

**A Bolder Britain**  
**Remaking a major European power**  
Speech to Chatham House October 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

I'd like to thank Robin Niblett for the invitation to speak at Chatham House today.  
And thank you so much Ellie Groves for organising this event.

Chatham House was once home to three Prime Ministers, Pitt the Elder, Stanley and Gladstone. A Whig, a Conservative and a Liberal.

I began thinking about this speech while I was campaigning for us to stay in the EU last year.

When I had been Shadow Business Secretary I'd led trade missions and I got an even deeper understanding of Britain through the eyes of others.

Not just as we are now but our history and what we mean to people around the world.

We have been living through some extraordinary times in politics.

What is inconceivable today is the norm by tomorrow.

The Brexit vote, Trump, the rise of the hard right and ethnic nationalism, le Pen in France, the AfD in Germany, Austria, Hungary.

Catalonia, Korea with its nuclear threats, a well-armed Russia.

It's hard to know where to find stability.

Here at home the Brexit vote has turned our politics upside down.

The comments of the Brexit secretary yesterday show a government pursuing an extreme Brexit at all costs. The Prime Minister, held hostage by the Brexiteers who shout loudest in her Party, has gone back on a guarantee to give Parliament a meaningful vote on the terms of our withdrawal before the date of our departure. With this single act the government undermines the very parliamentary sovereignty the Brexit secretary claimed he was a champion of for so many years.

The centre ground has broken and the extremes of our politics are making the loudest and most illiberal noises. Neither has built a consensus. One wants the domination of the state, the other the domination of the market. Political extremes offer Britain little but retreat, isolationism and a fall in living standards. This is a symptom of our failing democracy.

Our country is leaderless. The political class, has lost its way. The foreign policy catastrophe of Iraq and the financial crisis of 2008 have broken people's trust in government and we are drifting in an unpredictable world. David Cameron failed to set the agenda. Theresa May is following one set by her Party's hard-right. The government has no leadership, no energy and no strategy.

So this morning I want to talk about our United Kingdom and how we remake our role in the world after the Brexit vote.

It is not the time to retreat.

There is no appetite amongst the British to raise the drawbridge.

Our national interests are not just European, they are global. And so as the government negotiates to leave the EU we need to look ahead and develop a proper national strategy on the basis of a clear understanding of what our interests are.

We must act and decide on our future, because if we do not, if through fear and timidity we dither and do nothing, there are consequences of inaction.

I believe Britain is at a crossroads.

The Brexit vote confronts us with some fundamental questions.

I'll begin with the simplest: who we are as a country?

We are a small island located between the Old World and the New.

To our west is the Atlantic Ocean, to the East, the Euro-Asian landmass.

These are our strategic frontiers.

They have always been far away, which is why Britain has always been a global island.

For centuries we have been a commercial power at the centre of our international trading routes.

Our Empire, our commerce and our expansion overseas depended upon our active role maintaining a balance of power in Europe.

It was in our national interest to make sure no one country achieved domination of the continent.

In or out of the EU we are a major European power.

Our parliamentary democracy,  
our English language,  
our history of individual liberty and the rule of law,  
have made Britain a powerful symbol of democracy.

### **1. Opportunity not decline**

But the Brexit vote has exposed the troubled state we are in. The last time we were exposed in such a way was in 1956 when

Abdul Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal.

Britain led an Anglo-French expedition to retake it.

America objected and then a speculative attack on Sterling threatened to bankrupt us.

We were forced to go cap in hand to the IMF, and the price of the loan was the surrender of our imperial ambitions.

The Empire had gone.

Many believed Britain was on the road to irrelevance.

The role of government would be to manage our steady decline.

And yet when my late father landed in Liverpool in 1964, with one suitcase and no money, he didn't see a Britain in decline but a promised land of opportunity and freedom.

He came over from Nigeria, just four years after independence.

His father was a teacher and the principal chief of our village Ogbunka in Anambra State.

My mother is half English.

Her own father's country was Ireland and he'd come to England for his education and had met my grandmother and settled here.

My parents met at a party and they made their home in Streatham in South London where I grew up, and the constituency I now represent in Parliament.

From my parents I inherited an England that was struggling to emerge from the legacy of Empire.

My father was a great example of its contradictions.

He was a successful businessman and yet he was also a passionate Labour supporter.

His great political hero was Harold Wilson.

He was a chief of his village in Nigeria and a proud upholder of Igbo traditions and at the same time he became part of what was a very English family.

And like many Black men he was a victim of police brutality and racism and yet despite this he still deeply believed in British democracy and fairness.

He saw the ugly side of the Empire but he never gave up on the idea that Britain was also a force for good.

So my family was part of a new national story, and this experience brought me to the Labour Party.

## **2. Labour is the party of national renewal**

It was in 1940, just 40 years after the founding of the Party, that Clement Attlee, Ernest Bevin and Arthur Greenwood had joined Churchill's War Cabinet.

When Tory grandees wavered and sought to appease Hitler it was the Labour Cabinet members who gave Winston Churchill the backing he needed.

They understood that failing to act can have grave consequences.

They helped to shape the Atlantic Charter of 1941 which set out the aims and values of this post-war order.

All countries would have the right to self-determination.

All people the right to freedom of speech, of expression, of religion, and freedom from want and fear.

And here they struck a chord with Roosevelt's 'New Deal' - nations would collaborate to 'improve labour standards, economic advancement, and social security' for all.

The Charter led to the institutions which still govern us today: The United Nations – its first meeting held here in London in 1946;

the General Agreement in Trade and Tariffs that became the World Trade Organisation;

the Bretton Woods conference that founded the IMF and what became the World Bank;

and NATO to defend our democracies.

Labour understood that the war could only be won if the peace was worth fighting for.

A new post-war international order could only be built with the consensus of the people at home and that meant

creating a fairer and more equal society.

So in 1945 Labour founded a new social contract and began to build a post-Empire role for Britain.

People in my Party forget that Foreign Secretary Bevin was the driving force behind NATO.

In 1948 he set out a British Foreign Policy which would appeal to the 'broad masses of workers'.

He based it on Churchill's description of three overlapping majestic circles among the free nations.

These were:

the English speaking world and the United States;

a united Europe;

and the Empire and Commonwealth.

Britain was at the juncture of all three and our leadership would combine European values and American power to link these circles together into a powerful democratic alliance.

With the memory of fascism and the threat of communism collective security was paramount.

But it needed to be more than just an elegant phrase.

So Labour made Britain a nuclear power and sent troops to Korea despite deep misgivings over American foreign policy.

Bevin and Attlee gave Labour a creed of progressive patriotism.

It was a belief in a robust national defence married to a passionate commitment to social justice.

At home, the interest of working people was the national interest, and it stood for a balance of power between capital

and labour.

Abroad, Labour sought cooperation amongst the democratic nations, free trade unions and national self-determination for Britain's former colonies.

This is the creed that established NATO to defend our democracy against the Soviet Union and other threats.

Our history dictates that we are not a Party of inaction on the world stage.

The creed of Attlee and Bevin informs Labour's values and we will use it to remake Britain's role in the world once again.

Labour lost the election in 1951, and Churchill, once again Prime Minister, turned the clock back to the days of Empire.

And so in 1955 Britain shunned the Messina conference turning our backs on the Treaty of Rome that founded the EU.

A year later the 'gun boat diplomacy' of Suez lost Britain our power and credibility in the Middle East.

We lost a partnership with France in creating a Union in Europe.

And we lost the trust of the Commonwealth.

Our role of co-leadership with the United States was exposed as the pretense it was.

We championed the UN and then we flouted it.

The three majestic circles fell apart.

The EEC looked our best prospect.



### **3. A changing world**

The international order came to symbolise the power of the West.

America was its ambivalent enforcer.

The EU with its member states pooling their sovereignty, became its emblem.

But today its rules based order is in retreat and as a result the world is becoming a more dangerous place.

Under Obama, America loosened its ties to Europe and turned to face the growing power of Asia.

With Trump now in power, America will expect Europe to step up in defending itself.

Europe is surrounded by many weak and failing states.

On its southern borders lies the Mahgreb and the threats of Islamist terrorism, Syria, and continuing movement of refugees.

To the East are the volatile borderlands of Belorussia, the Ukraine, and the Baltic states.

Beyond them lies Russia.

Despite a weak and declining economy, it is spending 15 per cent of its State Budget modernizing its nuclear arsenal and military capability.

Defensive, brittle and threatening, it takes an offensive stance while claiming to act defensively.

Conflict is no longer just nation states facing one another across the plains of Europe or Asia.

The terrorism of non-state actors and hybrid warfare is now the norm.

Economic and infrastructure based cyber attacks are backed up by the threat of conventional and irregular warfare. We know that Russia and North Korea are using this kind of conflict to interfere with democratic processes.

In countries like Turkey, the Philippines, and India, there are long bubbling nationalist and religious revolts against their political elites.

Populist leaders have emerged who are willing to flout international rules.

And Non-Western countries with different values are now becoming global actors, they too are willing to challenge Western foreign policy and legal structures.

New institutions such as BRICS, the African Union, the New Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank offer an alternative global order.

China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and its Belt and Road Initiative are a bid for global power that may transform international trade and integrate markets across Asia.

We have a choice.

We can surrender to our fatalism and allow ourselves to sink into decline.

Or we can act to uphold our values of democracy and liberty by a readiness to argue for them and defend them.

Without resolve the rules based international order will be more easily flouted and tyranny will grow.

Britain and Europe face many threats but the biggest is now coming from the broken social contract within our own societies.

The invasion of Iraq, failure in Afghanistan and Libya, and indecision over intervening in Syria, have left millions questioning our motives, and doubting ourselves.

Globalisation has broken down the borders of the nation state.

Factories have been shut down, jobs replaced by automation, and industries have been moved overseas.

Wages have stagnated.

There is widespread anger over high levels of immigration. Economic inequality and cultural disruption have created a populist revolt.

Across Europe the political classes are accused of favouring middle class metropolitan concerns at the expense of the bread and butter interests of working people.

Theresa May has reacted by promising to govern in the interests of working people.

So far this has come to nothing.

She has described Britain's role in the world as being the most forceful advocate for business, free markets and free trade anywhere around the globe.

But the solution to political discontent cannot simply be more of the same free market principles that have helped to create it.

Without consensus at home, the rules based international order will become weaker.

I believe in the values of this order, but it has lost the moral energy of its birth in the Second World War.

It has become a feeble version of the original and it now belongs to Davos Man with his sense of privilege and entitlement.

The idealism of the West has been tarnished.

We need leadership to renew our country and an international activism to rebuild an international order based on social justice and democracy.

Some doubt Britain can play an active role.

I don't share their defeatism.

I do not believe we are a country in decline.

#### **4. A role for Britain in the world.**

In 1947 George Marshall, the US Secretary of State surveyed the destruction of Europe.

It was the aftermath of the most destructive war in history.

The problems he said which bear directly on the failure of our civilisation do not need general talk and vague formulae.

They require concrete solutions.

Bevin understood Marshall and I believe that the three majestic circles are still our best guide.

They require Britain to first of all prioritise security in Europe to safeguard the continent.

Second, to sustain our bond across the Atlantic with the United States, and third to renew our global role.

Within each circle we must concentrate our national resources and capability, particularly where they overlap.

Britain still retains considerable global influence.

We are a permanent member of the UN Security Council and

the G7. The G20 gives us a relationship with emerging powers.

We have influential roles to play in the European Security Council, in NATO, and in rule making bodies such as the Basle Committee on Banking Regulation.

And we are the second largest bilateral donor in the world with a strong track record on development issues like universal education and health care.

So let me outline the three overlapping circles which define Britain's role in the world.

First of all, we need to strengthen our commitment to the security and defence of Europe.

Alongside France we are the most capable military power. Our intelligence gathering capacity remains indispensable. Our membership of the Five Eyes intelligence partnership makes us a global leader in the fight against terrorism.

In NATO Britain holds the position of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander.

We need to increase NATO's conventional deterrent and help develop the application of Artificial Intelligence.

Cybersecurity is now a tier 1 threat and Britain has a key role to play in the integration of internal security and external defence to meet the new challenges of hybrid warfare.

We must provide credible deterrents that convince Russia NATO is committed to Europe's collective defence.

And by increasing our commitment to NATO we are more likely to keep the United States engaged in Europe.

Britain led EU expansion.

We have a long history of involvement with Estonia.  
We went to war for Poland and have a close relationship with their people through migration.  
Ukraine wants our support in helping to build its democracy.  
These countries have looked to us to provide a more balanced Europe and we have a special responsibility for creating alliances with them.

We need a long term strategic response to Islamist terrorism, not piecemeal reactions.  
This must include standing by our global commitment to the UNs 'responsibility to protect' and supporting the development of the weak states to the East and to the South.  
Our failure - and Syria's refugee crisis is a warning - will only lead to Russia's continuing destabilization of the borderlands, more Islamist terrorism and increasing flows of refugees across the Mediterranean.

Secondly, the United States is our ally and the Atlantic remains our strategic frontier.  
Labour has swung from uncritical support for US foreign policy with disastrous consequences to our current anti-Trump hostility.  
Neither approach benefits our national interest over the long term.  
Our historic relationship with the United States is neither special nor is it just sentimental.  
But it is based on hardheaded interests.  
Our mutual sharing of intelligence and the interoperability of our nuclear submarine forces makes it more than just a transaction.

Our army, navy and air force is designed to fight alongside the US in a supporting role.

The relationship gives us security, and it amplifies our capabilities.

But Britain cannot settle for just being a useful component of US military and security strategy.

It undermines our sovereignty and leaves us over reliant on American knowledge and resources.

And with President Trump, America is unpredictable.

As Attlee remarked to Bevin in a Cabinet meeting discussing the nuclear deterrent, 'We ought not to give the Americans the impression that we cannot get on without them; for we can and, if necessary, will do so.'

Wilson demonstrated this during the Vietnam War when he resisted the intense American pressure for British support.

'Lyndon Johnson is begging me even to send a bagpipe band to Vietnam', he told his Cabinet in December 1964.

Thirdly, Britain's unique history requires us to remain a global power.

London is the historic commercial centre of the shipping industry and we have obligations to keep open the worlds shipping lanes.

Our naval base in Bahrain has been revived, recognizing that East of Suez is once again of strategic global importance.

We are a signatory of the Five Power Defence Arrangements along with Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia which has a focus on counter terrorism and maritime security.

France has expressed an interest in joining and this provides us with an opportunity to strengthen our military and security commitments with the French.

We should consider renewing attempts to expand the UN Security Council to include India, Brazil, Germany and Japan, and to promote the idea of a Rapid Reaction Force under its control, however difficult this might prove to be.

Our two new aircraft carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales along with the French carrier in production could play a leading role in a naval version.

Britain must reinvent this circle of influence by combining our hard power with a role as a democratic leader, a social connector, and an ideas maker.

A priority is tackling climate change and its impact on water and food security.

The drought and falling crop yields in Kenya and the storms in the Caribbean and North American show why we need a global and cooperative response.

Amongst our greatest assets are our language, our culture and our history.

The strongest relationships a country can make comes through cultural association.

We must nurture our global pre-eminence in soft power.

But we must be wary of not using it to avoid tough decisions or disguise a lack of will.

The international system is changing.

A new order is taking shape amongst the world's major powers.

Britain has a role to play, but only if we have the political will.



Our world class diplomatic corps is a major force for British strategic power and influence, but it is underfunded. Our defence spending on current projections of the 2015 accounting model could drop to 1.7 per cent of GDP by 2020. Cultural influence and social exchange is now as necessary to projecting national influence as the willingness to use military force, and yet we are cutting back here as well, reducing the budgets of the British Council and BBC World Service.

This government is not spending enough to meet the risks, threats, nor the opportunities identified in its own National Defence and Security Strategy.

We are a big country but sometimes we can act and behave as if we are small.

One of the priorities for a Labour Government must be a Strategic Defence and Security Review to give the electorate, our allies and our potential enemies a clear message of our intent and purpose.

Our spending commitment should rise above NATO's two per cent of GDP, lifting it incrementally to 2.5 per cent over a five year period. This will allow us to maintain our conventional forces at an adequate level.

Being clear about our commitment to our independent nuclear deterrent is important.

Developing the role of the National Security Council will be crucial to coordinate and implement the national strategy across Government.

## **5. A new world order – a new democratic doctrine**

Let me return to where I began.

In 1991 my father returned to Nigeria and stood for election as the Governor of Anambra State on an anti-corruption ticket.

He was exasperated with a country riddled with corruption from top to bottom, but he could not overcome a rigged system, and so he lost.

He taught me that there is a world out there yearning for freedom and prosperity.

We do not know the outcome of Brexit.

I've been very clear about where I stand on it.

But this is not a time for Britain to retreat from the world.

We need to renew our own country and play our part in rebuilding a global order based on democracy and the rule of law.

If we fail to act, if we leave Britain broken and divided, if we allow tyranny and illiberalism in the world to grow, there will be consequences and they will hurt us.

We are a great country.

The envy of people throughout the world.

The world is changing and we must change too.

Thank you.