

Lord Howell – speech to the House of Lords 23.07.26

Take Back Control' - the most useless slogan, injected into the British political debate in modern times! Sovereignty is based on power. Power in the digital/AI age is now largely with seven or eight gigantic platforms internationally.

How do we recapture at least some of the power and control over our nation, our lives and liberties and security they have taken away already? How do we stop them taking more; How much can we do on a purely national basis? How much sovereign power for each nation can be regained by acting collectively to recreate respected international institutions , as in 1945, based firmly on the rule of law?

Once we have clear answers to these questions then perhaps we can fight to take back, or share, a greater degree of national or sovereign control. '

My Lords, it is time for the formal and ritual congratulations to the noble Baroness, Kidron, not merely on starting the debate but for recognising her enormous energy, concentration and focus on the real issues, which I am glad we are debating now at the end of this term. Of course, the key issue is who holds power and how on earth, in the new conditions in which power is shifting all the time, we will maintain some control—the noble Baroness who has just spoken rightly reminded us of this—over areas that we can realistically control, rather than pursuing hopes and slogans that would only raise hopes when nothing can be done.

I say, incidentally, that the slogan “Take back control” is one of the silliest, most immature and most useless slogans that has been thrown into the political debate over the last decade or so. That is not the question; it gives us no guidance as to how on earth we establish the new powers, how we can contribute to them, or how we retain the areas where sovereignty has obviously been completely changed and partly dissolved from what existed 20, 30 or 40 years ago. Where does it lie now? It lies increasingly, as the noble Baroness, Lady Kidron, and others know perfectly well, with the great platforms—I am not sure whether it is the four American ones, the two or three Chinese ones or other platforms that are emerging. We try our best in some areas, but it is with the platforms that the power exists. The question is how on earth we are to identify areas where we can retain maximum influence internationally as well as retaining our own systems much more efficiently than we do.

As an example, the whole of world trade has changed beyond recognition in the last five

years. It is now a seething mass of supply chains covering almost every product and a whole range of countries, usually with computers—and computers containing Chinese parts, at that. That requires a completely different approach to bilateral trade control than anything we have had before.

On energy links, people talk about independent energy in this country. Frankly, that makes absolutely no sense when you look at the technology of energy. All the major sources, both traditional, fossil fuel and new and renewable ones, are heavily dependent on international networks of enormous complexity. Even on our nuclear side—where I think we all, or most people, favour development—people think that if we can build enough large nuclear power stations, we will be all right. That is complete nonsense. It only requires one difficulty in a Korean nuclear power station, or in any part of any system, for the entire world network to be badly affected. If we are talking about electricity and trying to move towards an all-electric economy, we know that we depend on endless interconnectors, linkages and supplies that come only from being heavily dependent on elaborate networks to which we must contribute rather than dance around and try to avoid.

Defence and security are intensely linked, as never before. We say that we must spend more on defence, and of course we must, but what is this defence? Does it really exist? Are we in fact more vulnerable than ever, with strategic threats from hypersonic missiles? Someone pointed out the other day that the V2 came at the end of the Second World War. It was wildly inaccurate, but no one had any conceivable means of stopping it. We were completely defenceless against it. The only defence in the end was for the allied troops to overrun the launching stations and the factories where slave labour was manufacturing these things. That was the only solution. We have not really solved the international missile situation now. We are, in fact, still defenceless.

On the climate, we can do our bit, but CO₂ does not obey national frontiers and borders, nor do its effects. This is an area where we obviously have to work entirely new systems and make them operative internationally. Otherwise, we will merely see the continuation of the rise in emissions, which is happening just as fast as it ever was despite all our efforts.

Then there are all the areas that the noble Baroness quite rightly mentioned, as well as inflation, pensions and pandemics. All these are globalised issues. My conclusion is, for the moment, quite simple: we need new, strong, multilateral institutions, which we do not have. In 1945, our brilliant people in America, Britain and other countries came together and created an entirely new international order with strong institutions. Today, that does not exist. I listen in vain to hear that real efforts are being put into restoring the respect and trust that these institutions must have—the UN, the IMF, the World Trade

Organization, formerly GATT, the International Maritime Organization and courts of justice. The whole rule of law is being internationally flouted. If I have one wish, it is to hear that new energies are going into that area to provide a shell for what we have to do ourselves as a law-abiding country. A shell is essential because otherwise, without that shell, we shall have the same fate as a snail who proceeds without one. We all know what that is: they get gobbled up.”
