

THANK-OFFERING TO BRITAIN FUND LECTURE

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY SINCE 1945

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*In introducing the lecturer Sir Isaiah Berlin said: As most people here probably know, this distinguished series of lectures was made possible through the bounty of men and women who fled from the Nazi tyranny in the thirties and in this way escaped the fate of six million others. But not only that, in this country they were able to re-build their lives in conditions of peace and the absence of persecution and discrimination which made it possible for them to lead a civilized and contented existence; and in gratitude for this they collected a fund, one of the purposes of which was the creation of a series of lectures within the general province of matters affecting the well-being of the British people. I'm quite sure there is no one here who supposes other than that among all the public men of our time, whatever his views may be, there is no one who is more identified with the values which these people sought to perpetuate than our lecturer this evening. He stands for civilized values in the highest sense; he stands for civil liberties, for social justice, and for the destruction of walls between peoples, all of which are among the ideals in the name of which this series was created. It is, therefore, a great honour for me and for the Academy to be able to welcome him as lecturer this evening on the subject of British foreign policy since nineteen hundred and forty-five.*

I AM greatly honoured to have been asked to deliver what is, I believe, the seventh of this series of Thank-Offering to Britain lectures. At a time when Britain, as I hope, is preparing not only to receive from, but also to contribute more to Europe than has recently been the case, it seems to me peculiarly appropriate that we should discuss those matters under auspices established by those who came here from the mainland of Europe—now a full generation ago—and have since contributed so much to our national life. My subject this evening is the development of British foreign policy over the post-war years. I think it would conceivably have been better had I called it Britain's changing world perspectives, or some similar, slightly more general title, for I am not here concerned with the minutiae of foreign policy-making about which I would in any event be quite unqualified to talk. The Foreign Office is the only one of the three great traditional, historical, continuing departments

of state which I have not seen from the inside. My purpose is rather that of trying to outline what appear to me to be the broad facts of world power within which successive British governments have had to operate since 1945.

If we look back to the beginning of the period, we find a new Labour government taking office with a record majority and a Foreign Secretary of massive personality but apparent lack of diplomatic experience whose most famous foreign policy remark before his appointment had been a claim in regard to relations with the Soviet Union that Left would be able to speak to Left. Ernest Bevin quickly became one of the dominant Foreign Secretaries of the century, but he was equally quickly pushed away from this happy view with which he started. It hardly survived the Potsdam Conference, to a resumed session of which he went one day after taking office. Broadly, his policy-making, and that of others concerned with it at that stage in the early post-war years, was conditioned by three salient sets of facts. First, as a result of the legacy of war, he—as indeed would have been the case with any other British Foreign Secretary—had to play his hand from a very weak economic base. There was an essential difference between our position and that of the other major countries. There was a contrast on the one hand between our position and that of either the United States or the Soviet Union; their power, broadly, had been built up by the war; ours had been undermined. But there was also a contrast between what we may roughly call the other four major developed powers of the world. The contrast with Germany, with France, with Italy, Japan, was because they had all been either defeated or occupied, and as a result their regimes were largely destroyed and they started afresh, both with fewer illusions and with fewer responsibilities than we did in 1945.

We were subject, luckily as it seemed at the time, a little more doubtfully so in a broader sweep of history, to no such brutal re-adjustment; but we had a strong inbuilt national tendency to compare ourselves with the first two of the super-powers—with the United States and the Soviet Union—and not with the latter four. We had indeed, as a result of what we had done during the war, an unassailable nominal membership of the triumvirate of world power. But it was not only nominally unassailable, it was also quite unsustainable.

However, this did not emerge clearly in Bevin's day. He realized the economic weakness: one of his favourite remarks was 'If only I had another fifty million pounds of coal to export,

what I could do in the foreign policy field . . .'. But where I think he was wrong was in thinking that this lack of an adequate power base, either economic or military, was a temporary aberration, and that he had to hold on until we could get back to more normal and better conditions from this point of view.

The second fact with which he had to deal, the second salient feature of the landscape confronting British foreign policy in those years, was that the Soviet Union was determinedly and consistently hostile. She was, indeed, more difficult in the early post-war days with us than with the United States. The spirit of Yalta lived on for a little time after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bevin's early confrontations with the Russians certainly could not possibly be blamed, whatever else it might be blamed upon, on too close a British attachment to the United States. Indeed, the by no means fanciful fear then was that deals would be made between the Americans and the Russians over our heads; and it is, I think, difficult to recall that piece of history which has since been shaded by a hill, and to remember the extent to which we were out in front of the Americans in early verbal encounters with the Russians. Bevin was certainly the first Western statesman to denounce the Soviet leaders with ferocity at the UN, but on the whole he controlled his impatience and a typical Bevinesque remark was: 'What you have got to do in foreign affairs is not to create a situation.'

Apart from his fear of this deal, his other dominating fear, the other dominating fear of British foreign policy, was that the Americans in 1945, as in 1919, would go home and would leave a weakened Britain vainly trying to organize war-destroyed and economically prostrate countries in Western Europe against Soviet pressure. He therefore saw his major task—this was the third of the parameters within which he had to work—as being that of securing a continuing United States commitment, political, military, and economic in Europe. And in this aspect of his policy at least he was in my view and in retrospect brilliantly successful. Starting with the commitment to Greece and Turkey in early 1947, through the response to General Marshall's Harvard speech in June 1947, the establishment of the Marshall plan and of OEEC, which was the foundation of European recovery, to the signature of the NATO agreement in 1949, the objective of a deep, continuing, multi-sided American commitment in Europe was secured.

The major weakness of British foreign policy during this early period—and indeed in a sense I regard this early post-1945

period as continuing for a full ten years, at least to the end of Churchill's premiership in 1955 and the end which came with it of Eden's last Foreign Secretaryship—was that all the leaders of our foreign policy-making machine during those ten years at least saw our relationship with the countries on the European mainland as more akin to that of America with them than with that of themselves to each other. It was a benevolent but a detached view; it was based upon an over-estimate, a substantial over-estimate, of our own power. We were always willing to help, but thought that we could and should do it from outside: and I think this—and its application to the two successive British governments—can be illustrated by two simple sets of contrasting historical fact. Bevin was a key architect of NATO but kept us out of the Coal and Steel Community. Sir Anthony Eden committed British troops to Germany for the rest of this century but tried unsuccessfully to encourage the formation of a European Army without our participation; and also declined tragically to be represented in the Messina Conference which led on to the signature of the Treaty of Rome. We saw ourselves throughout the whole of this period, under both governments, in Churchill's phrase as the meeting-point of three circles—of the Commonwealth circle, the North Atlantic circle and the European circle. This view that we were at this peculiar, exceptional, central meeting-point affected our view of our imperial role. We handed over power during this period and indeed during the subsequent period with speed and with remarkably good grace to our formally dependent territories. This took place in the Indian sub-continent in 1947, in Africa in the late fifties and early sixties, and apart from the few relatively small isolated incidents—Cyprus, Malaya, later the Malaysian/Indonesian confrontation—we were remarkably successful at not getting bogged down in colonial wars or semi-wars. But, at the same time, although we were handing over power with great speed and considerable grace we were greatly affected in our general policy outlook by the need to maintain a vast network of imperial communications, buttressed by military establishments.

I believe, looking back again to the late forties, that this substantially affected Bevin in his Palestinian policy, although there may well have been other reasons as well. It made him attach vital, excessive importance to good Arab relations, and I think that this interfered with and for a time endangered his major foreign policy objective of close relations with the United

States. It also had the result of enforcing an extremely high level of defence expenditure. In the late forties, our defence expenditure was higher as a proportion of the national income than any other western country including the United States. In Bevin's last year in office it was nine per cent of the national income. I think this figure in itself justifies the view that our immediate post-war position as one of the triumvirate of world power was unsustainable on economic grounds.

Also, during this period, and well beyond it, there was a widespread view of a continuing Commonwealth leadership role for the United Kingdom in the world. Discussion of this role was indeed a major factor in early Common Market arguments, though this has become much less so in the more recent phase of the argument in the past year or eighteen months than was the case in the previous round in the early sixties—and I think with good reason. The idea of a close-knit Commonwealth, providing Britain with a leadership role in the world, has in my view always been a mirage.

No close association has been possible, or desired, by other members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has continuing value if it is seen in its proper context, and in looking at it in its proper context I outline the following facts. First, it exists purely by reason of historical accident. Its members are bound together by the fact—the important fact, but the one and single fact—that they were all until fairly recently under British rule. Secondly, and this is its great advantage, it brings together into loose and informal, but occasionally intimate, association countries almost as disparate as possible in race, in religion, in stages of economic or social development. It is a club which imposes very few obligations and is not greatly used by the members, but which has the nearly unique distinction for a club of widening rather than narrowing the horizons of those who belong to it. If seen in this context, the Commonwealth has considerable and continuing value. But any attempt, either in the recent past in the period I am considering, or still more at the present time, to have imposed upon it a tight framework of economic or political, still more of military, union, would have meant that it would very rapidly have broken in our hands. We have only to ask ourselves the question whether any of the main members wish to see a tight-knit Commonwealth of this sort—an approach to a world block—in order to be clear what the answer is. It is clearly not true of India, it is clearly not true of Canada, not true of Australia, not true of the African countries

who have emerged far too recently to independence to wish to form a column under the leadership of anyone outside, but least of all the principal ex-colonial power of the world. The only country of which it is conceivably true is the remote, loyal, but somewhat over-dependent New Zealand. This is the plain fact of the matter which has to be faced.

Nonetheless, despite these being the facts, the view of the Commonwealth, the leadership role it might provide, the need to maintain imperial communications was a big factor affecting our policy throughout these years I am considering and was, I believe, too, a big factor in leading us into the ill-fated Suez adventure which must be considered as the next major chapter after the end of the Bevin-Churchill period in British foreign policy development.

Suez was the only real joint Anglo-French venture which has taken place since 1939-40, which is rather a dismal thought. And as then it had traumatic and lasting effects upon both countries, though in my view, in different directions. For Britain it was in many ways a longer-term blow to national self-confidence than for France. Clearly, we both of us failed in what we set out to do; that cannot possibly be denied. But we on the whole thought that we had failed and been wrong. The French thought that they had failed and been right. But, perhaps still more significantly, it drove us, but only us, towards America. The general post-Suez mood here, certainly in government circles, was to do no more ventures without the support, the assured, advance support, of our principal ally. Hilaire Belloc's 'Keep a hold of nurse for fear of finding something worse' became for most of the next decade Britain's recipe for dealing with Washington.

In France, it had almost exactly the opposite effect. There was less guilt and more anger. The lesson they learnt was probably 'never trust the Americans', and very likely not the British either. It helped to produce a regime which moved into a position of much greater independence, or intransigence, *vis à vis* its allies, although the luxury of that intransigence could perhaps only be enjoyed because others in Europe—the Germans and ourselves and others still—were willing to maintain the effectiveness of the Western alliance. But the more important point is that it led the two principal powers of Western Europe for nearly a decade in opposite directions. Both the symbolic and the extreme point of the split was I suppose at the turn of the years 1962 to 1963 when the Nassau Polaris agreement and

De Gaulle's veto on our application to join the EEC came within a few weeks of each other.

Since then there has been both a substantial change in France and a number of factors turning British policy-makers under two governments in a more European direction. First, the special relationship with the United States has certainly declined and probably come finally to an end. This is partly because wartime personal associations have now run out. I suppose the Macmillan/Eisenhower relationship was really the effective end of this; but there was, nonetheless, some sort of special personal contact both between Mr. Macmillan and John Kennedy and between Mr. Wilson and President Johnson; but I do not think that this has existed, or does exist at the present time, in anything like the same way between Mr. Wilson and President Nixon or between Mr. Heath and President Nixon; and I doubt very much if it will ever be re-created in quite the old personal form which, as I say, in its full flight came to an end with the end of Eisenhower's presidency in the middle of Mr. Macmillan's prime ministership and ran out finally about five years later. But more important than this is the change in the position of the United States itself. Long-drawn-out embroilment in Vietnam and the divisive effect of this at home superimposed itself on what would in any event almost inevitably have been a period of mounting social tension in the United States. These factors have inevitably made the United States at once both somewhat a less attractive and a more difficult country with which to be involved in a relationship of intense intimacy. I do not think one could now easily use again Churchill's memorable 1941 quotation from Clough, say, 'but westward look, the land is bright': I certainly advocate nothing here approaching a rupture of friendship. I hope and believe the United States will not become isolationist. I hope and believe she will continue to play a major role in the world. But it does seem to me common prudence and in accordance with all the facts of the situation that we should recognize that it is almost inevitable that the United States will be much more pre-occupied by its own problems in the next decade than it has been in each of the last two decades. And, indeed, the last thing we should be is to be too censorious about this. The United States is experiencing at the present time, coming upon it with remarkable suddenness, many of the problems of over-extended commitments, both militarily and monetarily, which have been with us and which we have been dealing with with

varying and doubtful success for much of the past twenty years. There are indeed many similarities except that the problems of the dollar are much more important. There are many similarities between the problems which have come upon the dollar in the last couple of years and the problems which sterling faced right through from the end of the war. We found it impossible to maintain the burden of being the second world reserve currency upon the basis of an economy as small as that of the United Kingdom. For a long time it appeared as though these problems could be gradually—perhaps belatedly—but gradually solved by passing more and more of the burden on to the dollar which appeared to be securely and permanently anchored upon the far broader base of the United States economy. And yet with remarkable speed it suddenly became evident that the special pivotal role of the dollar, chosen by the United States itself at Bretton Woods, and which worked very well for a generation, had, with the disappearance of the dominant American competitive position, become a role too heavy even for the United States to carry. And therefore I think we have been seeing in a more abrupt, in a more exaggerated form in the United States in the last few years the coming home to roost of some of the problems which we in a lesser and more gradual form have experienced during the post-war period. And in my view our aim, in a world in which the American position of clear supremacy over its allies, over all other Western countries, must inevitably be less clear in the future than it has been in the past, is to try nonetheless in every way to get the Americans to pursue a continuing role of commitment and cooperation—as I believe they will—and at the same time to endeavour to ensure that the Europe which we join shall not be a Europe separated from America by too wide an Atlantic Ocean. We do not want to join Europe in order to break off from the United States, but nor on the other hand do I believe that we can perform that or any other sensible role by trying to adopt a mid-Atlantic position, by trying to be a sort of enlarged Iceland in which we stand equally apart from Europe as from the United States. I believe our proper role is to be wholly part of Europe but to be dedicated as part of Europe to making a Europe which will preserve continuing links of closeness and friendship across the North Atlantic.

That is the first of the factors which have brought about a change in British policy-making since the differing effects which Suez had upon ourselves and upon the French. The second is



that the Commonwealth relationship in any exaggerated form has been shown to be without substance. It is now probably generally accepted that there is no new or continuing role—as our principal orientation—in this for us. I think it has also become increasingly clear that we live, whether we like it or not, in a world of big blocks and big powers. This, I think, has inevitably meant a decline and a visible decline in our influence as an independent middle-rank power. This can be illustrated by examples from two different parts of the world. It is shown by our lack of success in attempting a mediatory role between the super-powers, as over Vietnam. And also by our inability to perform a significant role in a neutral area of the world, like the Middle East, where we had those strong historic ties. And, indeed, during the past decade Europe as a whole, while highly successful economically, has in my view been less successful in exercising political influence. And the world of big powers and big blocks has economic as well as political repercussions. We have been fortunate enough to live in a comparatively bland world trading climate since 1945. It may well become somewhat less bland. We may be moving—we cannot be sure and I hope it may not be so—but we may be moving into a more protectionist climate stemming from the weakened position of the dollar and from American reaction to intense outside competition, particularly from Japan, which are really two sides of the same coin. It may well become a much more difficult trading world in which to live on one's own.

This world of big blocks and the big powers is a negative, defensive—although important—reason for a British European orientation. But I would prefer to lay still greater stress on the positive reasons and I will, if I may, try to provide some of them by asking what sort of world developments we want to see and trying to provide my own outline answers.

First I want to see the maintenance of Atlantic ties, but upon the basis of a far more equal partnership between America and her European allies than has hitherto been possible. Second, I want to see Germany ever more firmly anchored into the democratic community. Third, I want to see the age-old rivalry between France and Germany, which has so damaged the civilized world for the past century, remaining firmly buried but not replaced by any alliance of hostility to ourselves. Fourth, I want to see a relaxation of tension between East and West and a balanced reduction of arms in the centre of Europe. Fifth, I want Europe, as a rich and relatively fortunate

continent, to be increasingly responsive to the needs of the poorer world. I want both the quantity and the quality of aid to be improved. Sixth, as China takes her place as the third of the super-powers I want to avoid a world in which they, the super-powers, and no one else decide everything for themselves. I want a stronger political influence for Europe. I also want, as I believe most people in this country do, an opportunity for us in Britain to continue to exercise an influence in the world, for good as we hope, perhaps more in keeping with our history than our size. I believe that all these objectives are likely to be assisted by an enlarged community, including ourselves, and impeded if we remain outside. Nor do I agree with the view that our entry into Europe would represent a return to our European origins after an imperial excursion of three hundred years. I do not believe that we have ever been away from Europe in that sense. At times we thought we could detach ourselves but it never worked. Eighteen years after the 1896 coining of the phrase 'splendid isolation' we were more deeply and disagreeably embroiled on the mainland of Europe than ever before or indeed since. And it has always been European struggles, whether military or diplomatic or economic, which have involved our fullest national effort. It is Blenheim, Waterloo, and the Somme which are the great remembered battles of British history much more than Plassey or Omdurman or even Yorktown. We cannot contract out; it is much better that we should not attempt to do so.