

Sir Nigel Sheinwald sees few grounds for optimism in Brexit

Sir Nigel Sheinwald, holder of three of the top jobs in UK diplomacy during 12 years of momentous global change to 2012, came to the November 22 lunchtime meeting with the AEJ's London Section to discuss "Britain and the World after Brexit". In the title of his talk, he posed the question: "Are there grounds for optimism?" After two hours of frank and lively discussion, it was clear that, in his view, they were few and far between.

This was especially true of foreign policy. Drawing on 36 years' experience as a UK diplomat, including his three final postings as UK ambassador to the US from 2007 to 2012, Foreign Policy and Defence Advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair from 2003 to 2007, and UK Ambassador to the EU from 2000 to 2003, Sir Nigel painted a bleak picture of the future.

Britain would lose a lot in terms of influence and being able to practice diplomacy as part of collective action. The EU had always magnified the UK's foreign policy role and had been at the core of UK foreign policy making on such key issues as Iran, the Middle East Peace Process, Russia and Burma. He couldn't think of an instance when the EU had impeded UK foreign policy. The EU had supported Britain in the Falklands War against Argentina. Although Germany and France opposed the 2003 US-UK invasion of Iraq, UK policy had not been held back by the EU.

In times of crisis, UK diplomats "plug in" to Washington and Brussels. In Brussels, they connect with EU colleagues at expert level and gather a huge amount of information. After Brexit, the UK will no longer be round the table in Brussels. The relationship will change and be more like that with the US, leaving the UK on the outside and having to work harder to glean information.

Brexit had also diminished the UK in the eyes of other countries. The rest of the world looked at the referendum result as sign of UK retreat from international affairs. He argued that the UK was losing its "edge" in international affairs and was absent from discussions to solve such crises as Syria and Ukraine,

Sir Nigel argued that these negative consequences of Brexit had been compounded by two "cruel coincidences".

The first was the election of Donald Trump as US President. This has made it impossible for the UK to "double down" on its previous strong relationship with the US. Sir Nigel described how other countries regard Brexit and Trump as "hyphenated" so that when a leader like Angela Merkel says Europe will not be able to rely on traditional allies in the future, people tend to relate her observation to Britain as well as the US.

Although Trump supports Brexit, the UK faces tough negotiations with the US on a free trade agreement and, with Trump in the White House, had probably suffered in its negotiation with the EU on the withdrawal agreement.

A "conventional US government" would have played more of a mediating role between the UK and the EU27 and could have weakened what Sir Nigel described

as "the excessive legalism and more punitive aspects" of the EU's stance in negotiations with the UK. Meanwhile, it was "striking" that the UK had sided with the EU against Trump on Iran, the siting of the US embassy in Jerusalem and climate change.

The threats now facing the post-Second World War multilateral system were the second unfortunate twist of fate to hit the UK's foreign policy. Trump holds in contempt alliances and multilateral institutions, like the UN and IMF, which are important pillars of UK foreign policy. These institutions and globalisation are also under attack from populist and authoritarian politicians elsewhere. Meanwhile the aftershocks of the financial crisis and subsequent recession -- fuelled by social media - have turned many against established politicians.

Although Sir Nigel suggested that some of these trends could be reversed, there was no denying that the political world had changed. In this context, it was a "delusion" for Brexiteers to believe that a thriving buccaneering Global Britain could emerge, freed from the shackles of the EU. Being a member of the EU and the euro had not prevented Germany from achieving great success in foreign trade.

After this litany of woes, were there any grounds for the optimism that Sir Nigel promised to explore in the title of his talk? "Maybe not", he said. But there were some questions which could elicit hopeful responses. Here a rigorously realistic approach emerged as the common factor that would be needed in the UK's responses to the challenges of Brexit.

- In foreign policy, the UK would have "no option to confront where we are", forget "Global Britain" and recognise that weaknesses had predated Brexit as a result of retrenchment after the UK's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.
 - In defence, the UK should strengthen its commitment to NATO and as far as possible plug itself into EU missions.
 - Sir Nigel advocated boosting the UK's diplomatic capacity, putting more resources into embassies in European countries, and, with a better foreign secretary than Boris Johnson, rebuilding the Foreign Office so that it could reacquire a negotiating role in Europe and possibly merge with the ministry for foreign trade.
- Brexit, he said, could force UK business to work harder in international markets. Finally, he pleaded for the UK to do more in support of multilateralism - to be "a bit more like Macron".

In the course of a lively discussion, Sir Nigel described Theresa May as an "underweight" prime minister but said even Britain's greatest prime minister would have found Brexit a "real challenge".

He suggested that after Brexit the EU27 would be a bit more protectionist and less outward looking. Brexit should be a wake-up call for the EU27 which faced very serious problems with the euro and migration. He noted how the EU's overriding goal in its negotiations with Britain had been to prevent other countries exiting the EU. There was now no prospect of Italy leaving the EU or the euro.

Britain itself "would not be insignificant" but would have less global impact outside the EU than inside. He didn't see Brexit affecting the UK's role as one of the five

veto powers in the UN Security Council where it would continue to exert influence through its aid policies, defence capabilities and other activities.

However, he dismissed suggestions that the Commonwealth could develop to play an important role in UK foreign policy. The Commonwealth was part of "the Global Britain mythmaking", he said. It was useful as an instrument of soft power but he could not see it counting for much in trade or big power policies.

Sir Nigel ended the session with a warning closer to home. "No country can be successfully internationally if it is weak internally", he said. Britain had been weakened by the drive for Scottish independence even before Brexit split the country into two opposing sides.

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