

AEJ Meeting with Lord Peter Ricketts, Formerly UK National Security Adviser and Head of the Diplomatic Service, November 20th 2019.

By Peter Norman

Defining Britain's future role in the world will be one of the many challenges of Brexit and will require a new national strategy. Yet, according to Lord Peter Ricketts, who as a former UK National Security Adviser and head of the Diplomatic Service, has held some of the highest posts in UK security and foreign policy-making, little thought is being given in Britain to the choices that lie ahead.

Speaking about "Britain in a post-Brexit world", Lord Ricketts told the AEJ UK Section that leaving the European Union after more than 40 years of membership will amount to a "wrenching change" for the UK and also for the EU. Europe's place in the world is changing, under pressure from a growing mood of disengagement from international affairs in the US of President Donald Trump; the resurgent, aggressive and nationalist policies of President Vladimir Putin in Russia; China, which increasingly feels itself to be the dominant power in Asia and is competing with the US for influence in the region and for command of advanced technologies, while the EU is subject to strains including Brexit.

Britain's position in the world since the Second World War came to be based on two pillars: staying as close as possible to the US while pursuing an active role in Europe. Both pillars are now looking "quite wobbly", Lord Ricketts said. There is a need for the UK to rethink its national strategy: to decide whether to be an active, initiative-taking medium sized power in the world or to choose isolation following Brexit and pull up the drawbridge. One problem, he said, is that the UK, in common with other democracies, is bad at what might be called "grand strategy" or plotting an overall direction for the country.

The pressure on democratic politicians is to think short term, and short termism had been made worse by pressure from the media and social media. Brexit was a classic illustration of a failure in UK politics to think about and take long term decisions. Lord Ricketts levelled this criticism equally at successive Prime Ministers who called the Brexit Referendum, failed to negotiate a successful Brexit and devised deals aimed only at winning majority support in and for the Conservative Party.

In this turbulent and uncertain world, Lord Ricketts called for a "conversation" on a national strategy in the UK. To this end, he outlined the following elements for discussion.

1) Trade policy. This will be much more important for the UK after Brexit because Britain's trade policy will no longer be outsourced to the EU and its negotiators in Brussels. The UK will have to replace 53 trade agreements negotiated with other countries by the EU. As a further challenge, Britain is no longer used to factoring trade into its foreign policy. In future, the UK will have to be much more "mercantilist", Lord Ricketts said. For example, it will have to calculate how far it can sail naval vessels through the South China Sea or criticize China over events in Hong Kong if doing so jeopardises trade relations with Beijing.

2) Relations with the EU. Britain will have to learn the "new discipline" of influencing the EU from the outside as a third country. It will have to learn how to lobby Brussels and plead its

case on issues as varied as trade, fisheries and security. This will be "tough" for a country used to influencing EU policy from the inside as a member of the European Council. The UK will have to choose whether to adopt a distant stance towards Europe or whether to try and build bridges in what is likely to be a bruised relationship. Lord Ricketts voiced concern about security cooperation in the future, notably in areas subject to or influenced by EU law, such as police and judicial cooperation where the European Parliament will be very careful not to cede powers to a non-member state.

3) Redefining relations with the US. The US's interests are changing. It is no longer keen on underwriting European security. The UK will have to consider how to ring fence its nuclear and security relationship with the US from an unpredictable White House. It will have to decide where it stands on policies, including trade, climate change, Iran and Israel, where until now it has stood with the Europeans rather than the US.

4) Defining UK foreign policy. At present, the bandwidth normally occupied by foreign policy is taken up by Brexit. Post-Brexit Britain will have to decide the sort of foreign policy it wants. Will it seek to reform the rule-based international order that has served it well since the Second World War? How will the UK make its reduced weight felt internationally as a single country in a multilateral world? Will it try, like France, to pursue a distinct policy on the world stage based on respected (albeit small) armed forces, strong intelligence capabilities and its permanent seat in the UN Security Council? Or will it be more like Germany and give priority to mercantile/economic interests? Lord Ricketts pointed to a "paradox of Brexit" where a national mood of isolationism jostles alongside ideas of a "global Britain". Pursuing the global Britain option would require public support and the government would have to make a case for it, he said.

Lord Ricketts's presentation was followed by a lively discussion. This was "off the record" to permit a candid exchange of views. However, he said he could be quoted when asked about the refusal of Boris Johnson's government to allow publication of a report of parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) into Russian interference in British politics, including the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2017 general election.

In highly critical comments, Lord Ricketts said the government had damaged itself by withholding publication of the report which had all the necessary clearances by the UK security services. Speaking of the ISC report, he said: "I can see no reason at all why they couldn't have published it" before parliament was dissolved for the general election campaign. Lord Ricketts said he had "no idea whether it contained an embarrassing secret about the Conservative Party or whatever. Even so, it would have been better to have the report out and then rebut it rather than have this impression they have something to hide."

Lord Ricketts said he expected the government's action would lead to a review of the ISC's prerogatives. "I don't see how you can have a select committee of parliament where the prime minister can block its reports. If it has been through the necessary clearances and has got clearances from the intelligence agencies and the material is not damaging national security, it (the ISC) should surely have the authority to publish its own reports," he said.

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