through the education system should come next.

But in terms of foreign policy and reinforcing Britain's role in the world, the critical second pillar is a strengthening of our hard power.

The UK currently accounts for almost 20% of total EU defence spending – and our armed forces possess a hugely disproportionate share of some key

capabilities.

The RAF's transport aircraft, for example, comprise nearly 40% of Europe's entire heavy lift capacity. And the Royal Navy's 2 new aircraft carriers are the largest and will be the most formidable warships in Europe.

But the threat picture, so dramatically reduced at the end of the cold war, has changed markedly. We are in a multipolar world without the assurance provided by unquestioned American dominance. We face a more aggressive Russia and a more assertive China. We simply do not know what the balance of power in the world will be in 25 years time.

At the same time the nature of warfare is changing. The conflicts of tomorrow could well start with a cyber attack, then escalate into precision strikes by hypersonic missiles followed by swarms of unmanned aircraft. The new domains of space and cyber and the immense capabilities of Artificial Intelligence will transform the conduct of warfare.

If we want Britain to defend the Enlightenment values that owe so much to our finest thinkers, like David Hume in Edinburgh and Adam Smith in Glasgow, then we need to be leaders in these areas too.

The foundation of Britain's security is NATO. But it is simply not sustainable to expect one NATO ally to spend nearly 4% of its GDP on defence while the others spend between 1 and 2%.

So for these and other reasons I believe it is time for the next Strategic Defence and Security Review to ask whether, over the coming decade, we should decisively increase the proportion of GDP we devote to defence. Any additional funds would of course need to be for new capabilities and not simply plugging gaps in existing plans.

And our aim, as ever, is to deter and avoid the horror of war in the knowledge that strength is the surest guarantee of peace.

The outcome of such investment should demonstrate beyond doubt that, when we say Britain stands for the defence of democratic values, when we promise never to leave our great ally, the United States, to perform this task alone, then we are as good as our word and in doing so we encourage other democracies who share our values to follow suit.

3. A democratic renewal

Then there is the third pillar, perhaps the most challenging of all.

If we aspire to champion democratic values across the world, we must ensure that our own house, too, is in order. Good diplomacy begins at home. But our democracy has become rather frayed. Proud as we are of our traditions, we too need renewal.

Renewal of our great Union, the heart of our success as a great power over the last 3 centuries. Renewal of the trust between politicians and people, shown to be so lacking in a Brexit referendum when people simply refused to

believe what leaders in Westminster were telling them.

Despite record low unemployment too many today feel that modern capitalism only works only for a privileged few. The internet gives people control over their banking, their holidays, their shopping and their contact with friends. But when it comes to civic decision-making very little has changed.

People want more power and agency over every aspect of their lives, including the decisions taken by those in authority, as part of a renewal of the social contract between state and citizen. Whether it is shaping the services they receive, influencing local government, securing action on climate change or standing up to large unaccountable corporations people – especially young people – feel government is something done to them and not by them.

So as the country that invented parliamentary democracy, we should be in the vanguard of rethinking it for the 21st century.

Conclusion

So what then should our role be as we start this new chapter in our history?

Britain's hand in designing and defending the world order in the last century surely reveals our mission for the next: not a superpower but as a global power, binding together democracies who share our values and playing a decisive role in making the world safer, healthier and wealthier. A role that predates Brexit and will long outlive it.

Our sense of national purpose has always been defined by more than narrow self-interest. Like the Royal Navy devoting its strength to the abolition of the slave trade 2 centuries ago, Britain at its best has followed a global vocation. And with all the uncertainty, all the instability and all the technological changes afoot, it is nothing other than our solemn duty to fulfil that global vocation with redoubled effort.

The story of a small nation playing a decisive and enlightened role in world affairs is not over yet, if today, as in the past, we have the courage to live up to our potential by pursuing it.

Thank you, and now, it is my duty to invite you to join me in a toast to the Lord Mayor and the Lady Mayoress.