

Estoril Political Forum 2020

Winston Churchill Memorial Speech – 19 October 2020

Difficulties Mastered Are Opportunities Won:

The UK, Portugal and Europe in 2020 and Beyond

Thank you so much Professor Espada. President Albuquerque, distinguished panelists and guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you and good evening to you all. I confess it feels rather strange to be speaking to you from behind a computer screen and very sad not to be enjoying a fine dinner in Estoril. Although the weather is so unpleasant in Lisbon today that that does slightly mitigate my disappointment. Among the many distinguished people attending the Estoril Political Forum are a quite a few that I am honoured to call my friends. But for those of you who don't know me, my name is Christopher Sainty, and I have the wonderful privilege of being the British Ambassador to Portugal, which as I never fail to remind my Foreign Office colleagues, is the very best job in our diplomatic service. It is a tremendous honour to be addressing you this evening and I would particularly like to thank my dear friend Professor João Carlos Espada for inviting me to do this.

When Professor Espada first asked me, I confess I felt considerable trepidation, knowing that a number of renowned authorities on Winston Churchill would be in this audience. I also couldn't help recalling that on the two previous occasions that I have had the pleasure of attending this event, the Churchill lecture was delivered by two extremely eminent British historians and experts in this field – namely Charles Moore and Andrew Roberts.

It is therefore with considerable relief that I can confirm that I am not, in my speech this evening, even going to attempt to reveal any brilliant or startling new insight into our great wartime leader: instead my plan is to set out some quite personal reflections on what has been a frankly extraordinary year. However, in doing so, I will try to draw at least a little inspiration from Winston Churchill.

So my aim this evening is to talk about three broad themes:

1. First, the United Kingdom's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic; the challenges we have faced; and I would like to say a little about the British contribution to the international response because I think this is an area in which we can feel very proud;
2. Second, a subject that I have found impossible to avoid, since I arrived in Lisbon two years ago; namely the state of our negotiations with the European Union about our future relationship now that we are no longer a member of the European Union; and
3. Third, I hope you will indulge me, as Her Majesty's Ambassador to Portugal, to say a little about the relationship between our two countries; some of the challenges we have faced in recent months; but also the challenges and, I hope, the bright days ahead for our historic partnership.

I don't know if there are any astronomers with us this evening, but if there are, you will undoubtedly be aware that there is some interesting stuff going on in the night sky this month.

Most notably with the planet Mars, which is the closest it has been to the Earth for several decades and last week was in opposition, in other words Mars and the Sun on precisely opposite sides of the Earth. All of which means that it is bigger and brighter than it has been for many years and that if you look up from your balcony into the night sky this month, you get a wonderful view of the red planet glaring down upon us, by far the brightest object in the heavens.

Now I'm not a particularly superstitious person but I can't help being struck by the thought that Mars, as we all know, is a warrior, associated with strife, turbulence, anger, fire and war. And that does seem to correspond at some level with what our world has been going through in 2020.

Like so many other countries, the United Kingdom has struggled with its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early stages, when we knew much less about the virus than we do now, governments everywhere faced extraordinarily difficult decisions and choices to try to protect their populations. It has been bumpy and uncertain as debate and controversy inevitably rage around those decisions and choices. And all our countries are now struggling again – as the grim prospect of a resurgence of the pandemic over the winter months becomes ever more real and immediate. The virus has ruthlessly exploited weaknesses in our social, political and economic systems. It has aggravated tensions. Over the summer, it even managed to introduce an unusual degree of stress into the historic partnership between Britain and Portugal – about which I'll say a little more in due course.

It is of course history that will, in the end, deliver the definitive judgement about this extraordinary period.

Watching from here what has been happening back in the United Kingdom, my observation is that UK population (similarly to the Portuguese population) has responded, by far and large, with tremendous patience and resolve to the tremendous challenges we have seen this year, though the politics are definitely fraying at the edges now. And that the British government has worked extraordinarily hard to protect public health; and also to protect businesses and workers impacted by COVID-19 across the country. There are no easy answers but the economic package of support has been unprecedented and I think, within the bounds of the possible, it has been far-sighted and compassionate. That said, our economy and public services have certainly taken a tremendous battering and the recovery will undoubtedly be very long and arduous. But we will survive, we will overcome this virus and we will recover. And we will work with our friends and partners to achieve that and we will always be generous in assisting those around the world who need our help.

And that brings me on to the theme of international leadership and co-operation.

Given the immediacy and importance of the domestic situation and response to everyone's lives, it's unsurprising that we read about little else in the British newspapers. But that does make me a little sad, because there is a tremendously important international dimension, where I believe the UK has a really remarkable story to tell.

Internationally, the UK government has been committed to leading a global response to the crisis from the beginning. We are a country that believes it has global responsibilities at times like this that transcend our national interests.

The UK has to date pledged hundreds of millions of pounds in aid to end the COVID-19 pandemic as quickly as possible. In headline figures we have pledged over 800m this year to the development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccine including to the poorest countries in the world.

We are the world's biggest donor to the Global Vaccine Alliance, GAVI, dedicated to the task of ensuring the rapid distribution of vaccine to those parts of the world and those communities where it is most needed. We will invest £1.65bn in Gavi over 5 years – and that investment will protect and save the lives of millions of children and vulnerable people.

Our Prime Minister hosted the Global Vaccines Summit on 4 June, raising over £6.9 billion (\$8.8bn) to fund Gavi up to 2025. Looking ahead, we will use our Presidency of the G7 next year to build a new, global approach to health security.

So on the multilateral stage, the United Kingdom has genuinely led the international response and the Brits among us can rightly be proud of that leadership.

But of course the UK has much more to offer than finance and convening power in multilateral organisations. We are also right at the front of efforts to develop new vaccines, treatments and tests at the breakneck speed and scale required to tackle the pandemic. Two examples of this: Oxford University, in partnership with the British pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, have developed what is probably the most promising and advanced of the various candidate vaccines, which is currently undergoing phase three clinical trials.

Now there can't be any guarantee that any of the current vaccine projects will in the end deliver a viable and effective solution but this project has succeeded at each stage so far and gives us great hope. The second example was the discovery a few months ago by UK researchers and medical professionals that the steroid treatment dexamethasone could dramatically improve the survival prospects of seriously ill, hospitalised COVID-19 patients. We immediately shared this vital discovery and it has saved tens of thousands of lives all over the world.

And given that we are in Portugal I should add that we look forward to José Manuel Durão Barroso taking office as new Chair of Gavi in the New Year. He will have a vital role in ensuring the success of the COVAX project.

I've lost count of how many speeches and interviews I have given on the topic of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union since I arrived in Lisbon. I acknowledge that there are not many enthusiastic Brexiteers in Portugal and of course I entirely respect the feelings of all Portuguese on this subject.

But we made our choice as a nation and we left the European Union on 31 January of this year under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement. And during the Transition Period which expires at the end of this year we have sought to negotiate the most mutually advantageous agreement for our future relationship, which is mostly about the terms on which we will trade, but also potentially covers a whole range of other matters like law enforcement co-operation, the transfer of personal data, arrangements for aviation and transport, fisheries, and so on.

This was always going to be pretty challenging and of course the COVID pandemic has certainly not made the conduct of these negotiations any easier.

It's quite hard, even when like me you have a certain degree of insider's insight, to understand the dynamics of a complex negotiation like this, so I feel for anyone trying to unravel the mystery on the basis of what they read in the newspapers. Inevitably there are competing public narratives. Both sides obviously have their own perspectives and want their arguments to be heard.

It is certainly the case that the gap between the negotiating mandate that was given by the member states to Michel Barnier in February and the principles of sovereign independence that underpinned the United Kingdom's initial negotiating position, that gap was very wide. And that after many rounds of negotiation and hard work on both sides that gap has narrowed in many areas. And it has become increasingly clear that the two major political obstacles that stand between us and an agreement are the set of issues around competition policy sometimes called the level playing field on the one hand, and fisheries on the other.

And this is not the moment to get deeply into these issues. I think the point that the UK negotiators would want me to underline is that the UK government has never demanded anything exceptional or unprecedented in these areas. On the level playing field, which is largely about the rules governing state subsidies, the EU has made unprecedented demands of the UK, seeking to constrain our freedom to regulate our own economy in a way that has never formed part of EU trade agreements in the past, including with countries like Canada, Japan, South Korea and many more.

And I think that anyone who has followed the Brexit story and understood the political mandate of the current UK government will see that it was never realistic to imagine that the UK could ever agree to remain within the regulatory orbit of Brussels once we've left the EU. But I think it's also fair to say that that understanding has sunk in on the EU side and I can only really offer you a personal view but I think that with enough political will on both sides it looks to me as if that issue could be resolved. On fisheries, the EU's position from the start of this year's negotiations has been to demand an indefinite continuation of the status quo, ie the EU Common Fisheries Policy, under which access by EU fishing vessels to UK waters and the quantities of fish that they can take from our waters are determined in Brussels according to a methodology that hasn't really changed since the 1970s. I think most objective people can see that no British government could possibly agree to that. Moreover, the EU has a fisheries agreement with Norway and the UK has been clear that we would be very happy use that as a template for our agreement; and we've also just concluded our own bilateral fisheries agreement with Norway which is an excellent model agreement because it operates on the basis of a really scientific methodology called zonal attachment that properly protects the marine environment and allows our respective fish stocks to flourish – which is sadly not the case with the Common Fisheries Policy.

Many commentators have I think assumed that because the fishing industry is a relatively small part of our economy we will eventually surrender our fishing interests to Brussels in order to secure a wider deal. But I think that is a profoundly dangerous misreading of UK politics. I do not believe this UK government can or will give way on this highly symbolic expression of what it means to regain control after leaving the EU.

So where does all that leave us, as there is clearly very little time left? Those of you who know me will also know that I have always been optimistic about these negotiations. Prior to our departure, in 2018 and 2019, it always seemed to me, even in the darkest moments (of which there were quite a few), that we would end up with a deal. Precisely because it was so manifestly in the interests of both sides.

And despite all the current uncertainty, I do think the same rather simple logic applies in 2020, even though this is a negotiation about a very different set of issues. Having said that, last week was certainly one of those “dark moments” when the gap between the two sides was fairly brutally exposed following the European Council meeting in Brussels and I confess that that did test my optimism. The EU had an opportunity to signal a willingness to compromise which it conspicuously and disappointingly didn’t take.

But several leaders, including Angela Merkel, sounded a lot less rigid in their public statements than the Council Conclusions. And I still think that for all the public rhetoric around the negotiations, there is quite a lot of determination on both sides to get this over the line if it is remotely within the scope of human ingenuity – and there are some extremely smart people on both sides working round the clock on this. Maybe it’s the moment for another quick Churchill quote to try to capture the mood among the negotiators: *“if you’re going through hell, keep going.”* Actually although that quote is famously attributed to Churchill, I believe there is no reliable evidence that he actually said it.

We certainly want an agreement: our Prime Minister has been very clear about that. The kind of speculation that we sometimes see that perhaps the UK government would really rather leave without a deal is definitely wide of the

mark. And I don't think the door is yet closed on these negotiations. But at the same time we have to be responsible and plan for the worst case. Even if we get a deal, we will still be outside the EU's single market and customs union and there will have to be quite significant changes at our borders for which people and businesses need to be prepared; and without a deal those changes become all the more significant. I think that is probably the right way to interpret the Prime Minister's comments last Friday.

But in the final part of this speech – and thank you all for your patience – I want to talk about the relationship between the United Kingdom and Portugal. I think it's very important not to conflate the UK-EU question with the question of our future bilateral relationships with our European friends, allies and partners. They are not the same thing and whatever happens between London and Brussels, I want relations between Lisbon and London – as our Prime Minister might say – to *“prosper mightily”*.

And working closely with Portugal is something that is really instinctive for the UK. We are famously the oldest allies in the world and the history is wonderfully rich. Even after two years I am still constantly uncovering fascinating connections between the two countries.

Which is perhaps the cue for another Churchill quote:

“One should always look back upon the history of the past, study it and meditate upon it. Thus one learns the main line of advance... It is wrong to be bound by the events and commitments of the last few years, unless these are sound and compatible with the main historic line.”

I think we are prone to undervalue history these days in the UK – I’m sorry to say – and by the way that is not intended to be an oblique comment on some of the highly charged issues around Black Lives Matter and the history of the slave trade. Very important issues but not my theme for tonight. I think as a nation we are less aware of our history than we were and I suspect that Churchill would have lamented that. But one of the things that has struck me again and again here in Portugal is that there is a greater awareness of Portugal’s history and it seems to me that what makes Portuguese people feel Portuguese is much more closely connected to the history of this country. And the reason this interests me so much is precisely because England, and more recently the United Kingdom, is such an important part of that story. What’s my evidence for all this? Well, it’s everywhere. Every town and city I visit in Portugal has some fascinating story to tell that links the two countries. And everywhere I go people want to tell me those stories. And so although it’s not always fashionable to look back, I think the ancient Anglo-Portuguese alliance does matter and does have relevance now and for the future.

It’s also something solid we can fall back on when we face unexpected setbacks and challenges. I mentioned in my opening comments that the COVID-19 pandemic had even put the UK-Portugal relationship under strain. The UK’s experience during the first wave of COVID-19 was, as I’ve already acknowledged, very brutal. We experienced high rates of infection, high rates of hospitalisation and we found ourselves in the awful position of recording the highest number of COVID deaths in Europe. And so when the lockdown and other restrictions finally brought the infection rate down in the UK in May and June, British ministers were I think understandably determined to protect our population against the risk of an immediate resurgence of the virus.

And there is a lot of evidence that shows that in the towns and cities where we did experience further outbreaks during that period, one of the main causes of those outbreaks was people returning from abroad and bringing the virus back into their communities. And so the introduction of the fourteen day self-isolation policy in June for all people arriving in the UK, for all the controversy around it, was a public health-based response, driven by scientific and medical evidence and designed to minimise the risk of reintroducing the virus into communities that had already lived through a devastating experience.

But the UK government also recognised that a blanket quarantine policy came with huge economic costs and so, in early July, a number of countries with low incidence of the virus were given exemptions – so called travel corridors. Now while all that was going on in the UK, Portugal was, like many other European countries, in a very measured and responsible way, lifting the lockdown restrictions and reopening the economy. In my view it was a great misfortune that, from about the middle of May, Portugal experienced a series of COVID outbreaks, mostly in the Lisbon region, which pushed Portugal's case numbers up to levels which were among the highest in Europe at that time. Now I have said over and over again that I think that the response here to the pandemic has been exemplary and I genuinely believe that we can all learn a great deal from the clear decision-making and public communication that has characterised the Portuguese response. But at that particular moment, in June and July, given the prevalence of the virus in Portugal and given the absolute determination of British ministers to minimise the health risk to our population, there was no way they could give Portugal a quarantine exemption.

And at the time that judgement was reached there were already seventeen other countries with travel restrictions in place in respect of Portugal, so it wasn't a wayward judgement in London, it was very carefully weighed and in line with the evidence.

But of course it did provoke a very fierce political reaction here in Portugal, which I confess took me somewhat by surprise.

Things were said and written about my country which I never expected to hear or read in Portugal. That saddened me. I tried hard to explain the context and the scientific and public health rationale for the UK government's decisions which – as I hope I've made clear, were not in any way politically motivated decisions – but, as I have learned, it can sometimes be hard to make yourself heard when a storm is raging around you.

Happily in August we were finally able to turn that decision around and lift the quarantine restriction for Portugal. Less happily, as with the vast majority of other European countries, the rapidly rising case numbers last month meant that the restriction had to be reimposed for mainland Portugal, although this time I was very pleased we succeeded in maintaining the quarantine exemption for Madeira and the Azores, which was well justified on the basis of the evidence: I would just say that the Portuguese islands have really taken advantage of their geographical separation and through a series of well-judged measures have maintained exceptionally low rates of COVID infection. And I pay warm tribute to President Albuquerque and President Cordeiro and their respective autonomous governments for keeping their islands among the safest places in the world.

Anyway my point in re-telling this rather unhappy story this evening is first of all to highlight how mercifully unusual it is for our two countries to experience that sort of bilateral friction – and that I think goes back to my point about the extraordinary way in which COVID-19 has inserted itself into all aspects of our lives, our politics and our relationships. But secondly to reinforce my point that when we do run up against these obstacles and frictions we can always find a way through and we are blessed with the strength of our unbroken history of centuries of friendship which help us do that.

And I do think, as I have always thought, that there is every reason to be optimistic. Look at bilateral trade and investment. The UK is Portugal's fourth biggest export market, and Portugal's fourth biggest source of Foreign Direct Investment. UK exports to Portugal increased by €4.3bn last year – and bear in mind that that is despite Brexit uncertainty, US-China tensions and all the formidable headwinds to global free trade. I'm told that our trade and investment figures have held up really well this year, that we may even see increases during the period of the pandemic.

It's also important to remember in any discussion of the modern relationship between the UK and Portugal the links that run through people. There is a very substantial Portuguese community in the UK – estimated at around 400,000 – who make a genuinely remarkable contribution to our economy, our public services, our higher education sector and our society more broadly. And of course there is a sizeable community of British residents in Portugal – estimated between 35,000 and 50,000 – who also make a significant economic and social contribution here.

I am absolutely confident that this will not change, given the guarantees enshrined in the Withdrawal Agreement and the commitments that both countries have given to protect the rights of these important communities in the future.

I've talked a lot about COVID and Brexit. These are not my two favourite subjects. And I'm pleased to report that we have a much broader agenda for the future relationship and that we have been working with our friends and partners in Portugal throughout this challenging period on a set of issues that matter to our two countries, and to the world.

I think there's a compelling argument that the pandemic is just one symptom of mankind's abuse of the natural world. And that abuse of nature is the real crisis, the existential crisis we face in the twenty-first century, and the one that we have to overcome if we and our beautiful planet are to survive. The science is beyond dispute: we are heading at breakneck speed and accelerating towards catastrophe if we continue destroying the natural environment and destabilising our increasingly fragile climate.

Both the UK and Portugal are leading by example, two of the very first countries to commit to the 2050 net zero emissions target. We are very closely aligned in our belief that the world must prioritise a green and environmentally resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As governments map out their economic recoveries, we will all be faced with the choice of our century. We can opt to prop up the status quo, locking in further decades of carbon emissions and environmental destruction. Or we can choose this moment to reset our relationship with the natural world.

In the coming months, the eyes of the world will turn to COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which the United Kingdom will co-host with Italy in Glasgow in November next year. This is a great responsibility that we are taking on. We will work tirelessly to raise the level of ambition on decarbonisation, adaptation and all other aspects of the climate debate, across the world. And we're certainly not sitting on our hands until next November, there is already a huge amount of work taking place and mapped out in the coming months, including a Summit to mark the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement in December this year, where the UK, France, Italy, Chile and the UN Secretary General António Guterres will up the pressure on world leaders to commit to ever more ambitious decarbonisation targets.

And one of the most important milestones of this next year of climate action with the UK in the driving seat will be Portugal hosting the United Nations Ocean Conference, and of course there will also be the golden opportunity of Portugal's Presidency of the European Union to shape an ambitious European climate policy; and I hope and expect that Portugal will make a significant difference at a global level through those events.

Now on the subject of relations between the UK and Portugal there are a lot of other areas I would like to talk about. As some of you will know I'm particularly keen on promoting science, research and higher education links and as soon as COVID-19 allows I'm looking forward to getting back on the road and visiting Portuguese universities up and down the country because I am really determined that this extraordinarily vibrant area of bilateral co-operation should continue to strengthen in the future.

But I'm also conscious that I have spoken for too long and probably tested your patience to its limits. So I will close at this point, perhaps with a final uplifting thought from Winston Churchill to help us lift our gaze as we confront what will undoubtedly be another series of stiff challenges in 2021. Churchill observed that *"kites rise highest against the wind, not with it."* And that seems to me to be an appropriate metaphor for the way in which I hope that Portugal and the United Kingdom can work together in the coming years.

Thank you very much.