

Poss. Article for The TIMES, following The Queen's Christmas day address, the recent Lords Report on the UK in a Shifting World and other end-of-year developments.

Re-Positioning Britain in a Network World

By David Howell (Chair of Lords International Relations Committee and President of the Royal Commonwealth Society)

Leaders of nations need to be good cooks. That is to say that they have to work with many new ingredients of enormous complexity, and use new ingenuity, new creativity and entirely new skills if they want to serve their followers and peoples with something that is popular, digestible, healthy and also realistic.

The old British menu was straightforward. It was roast beef served up by John Bull. But today the chefs of international diplomacy would run rings around such simple fare. Far more subtle menus are required. Before departing from this culinary metaphor, here in summary is the new menu choice for which our strategist and national leaders have to prepare.

First and top of the list is preservation of the rules-based international order. Without respect for international law we are lost - straight back to the barbarianism which came close to destroying everything in both 1914 and again in the nineteen-thirties.

Second Nations and their governments have to learn to work and operate skilfully in an age of networks, demanding quite different skills from the old world of treaties and alliances.

Third, there has to be a clearer sense than ever of national narrative and purpose.

Fourth, our leaders and strategy-makers have to learn more about soft power, alongside strong military forces of the more traditional kind, creating smart power and even what is now called sharp power, if our nation's interests are to be properly safeguarded and promoted in today's infinitely more complicated international milieu

What do these four menu choices imply, now that we are moving into what some have called a new epoch of human endeavour?

First, take the rules-based order, now under direct attack. After the Second World War, as after the First, the statesmen of the world came together and vowed to replace the rabid nationalism of the past with new institutions, new arrangements and new customs, so that never again would countries tear out each other's hearts and youth with the terrible slaughter of modern weapons.

After the First World War, whose ending we have just celebrated, hopes were high but it all failed.

After the Second World War we have had more than seventy years of relative global peace, despite the Cold War period which nearly exploded but was just prevented from doing so, and despite ugly regional conflicts. But now the structures of international cooperation and understanding are being smashed.

Under populist pressures national leaders are tearing up treaties, flouting international law, rejecting international responsibilities. Me-first has become the inward-looking nationalist watchword.

Russia has seized Crimea and is bent on further violations in Ukraine; China rejects UN court rulings and contests international waters with sovereignty claims; the USA has a leader who puts 'America first', rubbishes the G7, quits global agreements, starts unravelling arms control treaties, triggers trade wars, unpicks trade agreements and shows a general contempt for multilateral bodies painstakingly built up over past decades. Everywhere nationalism in its louder and harsher forms, vastly empowered by the communications revolution, the cell phone and the web, is on the march. Mass migration has given it further strong impetus – not least in Europe, but also in South Asia and in the Americas.

Some depict Brexit as part of this tendency, but while it is true that one hears shrill anti-EU voices, including regrettably from Ministers, the UK remains committed to deep European co-operation, whichever way Brexit works out. It has to be so. After all, we are neighbours.

But we now need to be much more than that. The absolute bottom line is that, as one of the founders and beneficiaries of the rules-based order, we must make its defence our top priority and be at the forefront in halting the slide back to global anarchy which is now beginning.

The second priority is to understand how to enter and operate within the world's new circles of network power.

Networks have their own agenda. It may be said that networking has always existed both within societies and internationally. That is true, but the scale, intensity and frequency of connections today are completely unprecedented and alter the whole nature of the process.

And it is probably networks *outside* the governmental orbit which are growing faster and accumulating more power than any single nation, large or small, or than any of the multilateral institutions of the past.

I am not sure to what extent our foreign policy establishment has yet understood this. For those trained in the processes of governance and bureaucracy it is undeniably difficult to see or admit that power may now lie

outside the corridors of government as much as, or to an even greater extent, than within them.

Most power of all has now been garnered by the giant global corporations which control and administer the algorithms behind the networking of the world and who regiment our thinking, as well as allowing darker forces to coagulate and cooperate with an ease never before available, in ways which threaten stability and law-based governance and order everywhere.

But there is one global network of an entirely virtuous kind which is actually larger, and potentially more persuasive and influential, than even these behemoths. This is the 2.4 billion strong network of Commonwealth nations - a third of the human race - once the successor nations of the old British empire but now transformed into something new and quite different.

Here is where both the third and fourth priorities run together. The imperative need for a nation – ours here in Britain in particular – is to find a sense of national purpose and direction. Our leaders must pray for the wisdom and insight to articulate a new national story in a totally changed world.

I can think of no better focus for the British people, as we step out of full participation in the European Union (though not by any means in Europe), than to make our dedicate ourselves to upholding and developing the Commonwealth network – nearly all democracies, or with democratic aspirations, nearly all believing in the rule of law and respect for human rights, and forming what has been called an oasis of stability stretching across a troubled world.

Nor is there any better transmission mechanism for Britain's considerable soft power and influence today's revolutionary conditions.

Of course we in Britain must take up this role in a suitably humble way. No use talking about the British Empire, or Empire 2.0. The British role and position have changed radically and must change still further. We are now the *demandeurs*, asking to be readmitted to the family and the club, after decades of relative disinterest and neglect. Some of us thought all along, long before Brexit, that with the rise of Asia and the huge eastwards shift of world power, the day would come when we might need our true friends in the Commonwealth again, however important our immediate regional neighbours might continue to be.

Well now that day has come, with the need becoming urgent to join up with 'old partners and new allies' (to use the Prime Minister's phrase).

As so often in the zig-zag course of history it turns out that the very structure which seemed at one time so dated, the old British Commonwealth headed by the monarchy, turns out to be the ideally suitable framework for the digital age. Its roots lie in its increasingly empowered peoples; it demands no treaties or

heavy centrally hierarchies, it has a focal point not in transient politicians but in the person of the British monarch – a role filled with exemplary skill by Queen Elizabeth 11.

It has become indeed, in The Queen’s deeply prescient words ‘In many ways the face of the future’, literally so, with sixty percent of its citizens under thirty! Prince William recently described it as ‘The Mother of all Networks’ - and it has become that as well.

Nothing like this has ever existed in history. Empires have come and gone. Superpowers have come and gone. Networks have arrived . For nations to survive and prosper in this network world requires new agility and new kinds of statesmanship. Old notions of sovereignty have to be shaken off even while pride and patriotism need be more extolled and valued.

So as we lift our eyes beyond the Brexit furore, which will in due course be resolved, a quite different world unfolds into which our United Kingdom can, with wise leadership and with inspiration, advance with confidence.

Our new friends and partners turn out to be the old friends with whom we should have kept closer all along. And our new allies will be those we seek out and approach with new respect and understanding.

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This article is based on Lord Howell’s Khusro Memorial Lecture to the Leeds University Business School on November 29th .

