

5.10 pm

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con)

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My Lords, after those wise words, I begin by declaring my interests as listed in the register: as president of the Royal Commonwealth Society and as an adviser to major Japanese companies and to the Kuwait Investment Office.

There are some very good and not-so-good aspects of the gracious Speech to be noted this time—of course, it is the second in the past year. To start with the best bits, it is obviously good to see the end of the Brexit deadlock in clear sight. The previously paralysed Parliament, which some of us had been pointing out for a long time could be cured only by a fresh election, has now duly been replaced and is a thing of the past. I agree that there are problems with our immediate neighbours to be resolved and arrangements to be harmonised after 31 January, but we plainly do not want to be tied to, or held back by, any kind of so-called dynamic alignment with an EU, which is so obviously stuck in the past and going through its own severe contortions, and which everyone recognises is in serious need of reform.

There is, of course, the usual crowd saying that the time made available to settle relations with the rest of the EU is impossible—that is the latest moan—but in many cases they are the same people who said that it was impossible for Mr Johnson to strike another deal, that the Irish border problem could never be resolved and that there would be another hung Parliament and that an election would solve nothing. So is there any reason to give their opinions now much weight? The answer is no.

The other sort-of-good-news bit of the Speech is that there is to be an integrated—I like that word—review of Britain's place in the world and foreign policy. Frankly, this is long overdue. It should have been held at least a decade or more ago, as the digital age and the new networked world took hold and changed the entire pattern of international relations and power. Had we done that, we would long ago, and much sooner, have discovered, first, that we need to engage far more purposefully in Asia, where power now lies and where vast new markets, in which we must succeed to survive and prosper, have already arisen.

Secondly, we would have discovered that the United States of America stays a good friend but that the relationship has changed from the old pattern of 70 years past, and that even before Trump appeared it was clear that our world views no longer coincided. A new relationship should have been built up long ago. Meanwhile, we are subjected to dim-witted columnists who write about an alleged choice between Europe and America that does not exist. Have these people forgotten about China's growing role in the Middle East and world affairs and that we now live in a network world, or that in any case we already have reasonably good trade relations with America? I fully share the view that Iran is a great nation that has been dragged down by the mullahs, from whose narrow, bigoted rule Iranians must be freed, but I do not believe that assassinations of their blood-soaked generals is the right way to go about it. The nuclear agreement with Iran finally having been finished off certainly makes the whole world a very much more dangerous place.

Thirdly, we should have realised much sooner that relations with China were becoming crucial, although they needed to be carefully balanced with our relations with the third richest nation on earth—measured by GDP if that means anything—namely Japan, which always saw us as its best friend in the West but which we keep overlooking. We might also have managed the Hong Kong situation better had we had better dialogue with Beijing.

Fourthly, we should have seen earlier that defence and security have come to change their meaning in the age of cyber warfare, drones, street terrorism and nuclear weapons development. We might then have avoided the disastrous decisions which have been made by those in charge of our defence procurement in recent years, which must now be corrected. We might have perceived earlier that NATO's purposes and structures needed radical overhaul in this utterly changed digital age.

We might have realised sooner that, while we must continue to contribute heavily to the welfare of humankind, the idea of our enormous DfID budget being completely separate from our overseas power deployment and foreign policy is absurd and wasteful. Finally, we might have grasped quicker that all kinds of new networks have grown up across the planet, not necessarily between Governments but between professions, interests, young people, business and trade in services and knowledge products in which Britain should be seeking the closest possible involvement, not least with the Commonwealth, the biggest network of all, in which we are fortunate, although barely deserve, to be members.

That brings me to my final comment. Although the Commonwealth was rightly mentioned by my noble friend Lord Gardiner, there was, alas, no mention of it at all in the gracious Speech—either this one or the last one. That, I think, was a discourtesy to Her Majesty who, after all, is head of the Commonwealth to which she has devoted most of her reign. It may sound a minor omission, but it tells us clearly one thing: that the strategists and mandarins deep in Whitehall have simply not yet grasped the nature of Britain's modern exceptionalism, new world role or potentialities in a shifting international order.