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The Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence

Inquiry on

SOFT POWER AND THE UK’S INFLUENCE

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MONDAY 16 DECEMBER 2013

Witness: Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH
Members present

Lord Howell of Guildford (Chairman)
Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Lord Forsyth of Drumlean
Lord Foulkes of Cumnock
Baroness Goudie
Baroness Hussein-Ece
Lord Janvrin
Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne

Examination of Witness

Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH, former Prime Minister

Q343 The Chairman: Sir John, welcome and thank you for agreeing to come before our Committee. We are very pleased that you were able to come. Just as a formality, in front of you is a list of the declared interests of this Committee, which may help you to understand one or two of the directions of our questions. I do not think there is going to be a Division, but if there is I would have to adjourn the whole business for five minutes.

This Committee is concerned with Britain’s standing, position and interest in the world and how techniques of protecting and promoting them are or are not—we think they are—being changed by new matters of communication, globalisation, the interconnectivity of the entire planet and the kind of power designated by Joe Nye as soft power, but it may also be a smart power, needed to promote and operate in these new conditions. That is our concern and the area where we are seeking to write an intelligent, useful and constructive report.

Can I begin by asking you a comprehensive question about the new conditions that we think, and our witnesses think, we are now facing? You held the highest offices in the land. Therefore, you are better placed than almost anybody else to express to us your feeling on whether we have entered this new phase. We have the rise of the non-western powers, the so-called “Rest over the West”. We have the information revolution. We have the emergence of non-state actors, fragmented forces and the difficulty of the whole idea of war beginning to dissolve. Has this changed things in the way I am describing to you? Do you feel that? As a result, if that is your line of thought, do you feel that our diplomacy and postures need to be altered and, if so, how?

Sir John Major: There are three separate questions inside that. The first and easiest part of it is, yes, it has changed. It has been changing for 20 years or more. It has changed, is changing and will change further and, if anything, the change is accelerating. I spend between four and five months a year travelling round the world, almost everywhere—rarely to Africa, maybe a couple of times a year to Latin America, but a lot to the United States, Europe, the Far East and the Near East. You can tangibly feel the change in which people see the world and, in some cases, the way in which they perceive the United Kingdom.

As far as power is concerned, hard and soft, I do not have very much doubt that, except in the most exceptional circumstances, the virtues of hard power are declining. I think the corresponding inevitability on the seesaw is that, as hard power declines, there is a greater
importance in the use of soft power. When I say “hard power declines”, I mean it is becoming less usable except in the most extreme circumstances. In any event, most countries in the western world, including us, are less well equipped to use hard power than we might have been 20 or 30 years ago. It is necessary to increase influence to make sure that we are well equipped with soft power or smart power.

I am sure we will come later to the fact that there are occasions where the British interest is served by a combination of hard and soft power together, or perhaps consequentially, as was the case in the Northern Ireland peace process, for example. Generally hard power enforces and soft power encourages and smart power melds, in some indefinable way, the two of them together.

If one looks at the change that you referred to in the style of diplomacy, there is a little bit of background necessary before you can answer that absolutely directly. We are very fortunate in this country. We have some historic advantages—“fixed assets” you might call them—in terms of the use of soft power. Having read the evidence, I know many of your previous witnesses will have referred to them, but just let me summarise them very briefly. The fixed assets that I see are language; our democracy, the extent to which it has been copied; the rule of law, the extent of which that has also been copied in many countries to a very large extent around the world; and the monarchy. When people refer to the Queen almost anywhere in the world they mean our Queen. That is very evident when you travel around the world. We have other institutions that are important to the world’s perception of Britain, and that is crucial for soft power.

There is also the BBC, of course, particularly the World Service: not flawless, not remotely big enough, but immensely worthwhile; the City: damaged a bit by the financial crisis, but still probably the most respected financial institution anywhere in the world; the British Council; our think tanks like Ditchley and Chatham House; and some of our publications: the Financial Times you will find in every corner of the world, read with admiration, and the Economist as well. So it runs across quite a wide range.

Then there are the almost subliminal elements of British soft power, such as our theatre. I may be prejudiced but I think it is the best in the world. I am often in America. I see American theatre. It is extremely good. It is almost as good as ours, but not quite. TV and film: wherever you go, Bond will be known and these days so will “Downton Abbey”. It is an illustration; all of these reflect a favourable impression on Britain. So do other things, like our music. We have had over 20 British albums top the charts in countries around the world. It is not just the established stars like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. You have Adele, One Direction, Susan Boyle. Wherever you go they are household names as well. They have an implication, the perception and thus the soft power.

So does sport. I have watched more Premier League football matches live from Hong Kong or Seoul than I have in the UK. They are broadcast live. So is cricket, although not in so many places. Many individuals, Lewis Hamilton and Andy Murray one should mention today as well, are relevant.

That is a background that few countries can manage in terms of profile. That is important for our diplomacy. It is important for our diplomacy for this reason. People see and think about Britain because of these elements of soft power, and because of our history there is, to a greater extent than people who do not travel may realise, a tendency to trust the British in diplomacy. It is very marked. I have had a number of lunches in different parts of the world when they have spoken extremely warmly of the Foreign Office—I know this is not typical
for holders of my former office to do that, but I certainly do—and also of the present Foreign Secretary. That is all very helpful.

Is diplomacy changing? I think it is. I will elaborate on that now or later as you wish, but our style of diplomacy is changing and I think there are opportunities in our modern world for our diplomacy that we have not fully utilised in the past and could now. Since I do not want to enter into a monologue I will wait and see if you ask about it.

Q344 The Chairman: We will come to that. What you have said is very comprehensive and many of the points you have made are things that are being reinforced very strongly by our witnesses. We have had a lot of witnesses. In fact, this is the 21st witness session of this Committee and we have two more ahead. It sounds convincing and it is strongly supported by what we have already heard.

There are a whole range of points that we want to pursue. On your watch, the things from our memories that were highly significant were the fact that you were at the end of the first Gulf War, which was war in the hard power sense, and you were at the centre of the Downing Street Declaration. You have just been speaking on that in Dublin and made a very interesting speech and we want to talk to you about that in a moment. Just thinking about the hard power nature of Saddam’s first invasion of Kuwait, that was hard power that had to be met by hard power. Did you feel that was the end of an era and it had settled the matter of Kuwait and Iraq or did you feel it was the beginning of some new softer and more subtle approach in the future? How did you see it at the time?

Sir John Major: The purpose of the war was very narrow. It was endorsed by the United Nations. The purpose was not to depose Saddam Hussein and enter Iraq and then take over Iraq and run it, which had self-evident difficulties. It was quite simple. It was to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. That was the alpha and omega of the first Gulf War. I will come directly to the point of whether it was a new phase of diplomacy and whether I thought it was the end of matters in a moment, but it is worth mentioning that it was a remarkable example of smart power by the first President Bush, George HW Bush. He had collected together the most extraordinary coalition of nations that we have seen since the Second World War. Very few people have observed the scale of it. We had representatives from every corner of the world, including many Arab states, joining in the coalition to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait.

It is also worth noting that, since that was under a UN mandate, had we done more than expel the Iraqis from Kuwait and had we decided to go into Iraq we would have broken up the coalition. Whereas President Bush’s word was trusted and so was mine at that time, had we exceeded the UN mandate I think it would not have been, but it is an indication there where hard power was absolutely necessary. The coalition was brought together by soft power and it was succeeded by a series of soft power initiatives, some of which were more successful than others.

Did I think that was the end of the matter? The general feeling was that it was the end of Kuwait being attacked by Iraq and it was the end of Iraq being an international difficulty. What we did not foresee was that Iraq would then turn on the Kurds in the north, as they did, and proceed to slaughter them. That was when we introduced the safe haven policy, which was very much a British policy, supported by the Commonwealth and by the European Union, which encouraged the Americans to take part in an exercise that could not have been carried out without them.
We did not think it was the end of everything. We thought it was the end of their military adventures, but we had no feeling that it was the beginning of a new settlement right across the Middle East. There were too many other difficulties then and remain today for us to be so optimistic.

Q345 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: I am tempted to follow that interesting line, but can I go back to how we are perceived overseas currently? You said, and I completely agree with you, in Britain there is a truly shocking collapse of social mobility and you are recorded as saying, “Hard graft is no longer enough to reach the upper echelons of power”. Do you think our image has changed because a very small, privately educated elite is now running the country? Do you think that makes a difference?

Sir John Major: It has not been my experience that people have focused on that. What they have tended to focus on is the way in which we are tackling the deficit. That has been the subject of a great deal of focus around the world, and a huge amount of interest on what will happen with the referendum on Scottish independence and the referendum on the European Union. There is a huge amount of focus on that. If either of those were to be lost—by “lost” I mean if Scotland were to become independent—then whatever that may mean for Scotland, and I think it would be bad for Scotland, it would certainly be very bad for the United Kingdom as well. They would see a country beginning to fracture.

I am not the world’s foremost Europhiliac. It was me who kept us out of the single currency and declined to enter the Social Chapter. But I do not have a shred of doubt that we are better off in than out. In a world of 7 billion people who are binding together, for us to cut ourselves loose from our biggest market would be folly on a grand scale. I find that is the predominant view as you go round the world.

People focus on that. They have not focused on the internal workings of domestic policy. They focused on what they see as Britain’s place in the world, which they think will be diminished if Scotland was to leave and it would. We would lose the Scottish talent and we would see a country begin to fracture, and we would certainly be isolated if we left the European Union. By “isolated” I do not mean we would not survive. We are a big nation, of course we would survive, but you do not have to ask me whether people would be more or less likely to invest in Britain if we were not in the European Union. The Japanese have told us the answer to that, so have the Americans, so have the Koreans, and so, no doubt, in time will others. It is those things people have tended to focus on.

Q346 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock: You have almost answered a question I was going to ask later about the European Union. I am very interested in what you say about Scotland, obviously, as you would appreciate, but it is also interesting what you say about not focusing on the internal workings and the education of our Government at the moment. It may not play to my agenda but it is very interesting. About Scotland, has that come up again and again as you have gone around the world? Have people expressed real concern?

Sir John Major: Increasingly so, and not just in Europe where obviously countries like Spain and Belgium have a direct interest in whether there is going to be a separatist part of the United Kingdom. There is plainly a matter of domestic interest for them, but it has come up more widely. It has come up in the Far East and it has come up in a number of countries, simply because they would perceive a country that was damaged and diminished if a chunk of it voluntarily chose to leave the United Kingdom. They are baffled as to why they should do so, but they observe that if that happened then it would diminish us in their eyes. It is hardly
surprising. If we were to see a large chunk of another country disappear, we would take the same view.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** That is very interesting, thank you.

**Q347 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** You have probably covered what I was going to ask you. In your very eloquent answer to the first question you described this fantastic image that Britain has around the world. Could you say a little bit about what you think the economic advantages of that are? In the context of this Scottish point, what would be your view on the sorts of things that we would lose? It might be that people around the world would think, “What on earth is going on in Britain?” but what would be the specific consequences for England and for Scotland? I suppose I am thinking economically here, but I am also thinking in terms of our position in the Security Council and our influence on global affairs. Many people, in looking at these questions of soft power, find it quite difficult to make the connection between soft power and how that relates to their immediate economic interest and the living standards and future of their families.

**Sir John Major:** How do they perceive us and why do these things matter? The perception of a country from its trading partners and others is crucially important. We have the gift of these ancient historic fixed assets that I talked about: language, culture, law, monarchy. We are seen as an extremely stable society, another reason why Scotland seceding would be so difficult.

We are seen as an exceedingly stable society. We are also seen as one of the, if not the, least corrupt nations in the world, and I do not just mean our business system. I mean our political system, our business system, our way of life. I hope I am not seeing this through tainted British eyes—I do not think I am—but people trust us. They may often disagree with us, but they believe we are to be trusted and they believe we deal honestly with them. The value of that to people who wish to trade or treat with us in any way is almost incalculable. That is a perception that is not the result of this Government or the previous Government or the Government before that. That has been built up over generations.

What would we lose in England and Scotland if Scotland were to secede? It is perhaps impertinent for an Englishman to tell the Scots what they would lose and I dare say there are one or two people, maybe more, around this table who would know at least as well I do. What would the United Kingdom lose? Apart from an extremely talented chunk of the United Kingdom disappearing, we would be diminished. That would put at risk our role in many international bodies. Our voice would be weakened. As to whether we would retain our seat on the UN Security Council, very possibly for a while but at some stage that is bound to be reformed. It is grotesquely out of date. The Security Council and the permanent members of it were fixed in the San Francisco Opera House in 1946 in a world that bears no relationship to today. Many countries that should be on the Security Council permanently are not. I think were we to lose in Scotland it may be open to doubt when that change comes whether we would retain our position.

It is not just the Security Council. We would find ourselves weakened in the IMF. We would find ourselves weakened in the G8, the G20. In every international gathering that there is the voice of Britain would not be growing stronger, as it should as the economy improves. It would be growing weaker because we would have had a political fracture of a most dramatic nature. That makes people wonder about the stability. If Scotland were to go, what would happen to Wales? What would happen to Northern Ireland? These are acute worries.
Let me take another point that I fear is quite relevant: the impact on Ireland if we were to leave the European Union. Our relations with Ireland now are better than they have been at any time in the long and tortuous history between those two countries, but suppose we left. Ireland would have legitimate causes for worry. Would we be so supportive of them in Europe? We could not be supportive of them in the European Union if we were not there. Would we get border controls on the border between north and south Ireland? Is that going to unsettle the Catholic community in the north?

There are all sorts of secondary effects, knock-on effects, from any form of fracture in the United Kingdom or any form of divorce of Britain from Europe. Heaven alone knows, there are a million frustrations with Europe, which irritate all of us. We know that. That is so, but we need to put those in a proper perspective of what it may mean for our country as a whole.

To summarise: we are perceived as a corruption-free, honest dealer, which is immensely valuable. People also perceive that our economy looks as though it is improving. They wonder how balanced the improvement is and they are looking carefully to see, but they see that we are improving and they see that the eurozone is not. From the purely domestic perception of the United Kingdom around the world, that is a distinct bonus for the United Kingdom. I do not think I need add any more on the England/Scottish point to those I have mentioned, but I have only touched upon the implications were Scotland to leave, both for Scotland and England.

I am wary to go on about Scotland, but the belief that, because they are in the European Union as part of the United Kingdom, they would automatically be there if they were to leave is fallacy. They would not. They would have to apply to rejoin at a time when the European Union is in no hurry about new members. I am sure they would get in, but it would take them 10 years and who knows what conditions of entry they would get. They do not know and I do not know. They say casually that they would use sterling. That is not their decision and if they think they are going to use sterling as a temporary interregnum for 10 years while they get themselves into the European Union, I do not know what the Prime Minister and the Chancellor can say, but I know very clearly what I would have said some time ago were that proposition put to me.

Let me touch on emotion, just for one second. We are coming up to the anniversary of the First World War. The Scottish National Party has chosen the anniversary of Bannockburn. There is another anniversary, that of the First World War, and how odd it would be on the 100th anniversary of the war in which Scots, Irish, English and Welsh fought together that we would commemorate that anniversary as separate countries. It seems to me to be folly on a grand scale for anyone even to contemplate that.

**The Chairman:** Let us turn from that part of the United Kingdom to the other part you have already referred to, Northern Ireland, and the other part of the British Isles, which is the Republic of Ireland, where the peace process started on your watch and one could argue that that was soft power replacing an agonising period, in which many of us including myself were deeply involved, of violence of an excruciating and terrible kind. Baroness Armstrong, would you like to lead on this?

**Q348 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top:** I wanted to ask you to explore a little more the relationship between hard power and soft power. I am not sure that it was a clear break between one and the other. My experience during the early years of the Labour Government was that it was still extremely fraught but it does seem to me that there was a relationship between the two and I just wondered if you could explore that a little more.
Sir John Major: Undoubtedly. Hard power bled into soft power. The fact that hard power had been there for so long was one of the reasons that soft power began to work. We had had hard power—that is the Army in Northern Ireland—for a long time and it led to a stand-off. It protected people. It prevented chaos and that was absolutely necessary, so we owe a great deal to the Army and the RUC for doing that. But it was when you got to smart power, that is the continuation of hard power allied to soft power, that we moved to a settlement.

I think the peace process proceeded and eventually succeeded for a range of different reasons. The first was war weariness among both the IRA particularly and the public at large. It was the use of hard power for a long time that brought about that war weariness. The IRA realised that after 25 years of violence they were getting absolutely nowhere and they were going to get absolutely nowhere, and that no matter who was in government in the United Kingdom, which party it was, they were not going to turn Northern Ireland away unless Northern Ireland wished to go. That realisation, reinforced by hard power, was crucial to the beginning of the peace process.

The second thing was that public attitudes were changing. The public were getting increasingly frustrated with a political problem that had not produced a political solution. Then there was the London-Dublin agreement for the first time, the Downing Street Declaration, which brought together a series of principles to which both countries subscribed. The importance of that was not in the opaque nature of the document; it may as well have been written in Gaelic for some. It was the fact that there was a unity between the two Governments as to how we should proceed. That robbed the men of violence, the nationalists and the unionists, of their support in their communities. They began to be seen as people who were continuing violence when there should be a political way through it, and that changed the atmosphere dramatically. We then had the framework agreement.

But what was also crucial and relevant to soft power? If you wished to have a solution in Northern Ireland you were never going to get one without the IRA subscribing to it. We needed to offer the IRA a way to climb down from the position in which they found themselves. That was the purpose of the early decisions to get rid of the restrictions to them broadcasting where you had an actor speaking their words. They were restrictions that were out of time and it was time they went.

We also had to reassure unionist and nationalist traditionalists that they were not going to be deserted during this process. All of that boxed in the people who were violent. It was hard power bleeding into soft power that started the peace process and it was immeasurably helped by the fact that the opposition parties in the House of Commons and Lords were very supportive of it. When I first talked to Neil Kinnock about it, he was supportive. So was Paddy Ashdown and so later was John Smith. They were all supportive of it and at no stage did anyone across the House play games with the peace process, and that was immensely helpful. They realised they were dealing with a united House of Commons as well as a particular Government of a particular colour.

Q349 Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top: Can I just follow that up? In your earlier remarks you said that you now thought that it was going to be difficult for powers such as the UK to use hard power for all sorts of reasons. Do you think we therefore are losing a lever that is sometimes important, as it was in Northern Ireland, in order to get to the conditions where people will negotiate?

Sir John Major: We still will use hard power from time to time, and we have done so quite recently and quite successfully: the Labour Government in Sierra Leone, the
Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government in Libya. So we will still use hard power and we will certainly use hard power in terms of peacekeeping. Where I think it is less likely is in what I would call a proper war or an invasion of a country. That is getting increasingly difficult after the second Iraq war. That is going to be less used and, for a raft of reasons, there are parts of the world where it is not going to be used at all because it is politically not a practicality. That was what I meant when I said hard power would be used less. I do not discount it. I do not think we are safe to assume we can dismantle the Army or the Armed Forces at all. Far from it, I do not think we could or should do that because there will be peacekeeping in other areas where hard power will have an important role to play. I just think, in terms of what you might call small wars, they are going to be less likely. As for large wars, I think the integration of the world and the world’s economies make those immensely unlikely. For all the criticism one can make of the European Union, the concept of a European war now is almost beyond imagination.

Q350 Baroness Goudie: Just quickly on the back of what Baroness Armstrong was saying, let me ask about Northern Ireland, which a number of us were involved in, through soft power and the aftermath that is continuing through soft power. Do you see that method being used by us in other parts of the world in terms of at the peace table after the hard power is over? We should be doing much more of that than just walking out and leaving it, given the expertise we have, more than anybody else in and around soft power, because I do not think the Americans—

Sir John Major: I do. There are all sorts of areas where we can use it. It is quite interesting that people come and ask us about it. Aung San Suu Kyi was here recently speaking to people about the Northern Ireland peace process. No two conflicts are identical. You cannot write a template for how to deal with a conflict. The one thing I would hold absolutely beyond doubt is that you cannot reach an agreement and end a conflict without talking and having contact with the people who are in conflict. That is why I so strongly support what Senator Kerry is trying to do in Iran at the present time. It may fail. I recall Jack Straw going to Iran trying to do something and getting a very frosty reception and a black eye, but he was right to do that. I think Senator Kerry is right. So no two conflicts are alike, but the principles are very similar. The first principle has to be: you cannot reach an agreement if you do not have some form of contact, maybe direct, maybe subliminal, maybe through third parties. The second thing is not to expect someone to come out with their hands up and their weapons thrown away. You might think it is desirable that they should do so, but in hard political reality no one is going to do that. So you have to offer people a way out of the situation in which they find themselves and that sometimes is quite difficult and it is often counterintuitive, but it is necessary if the objective is to end the conflict.

There were many occasions when we might have dropped the Northern Ireland peace process, most obviously after the Warrington bomb, which murdered those two little boys, you may remember, on an Easter Sunday. They were out trying to buy some flowers for their parents on an Easter Sunday and they were just murdered. The pressure to end the peace process then, the pressure that said the IRA are lying to you, was very strong. But I thought the argument against it was stronger in that, if you did that, there would be more Warringtons. If you did not make that gesture you may stop there being more Warringtons, and eventually the Good Friday agreement did that.

Q351 The Chairman: We have touched on the European Union a bit, but do you think that membership of the European Union helps Britain’s promotion and our reputation and pursuit of our interests in the world at large and, if so, in what particular ways?
**Sir John Major:** I think it does. It enhances it in a number of ways. We are seen as a big country in a bigger grouping and an influential country in a big grouping. We are seen as one of those who determine European Union policy. We are seen as someone who plays a lead part in some European policies—the anti-piracy in Somalia policy, for example. We are seen as the entry point for European Union investment as well. We are seen as part of a European Union negotiated free trade agreement and, of course, if we left the European Union we would have no free trade agreements. We would have to renegotiate every free trade agreement that we have ever had, and that would take a very long time and who knows what conditions we would get.

There is no doubt it enhances us, but there is a subliminal way of asking whether it enhances us as well. Consider the attitude of other people who look at us from abroad. Do the Americans want us in the European Union or out? They want us in because we can have an Anglo-Saxon influence on the European Union and be a counterpoint to some of the protectionist tendencies that exist there. The second point is this: no country has left the European Union. Even in its present difficulties no country has left it and countries are still queueing up to join it, which must tell you something about its value as perceived around the world. I think it undoubtedly enhances our position that we are in it, although some of the ways it does are subliminal.

**Q352 Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** A corollary of what you say is that the actions of UKIP and the Tory Eurosceptics must damage that image and influence in Europe and abroad. Is that right?

**Sir John Major:** Absolutely. I would like to be careful about the definition of Eurosceptic.

**Lord Foulkes of Cumnock:** You called them something else even stronger, I think.

**Sir John Major:** It was a moment of mental clarity when I did say that. It is perfectly permissible to be sceptical about Europe. All of us are. The people we are talking about are not Eurosceptics but Europhobes. There are some people who trade under the word “Eurosceptic”, but the plain truth of the matter is they want us out. It is as simple as that. Whether they are in UKIP or whether they are in any other party, in my view that is damaging and I have never made any secret of that fact. The argument that I hear so often is that Britain has always been pushed around in Europe, bullied by those nasty Commissioners and others. Like everybody else, we are occasionally outvoted and we have to accept things we do not like. That is certainly true of everybody in the European Union, but I would argue very strongly that we are not being pushed around in Europe. There have been great developments in the European Union since it started: the single market, which was a UK-led operation; enlargement, which was a UK-German operation; and the euro, in which we stood aside. I do not notice a great degree of us being kicked around or bullied in any of that. I think it is just a phantom argument.

**Q353 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** As a Minister in your Government I remember, with affection, going to European Social Affairs Council meetings where we tried to prevent the working time directive being implemented, which was done as a qualified majority voting measure because it was presented as health and safety. Do you not think that one of the difficulties is that our kind of vision of Europe, which is a free-trading open-market Europe, is very difficult to achieve within the European Union where in order, for example, to reverse the working time directive you have to get unanimity among all member states? I remember being at a lunch with Ministers and saying to them, “But, look, this is making us uncompetitive in the global market place”, and they said, “Yes, but we have coalition
Governments and we are unable to change that and we are damned if we are going to have
the British having a competitive advantage over the rest of us”. How do you deal with that in
your vision of Europe in the context of Britain?

Sir John Major: Now or then?

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: Now.

Sir John Major: You know how I dealt with it then. I declined to join the Social Chapter and
vetoed the Maastricht Treaty unless we got our way on that.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean: For very good reasons, and my question is—

Sir John Major: I said we are occasionally outvoted and that is absolutely true, but
something has changed. It will not be perfect, but something quite dramatic has changed.
During the periods Margaret was Prime Minister and I was Prime Minister the British were
very often entirely on their own in their arguments as the European Union grew and
developed towards 15 members. We now have 27 members and any British Government
these days, certainly the present coalition, has allies that Margaret Thatcher and I could only
have dreamed of having. They are no longer alone. They have allies in eastern Europe. They
have allies in northern Europe. You now have the German Chancellor saying we do not have
to do everything in Brussels. You have the Prime Minister of Holland, an absolutely core
European country, saying we need a leaner and meaner European set of arrangements. You
have a lot of public discontent with the pettifogging aspects of European countries right the
way across the Europe.

We have allies we never had before, and we are going to have to utilise those allies. I am
much more positive and optimistic about the prospects of being able to obtain some
renegotiation than most people and I have done rather more negotiating with Europe than
most people, but I am much more optimistic. I do not think Germany, for example, would
remotely wish the British to be forced out of Europe leaving them surrounded as a free-
trading nation by a larger number of protectionist nations. I am not going to give a list
because every time somebody gives a list it becomes a demand that the Prime Minister
achieve this. My intention is to support the Prime Minister, not make life more difficult for
him, but I think there is a range of changes in Europe that are negotiable provided we go
about it by seeking allies who have the same objectives as us and talking to them and lining
them up beside us as part of our negotiation. This should not just be a negotiation of “Britain
wants this, Britain wants that”. It needs to be a negotiation of how we change the European
Union for the wider benefit, which would include us.

Q354 Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne: Given that, as I perceive it and the
history shows, the European Union is an intergovernmental system with a directly elected
Parliament grafted on to it, the tremendous weakness that is appearing is that the national
Parliaments are somehow further and further away from being able to influence. I think
perhaps the most important and powerful part of our soft power in the European Union
context is the Westminster Parliament. How do you feel we should possibly try to shift the
balance to bring back to national Parliaments, in some way or another, this offer that we
certainly possess given the intergovernmentalism from top to toe of the European Union?

Sir John Major: It is a very good question and it is one being asked in other European
capitals, which is helpful because, again, we would not be alone in pursuing that particular
case. In retrospect, I think we made one significant mistake quite a few years ago. When we
stopped the dual mandate of Westminster and the European Parliament we set up two rival
institutions rather than having advocates for the national Parliament in the European
Parliament and advocates for the European Parliament in the national Parliament. I think that was quite a dramatic mistake. It did not seem so at the time. People all thought it was very democratic, but things often turn out in a different way from the way that is imagined when, for the best reasons, they are done. I think that was a mistake. In some way we are going to have to strengthen the role of national Parliaments. There are different ways in which it could be done. Again, I do not want to speculate. I do not want to read in tomorrow’s press that I am holding a pistol to the Prime Minister’s head saying, “You have to negotiate this”. I have had a bit of experience of that and I do not want it to happen. I am encouraged that other people also see their national Parliaments being subordinated too much by a Parliament that has a lesser direct contact with the electorate they represent.

The Chairman: We are getting very tight on time. There are two other huge subjects I want to turn to but, Lord Janvrin, is your question on this or on something else?

Lord Janvrin: It was going to be on something else, so do you want me to come on after the other?

The Chairman: What we want to look at is one of the other great institutions, which involves the Commonwealth, and we want to look at the whole area of the creative arts and sport and so on. We might even get to cricket, if we have time.

Sir John Major: Not today please!

The Chairman: Baroness Hussein-Ece wants to come in on the Commonwealth.

Q355 Baroness Hussein-Ece: I just wanted to ask you how much of an asset you believe the modern Commonwealth can be in advancing the United Kingdom’s international standing and interest. In particular, do you think it is being used effectively to promote soft power, both within the Commonwealth and elsewhere?

Sir John Major: The Commonwealth is so diverse that it is quite difficult to think of it entirely as an entity. We often have different allies within the Commonwealth for particular things that are of interest to us and to them. Is it an asset? Yes, I think it is. It is quite difficult to quantify it but it has some practical and subliminal advantages for the United Kingdom. The Commonwealth is not a power bloc like the European Union and never will be.

Why is it of value to us? For several reasons. The world sees the UK as having influence because of the huge spread of the Commonwealth in every corner of the globe. Those who know these things observe that in 1952 the Commonwealth had four members. Today it has 54 or 55 members and it is still growing. There are still people who are not in the Commonwealth who may join the Commonwealth and they perceive Britain as a key component. We are no longer the maypole around which everyone dances, but we are a very influential member of the Commonwealth.

I described earlier safe havens. Our safe haven policy was born in No. 10, taken to a European Union meeting that morning, endorsed there and, while we were getting it endorsed in Europe, the Foreign Office was contacting every member of the Commonwealth so that the idea of safe havens was approved in the United Nations, with the support of the European Union and the Commonwealth. That was a practical area where we used the Commonwealth to advance a policy that we thought was right.

The other extent to which it is an asset is that we often find allies. Big countries are often looked at suspiciously. They are looking after their own interests, but if there are small countries that have the same interests in international bodies that is often quite an influential addition. It is more than a feather in the scales, and that often happens with different parts of
the Commonwealth. It is hard to quantify but, yes, it is an asset. Diplomatically, in my experience, most of the members of the Commonwealth are pretty easy to work with and many of them instinctively have the same view that we have. If we are advancing something that is not widely popular elsewhere and if, for example, Singapore is with us, it rises to a different dimension. So in those ways, which are quite difficult to quantify, the Commonwealth is an asset towards our soft power.

The Chairman: When you were in Dublin the other day, did you get any sense that the Republic of Ireland might wish to join the Commonwealth?

Sir John Major: We did not discuss that, and I did not think it was a matter that I should raise. I simply observed, though, that our trading relationship with Ireland is significantly greater than that with China and India added together.

The Chairman: We are close.

Sir John Major: That is 40% of the world.

Q356 Lord Janvrin: Right at the start you said, rather enticingly, that you thought the nature of diplomacy was changing and then stopped at that point. In the world that we have been describing, what did you mean by that? Could you expand on how you think British diplomacy should use the assets that you have mentioned in this new world?

Sir John Major: I will happily do that. There are several ways it is changing. I think it is changing in a desirable direction. First, despite financial restraints over the last few years, the present Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office have been opening more missions—not a lot yet, but a significant number. As a general principle, as hard power decreases, in the interests of the United Kingdom we should increase soft power to maintain our influence in different parts of the world and that means being better represented both for political matters and also for trade matters around the world. I know you have taken evidence from UKTI and others. For the last 40 years—I emphasise that so it is again not seen as a criticism of the present Government—in my judgment, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been under-provisioned in terms of the good it could do for our soft power. I think we should review it. To retrench from where we were would be utterly the wrong policy, and I am glad that William Hague is expanding it.

The second way it is changing is this, and the European Union is a case in point: during the 1980s and 1990s, whenever there was a European policy, by the time it surfaced it had been the subject of detailed discussion among other European heads of government before we British became part of it. Chancellor Kohl met President Mitterrand, Prime Minister Lubbers and Prime Minister Andreotti, and they informally discussed these matters at weekends that British Prime Ministers were too busy to go to and often had no idea were taking place. These things were discussed informally long before they got on the agenda. It is a case study of how the European Union worked then and it is changing. It is partly changing because the present Prime Minister has a lot of allies across Europe among his counterparts and that is very valuable. We should do that at all levels of Ministers. It is very important. I spoke to one junior Minister who said he spoke to his counterparts in three countries almost on a weekly basis, and it is very important that we do that.

We need to be much more active. We must not just form our position, say that is our position, trot up at the meeting and then deliver our position. We need to persuade and bring in people at an early stage. A voice that is echoed is a voice that is doubled and that is a form of diplomacy we have not traditionally utilised in Europe remotely to the extent that we should. I reinforce the point that these days a British Government, any British
Government, would have allies in Europe that previous British Prime Ministers did not have. The other point is about how it is changing. My experience of the Foreign Office—and I see missions, embassies, high commissions, in every part of the world—is that the best of our diplomats are extremely good. I would like them to go front of house rather than back of house a little more than they have in the past.

I would like us to be a bit more self-confident and proactive in our policies. There is no reason why we should not launch our own initiatives. We are not some tiny little country pushed to one side. We are still a big country in the eyes of the world and a powerful and influential country. We should be more confident about launching initiatives on our own, if necessary, in terms of international problems. I think we would be surprised at how many takers there are for our position in different parts of the world. I do not think it would hurt us to take positions independent of our principal allies from time to time. If we have a slightly different view, I do not think it diminishes our alliances with them if we said so, whether that is Europe or whether that is the United States. We have a distinct historical view. In the Middle East, for example, the two countries that know the Middle East extremely well historically are the United Kingdom and France. I think we would be wise to use that historic knowledge and not be shy about using it in our diplomacy. Those are the ways in which it is beginning to change and perhaps in which it might change a little further.

**The Chairman:** We are going to spend the last very few minutes on a vast area, which is the non-governmental side that you touched on at the beginning: the arts, the business and trade, all the areas where we need to succeed. We have heard a great deal of evidence to show that we are in some ways succeeding, but how do we do better?

**Q357 Lord Forsyth of Drumlean:** The question is: how do you see non-governmental agencies promoting the UK? Perhaps you could say a little bit about sport. Undoubtedly, the lottery, which was your idea, has produced a very considerable dividend, but how can we exploit those private non-governmental interests more effectively?

**Sir John Major:** With some of them we are doing very well. In others, there is scope for improvement. I caution, when I say that, that money is the root of all progress and we live in stringent times. You kindly mentioned the lottery. It has just passed distributing £30 billion to good causes and is still dispensing something like £1.5 billion a year. A good deal of this goes into culture, for example: theatre and music, buildings, museums, art galleries. They are instrumental in bringing huge numbers of people to this country and getting a favourable aspect of it, so that is extremely helpful.

Most sports were invented by the British. The British Premier League, for example, is probably the most watched league in the world and people want to look at it. If they are skilled, they want to come and play here. That is all helpful in the perception of us. The other forms of non-governmental sources are things like the British Council, the BBC and universities, about which I would like to say something. Even things like fashion are crucial, let alone music. Think of the influence the Beatles had or our most popular groups, like One Direction, have at the present time.

Perhaps I can pick up a little on two or three of those. I said earlier that the BBC World Service is a huge asset. People believe it and they listen to it, but, unfortunately, that is only about one in 30 people around the world. When you see the huge investment that has been made by other countries—China most obviously, but also there is America, and Al Jazeera and the Gulf—it would very much be in the British interest for the BBC World Service to be dramatically increased. That is going to be a matter for the BBC Trust and that raises all
sorts of subliminal questions. I simply observe it is in the British interest: it can do good; it is doing good; it can do more good; it should and it needs funding to do it.

The second point is universities. I take a rather different—I am trying to avoid using the term “left field” here—view of universities. We benefit enormously from overseas students coming to our universities—absolutely enormously. I go to the Gulf too often and to the Far East not to be startled by the people who are running things in those countries who came over here: they went to one of our schools, they went to one of our universities and they retain an affection for our country. The return in hard cash, let alone good will, for having the brightest and the best coming to spend some of their time in the British education system, and particular universities, is absolutely enormous. If that means easing the position on visas and helping the position on grants and encouraging scholarships and making it easier for foreign students to come here, it is in the interests of my children and my children’s children that we develop that. That is an absolutely key point to make.

The British Council also has a big role to play. I know we are running out of time so I will not elaborate on it. But, again, I am very conscious that when you talk of the BBC, universities and the British Council, you are talking money in stringent times. However, purely from the perspective of whether it is good for Great Britain, an enhancement of all those bodies is very much, in my judgment, good for Great Britain plc. You can say the same thing for UKTI.

The Chairman: Sir John, you have touched on a whole range of issues that are of huge interest to this Committee and you have cast light and wisdom, if I may say so, on a number of issues that are concerning us. We would like to go on for hours because we are dealing with huge areas of interest, but we cannot because we have a video coming in from America to tell us what the Americans are doing on soft power and what they think of us. We are delighted to thank you for your presence here, for the trouble you have taken in sharing your views with us, and to wish you well in the future.

Sir John Major: Thank you very much indeed.