

## ‘Why we are dealing with a totally changed rest of Europe’

Lord Howell of Guildford – 20.09.23- House of Lords

My Lords, this report is an impressive survey of our current relations with our European neighbours and the noble Lord, Lord Kinnoull, and his committee deserve congratulations. For those of us who have spent half a lifetime working on, first, how best to get the UK to fit in to the European Union and, once we were in, how the UK could best help shape its further evolution from within, and help it escape from its original cocoon of 20th-century protectionism, this debate gives a strong sense of déjà vu and having been here before many times.

The dulcet tones of the noble Lord, Lord Kerr, are very evocative of night after night of debate in the past, going round and round old treaty issues, long forgotten, and coming to the same conclusions as before, which were usually very negative.

The missing element, if I may begin on a negative note, is that the discussion continues scarcely to touch on the changing nature of European governance and the enormous momentum for European reform, as the world alters rapidly around it and entirely new challenges emerge. We talk about more co-operation and trust; that sounds splendid, but exactly with whom or what? Are we talking about the 32 committees—this army of committees that we have to work through and do not meet often enough? The EU institution is in flux, and understandably so.

Talking about it is like being confronted by a chair with one leg missing, and the missing leg is the fast-changing nature and direction of the EU itself as an institution. We may say that perhaps that is inevitable because we are outside the EU, but I am not so sure. We are, after all, just as much a European power as before, and just as much affected by the major common issues of today as we were before. Indeed, I find the chorus of “losing influence” in the whole European scene utterly self-defeating, as well as self-fulfilling.

Indeed, you could argue that today there are more common issues for us and the rest of Europe—and, as my noble friend Lord Hague remarks in his evidence, more need for a new framework for the future—than when we first joined the European Union 50 years ago. For one thing, the whole nature of modern defence has changed but the EU has not. The Ukraine outcome will change everything further, as my noble friend Lord Tugendhat reminded us. For another, free trade is under threat as never before in the

last 50 years. There is the biggest migrant surge of all just beginning, as we saw over the weekend. There are deep divisions on Europe's relations with and dilemmas about trade with China and whether it will start a new trade war by trying to ban Chinese vehicles and getting a sharp rebuff, as it will, from China. Our transatlantic relations need revising and, as your Lordships remarked earlier, even more so if Mr Trump is elected.

As for energy and climate issues, which are addressed extensively in this report, a European system of energy co-operation is really urgent. What has been delivered from the EU side is a fragmentation that will tear apart the whole energy market, and the European Green Deal is in a terrible muddle.

For example, Germany's latest energy package is a real go-it-alone strategy, and there is no unified view of nuclear power in Europe at all. I hope that in this country we will not give up or turn shy on all our work addressing these enormous crises, and all the work we have put into handling them, intellectually and creatively, with very wise minds over the last 50 to 60 years.

The Europe-wide reform cause is growing stronger all the time. The slightly supplicant note of some of HMG's utterances and some reports should be replaced by a much more positive tone. By that, I do not mean concentric circles and all that rubbish, which we have discussed endlessly before and should put aside. For these reasons I strongly welcome the support given though membership of PESCO—advanced defence co-operation—where we can update Europe's woeful defence inadequacies for modern war conditions.

I also welcome our participation in the European Political Community, as this report does, and the North Sea energy co-operation—although goodness knows how we get electricity to market from the coming offshore forest of wind pylons being planned, since no one has begun to work that out or how to pay for it.

At the end, this report rightly asks how the laser beam coherence we need here at home to focus creatively on all these issues can be concentrated and directed by the united efforts of the FCDO, the Cabinet Office and other departments—indeed, the whole Whitehall machine. I confess that I see little or no sign of that in the Government's response to these urgent matters of supreme national interest and importance.

7.33pm