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Major's Major Manifesto: "Britain in the World"  
The World Conference

On 29 March 1995, Britain's Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Major gave a very important speech opening "Britain in the World Conference." The Conference was convened on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Chatham House, one of the great pillars of Britain's Foreign Policy establishment. It was a speech delivered to industrialists, bankers, politicians, public servants, academics, journalists, non-governmental experts and specialists in a range of different fields who had come together to discuss Britain's place in the world. The importance of Mr. Major's address in this context goes without saying, even though it made no headlines in the American press and drew little interest from American mind-shapers and opinion makers. Consequently, its real historic significance went unnoted and unappreciated.

Yet it was in fact an historic proclamation. It openly proclaimed that Britain was a world power to be reckoned with as much in its post-imperial role as it once was reckoned with in its imperial role. It was a coming out of the closet for all to see that the "Emperor" wore real clothes. It was also an occasion for giving the lie to Dean Acheson's dismissal in 1962 of Britain from a world role. "I suspect," Major said, "that I scarcely need to remind [this audience] of Dean Acheson's famous dictum in the 60s, that Britain had lost an empire and not found a role. IT hurt, it hurt at the time because Dean Acheson was uncomfortably close to the truth when he said it, and that is why we hated him for saying it."

Regrettably Mr. Major did not cite the damning indictment in full which read as follows: Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role

The attempt to play a separate power role — that is a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'special relationship' to the United States, a role based on being the head of a 'commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity, or strength and enjoys a fragile and precarious economic relationship by means of the sterling area and preferences in the British market — this role is about to be play out. [Quoted by George Ball, The Discipline of Power (Boston, 1981), p. 69. Address by Dean Acheson at West Point, December 1962.]

It was regrettable because Major left out the open threat that the United States was determined to see to it that this role was about to be played out. The United States would be an active not just a passive participant in bringing this about. It is thus evident that Major's references to Acheson's dismissal of Britain back in 1962 was to publicly proclaim that Acheson's dire prophecy had not been fulfilled and that Britain was now playing and would continue to play a world-girdling role every bit as influential as that of the United States. As Major put it in part:

Britain has found her role in Europe and around the world and has developed it more successfully than many people in this country appreciate. [Over the past 33 years since Acheson's Jeremiad], we have operated ... [1] as a leading member of NATO and the European Union, [2] a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, [3] part of the Group of Seven Economic Summit Countries, [4] and of course as a founder member of the Commonwealth [of which Acheson had spoken of so disparagingly in his stinging and hurtful remarks].

[Furthermore] the UK now has troops deployed or stationed in over 40 countries around the world in a wider variety of roles than ever before. The end of the Cold War may have led us to reduce the size of our Armed Forces, but not their quality, which we believe remains the equal of any in the world [including by implication the United States as well].

[But this is by no means all] we have begun. I think more than ever before of the power of our long age and our culture. We have built up a remarkable portfolio of investments overseas. Per capita the United Kingdom's direct investment is higher than that of the United States, Japan, France, or Germany. Our global investments are said to be around \$300 billion and only Japan and the United States can exceed that sum. And that very naturally gives this country a very lively interest in what happens practically anywhere across the globe.

Having established Britain's *bonafides* for a world role, Major goes on to spell out some of its main characteristics.

First, [the UK] is a Nation State, a Nation State in what I firmly believe will continue to be a world of Nation States for the foreseeable future. We are attached to our independence, to our sovereignty and also to our national peculiarities. But there are numerous interests that we necessarily share with others. [As such] we work particularly closely with our partners in the European Union which remains essential to our prosperity and to our security. The world may no longer be divided into rigid blocks and nations must act more closely together than ever before to deal with the global, economic and security problems that we must all face.

And second, it follows inevitably from what I have just said that we have at the moment a global foreign policy.

Thirdly, no less than in past centuries, the United Kingdom remains a trading nation, but in a world where invisibles are now as important as visible trade. And one quarter of [the UK's] GDP comes from external trade. Export success, investment success have both helped our current account to go down dramatically last year from nearly £12 billion to more or less zero, and we now have a current account surplus with Japan, a point not generally recognized in every part of the country [or the world at large].

Major then goes on to underscore just how promoting trade has become for him personally a major concern.

Promoting trade is an important part of my own business abroad wherever I travel. The Indo-British Partnership which I launched in India has helped the surge in trade. Visits to other parts of the world that I have made, and that other senior members have made, have so often taken with them businessmen trading with countries abroad, investing with countries abroad, and attracting investment from those countries into the United Kingdom.

Indeed there has been a cultural change in British diplomacy abroad. The Foreign Office now devotes far more of its overseas resources to commercial work than any other front line activity and rightly so. And that has made a significant difference to the way in which British commercial interest can be represented overseas.

And fourthly, the United Kingdom remains one of the world's leading free market democracies. We actively promote democratic values and liberal economics in our foreign policy because in our view they are the best guarantors of peace and of stability.

And fifth, we have stopped taking for granted the English language, British science, education, training and broadcasting. We realize precisely what assets they are and what can be done with them both at home and abroad. Through immense good fortune the United Kingdom originated the world's most valuable piece of intellectual property — its main international and business language— and we are now marketing it more aggressively than ever before.

Of great importance for Mr. Major in enabling Britain to play her world role is the fact that Britain has enjoyed enviable stability over centuries through cherished institutions — the monarchy, parliamentary government, a rigidly impartial civil service, professional armed forces, an independent judiciary and churches operating within religious tolerance.... These institutions remain the bedrock of Britain's place in the world and they will outlast superficial criticism.

“But,” Mr. Major reminded his audience, “Britain's conservatism should not be misread in any sense. We are rightly averse to revolutions but we are not afraid of change or of risk. And indeed I would go further. I think our willingness to take intelligent risks, to act sometimes quickly and independently and to give a political lead, underpins Britain's standing in the world. It explains why, despite nature's inevitable limits on our size and resources, the UK is one of the five Permanent Members of the Security Council and has the world's sixth largest economy. It is not a quality that we should permit to be submerged, it brings value not only to this country but to the international community as a whole.

Mr. Major then goes on to illustrate from current policy towards Russia, China, former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, South Africa and Ireland. As for Russia, “It remains in our interest ... to encourage

reform in Russia and to develop further cooperation in foreign policy." As for China, "we should like to bring China into economic partnership and political dialogue" without mincing our words about human rights and their abuse in China, and as for Hong Kong, "we are fulfilling our vital responsibilities." As for the former Yugoslavia, Major takes pride in Britain's concrete efforts to provide humanitarian aid and get a diplomatic process moving. Suffering would have been far worse without Britain's efforts. The parties will need to find a negotiated outcome as there is no clear-cut military solution. The sooner that is recognized the better.

As for the Middle East, it is an area fraught with political risk, but in which the United Kingdom has huge interests and a long standing affection. "I was the first G-7 Head of Government to visit Chairman Arafat in Gaza, and I went because we have an interest in supporting the peace process. Yasser Arafat asked me on that occasion if the European Union would coordinate international monitoring of the Palestinian elections. And the Israeli government, when I spoke to them, supported this request. I hope the European union will now agree to take on that task and thereby to engage more directly than ever before in the attempt to build peace in the Middle East."

As for Iraq, "we have to take risks. Saddam Hussain is trying to blackmail the Security Council by causing his people to suffer. The world should not give into such tactics.... But we must also help the Iraqi people, themselves innocent, who are as much his victims as anyone else. Britain has taken initiatives to bring this about.

As for South Africa, it is at the beginning, as is Russia, of a long-term transition without a guaranteed outcome. So we are doing all that we can to help this remarkable transition to move towards

success. I believe the UK can be a tremendous power for good in South Africa, provided that we do not shy away from taking risks. And there can be no better demonstration of this than last week's outstandingly successful state visit by the Queen in which the Foreign Secretary took part.

As for Ireland, the UK has worked more closely than ever with the government of Ireland, and we have done so to promote peace in Northern Ireland. In doing this, the British and Irish governments had to overcome historic tensions and entrenched positions. It has not been an easy process for either of us and many more difficulties remain to be surmounted. But a lasting settlement will only come about if all concerned are prepared to risk a new approach.

Summing up, Mr. Major asserted that "this is the sort of country I believe us to be and that I wish us to remain. Perhaps a little less cautious and a lot more hardheaded than many people believe."

Mr. Major then turned to future challenges. 2020 will be a very different place than today, he said. By then the Asian tigers, once aid recipients bearing a Third World label should be prosperous players in the economic first division. How is that going to change the balance of power around the world? These and other such problems should be addressed by the conference. As for the United Kingdom what policies should we now be shaping to equip the United Kingdom for change, to take advantage of the new opportunities, to be ahead of the curve as events move on.

The key issues as Major sees them are five:

(1) The United Nations. The need for a powerful compelling United Nations has never been greater. Yet the UN is in a profound financial crisis which is about to deepen. "Despite American

arrears of \$1.5 billion, the Congress has voted to reduce the US contribution. Does the financial crisis present an opportunity for us to press for really effective reforms in the UN and if so in what direction?"

(2) That crucial transatlantic relationship. Britain has a vast range of shared interests with the United States. We have traditionally favored both a strong Europe and a strong relationship with North America. How can one help promote ties between the two heartlands of democracy now that we are no longer bonded together by shared fears over the Cold War? We have seen the first stirrings of a debate in Britain and in Europe about a new transatlantic community. It is a worthy aspiration. How shall it be developed?

(3) The United Kingdom and Germany have led the drive to extend Western Europe's security and prosperity to the east by bringing the countries of Central Europe into the European Union and by forming closer ties with Russia and the Ukraine. This will require a huge political and economic effort over many years. It will require us to take the domestic strain of opening the markets of Western Europe and investing more in the east. Is this an attainable goal? Is Western Europe simply strong enough to take that job?

(4) Is our diplomacy adapting enough to new international problems? Some of the most acute threats to our interests and way of life are not posed by dictators, not posed by traditional conflicts but terrorism and crime, by the narcotics trade, by extremism in the name of religion, by diminishing natural resources, and by environmental pollution. Do those problems receive a high enough priority? What new approaches to these problems should we now be developing?

(5) How do we play our proper part in tackling world poverty? Official development aid can point to some successes, for example, in South Asia. But it is trade, investment, education and entrepreneurship which have fueled the more spectacular development of South East Asia. Hundreds of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa have seen little improvement in their living standards despite huge flows of official aid over many years. How can we promote investment and entrepreneurship there? Is there still a rationale for official aid, tackling emergencies, promoting reform and spreading know-how? So looking into the next century, what kind of aid program should we maintain?

As fitting, Major concludes his agenda with a word of faith in the Commonwealth which Acheson had so brusquely dismissed as without substance in his West Point address of 1962. "I am a firm believer in the Commonwealth," Major assured his listeners. "It is more of a family than an institution and it brings us together with nearly one-third of the world's nations. Sometimes we make good use of its assets as in the Trinidad Terms initiative or the Harare initiative on good government. But if we do not keep using it, then I believe we will lose it. The commonwealth needs a focus, it needs a *raison d'être*. What should it be as we look at the years ahead?"

Mr. Major then affirmed his belief that the Conference is about building on success. "The United Kingdom, as an island with a trading and seafaring tradition, has always looked outwards. I am sure that we will continue to look outwards. We cannot afford a 'Little Englander' mentality and frankly I see no danger of that. But I do think we have to work even harder in the future to maintain the United Kingdom's influence and healthy competitive position."

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I have dealt with Mr. Major's address at such length because of its historic importance and because of the limited response to it. Although Major makes no mention of Britain's growing strategic clout with Trident becoming operational, he makes it clear enough that Great Britain is a global power comparable to that of the United States. He leaves us in no doubt that post-imperial, and post-Cold War Britain is, if anything, far more potent and influential on the world scene than it ever was. Above all Major's speech is to be read as giving the lie to Dean Acheson's haughty assumption back in 1962 that Britain's world power role was about to be played out. For what else but sweet revenge could have inspired Major to have made mention of Dean Acheson's famous dictum that Britain had lost an empire and not found a role and reminding his audience that "it hurt, it hurt at the time because Dean Acheson was uncomfortably close to the truth when he said it and that is why we hated him for saying it." But Acheson has been proved wrong. Britain is once again a world power wielding global influence and well on the way to shaping a new world order which just might work.

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