Transcript – YouTube interview

Lord Howell of Guildford, Chairman, Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence discussing the Committee’s report ‘Persuasion and Power in the Modern World’

Interviewer: What does soft power mean and does it mean that hard power is less important, the situation in the Ukraine, doesn’t that suggest that actually it’s hard power that counts?

Lord Howell of Guildford: Well, soft power is about persuasion rather than force; it doesn’t say that we don’t need force in the world and good military in strong strength but it does say that in this totally connected world we now live in the power of communication, the power of influence is much more significant and has to be deployed much more skilfully than ever before. You mention Ukraine, this is a perfect demonstration of the totally changed international landscape in which we now operate, the digital world, where Mr Putin must be persuaded that hard power isn’t going to work and the West is obviously reluctant to resort to old-fashioned methods of hard power which have been found in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, around the world, don’t lead to instant victories anymore, you have to work on hearts and minds you need soft power as well as hard power.

Interviewer: And what is it about the world today that makes soft power so important?

Lord Howell of Guildford: Two things, first of all that everyone is connected we have an intensity and a density of connections continuous, frequent all day, all the time on a scale that’s never been known before in human history, globalisation of information is complete. Secondly there has been a shift, partly as a result of the rise of the electronic information revolution, there has been a shift in power away from America and the West which was the 20th century, some sharing of power with Asia, Africa and Latin America, the developing world is now asserting its, in some cases, superior economic strength and this is a new factor that we have to deal with.

Interviewer: Your report looks in detail at issues around soft power and says that the government has moved from ‘absent mindedness to neglect’ when it comes to soft power, what do the committee think the government should do now?

Lord Howell of Guildford: Well, first of all we argue that Britain has an enormous range of assets which can be used for deploying our soft power around the world, enhancing our reputation and influence, promoting our exports and so on. We say that to the government should first of all stop doing things that undermine these assets and secondly it should use them much more effectively, what do I mean by undermining? I mean handling the visa issue in a way which makes us look what people have called a ‘nasty country’, that’s a minus. What do I mean by using them more effectively? I mean building up the instruments we have: the BBC World Service, the British Council, they should be properly resourced, I mean strengthening our embassies around the world I mean talking up the Commonwealth network, two billion people, all ready, many of them expanding big economies, and I mean encouraging our enormous creativity and cultural influence around the world, all these things require a different approach by government from the one we see at present.
Our proposal for the longer term is that there should be a strategic unit at the heart of government which should keep the prime minister and senior ministers informed of the things that might be negative and going wrong and areas where we can strengthen capacities, this applies not just the Foreign Office but to all departments, where we’re dealing with cultural links, where we’re dealing with educational links, very important indeed I haven’t mentioned those, where we're dealing with training, defence, our huge services exports, and the interface between the many departments of Whitehall and their overseas opposite numbers, so this is a big new strategic thrust and we think it could be helped by this strategic unit.

**Interviewer:** The committee heard evidence from a wide range, a diverse set of witnesses, what did you learn about the assets and the characteristics of the UK’s reputation?

**Lord Howell of Guildford:** Well the witnesses bought home vividly what potential we’ve got, we had Sir John Major, the former prime minister pointing out that our songs dominate most of the song charts round the world, that our television series and our theatre are highly successful, and he mentioned many other aspects of British culture which are really huge potential gains for Britain around the world. Then we had Richard Scudamore, we had leaders of the other sports such as cricket reminding us that cricket is spreading around the world, British origin, we had leaders of athletics and the sporting world reminding us about the Olympic legacy and the importance of British athletics, with the Commonwealth Games of course to come. We also heard from Maria Miller, the Culture Secretary, who reminded us that in her view our cultural and creativity links were a calling card and a foot in the door for trade promotion and expansion of our exports.

We had important sessions with business and trade leaders and export leaders and they reminded us that we have a lot more to do in that area using soft power. We were reminded that, as the Chancellor’s recently said, Britain does not export enough, we don’t invest enough, which means we don’t attract enough investment from outside and we don’t to build enough so there’s a long way to go.

**Interviewer:** Critics will say the UK isn’t a great power anymore, we have to face a foreign policy choice between being close to America or being close to the EU, what was the committee’s response to that?

**Lord Howell of Guildford:** We concluded that the critics are wrong; they don’t appreciate the totally transformed nature of international relations today in this digitalised, information-loaded world. Everyone is connected to everyone else. Large countries and small are all in the network together, we say that in this network Britain is superbly placed as a hub nation, we generate vast flows of information out of London, we must obviously remain good partners with America as we do we don’t want to be bossed around by America, but we’re good partners, and we remain good Europeans committed to the European Union in which we are geographically placed, but this also means we can develop our own unique contribution, particularly through soft power in the emerging World of Asia and Africa and Latin America where all the great new markets are going to be to which we must have access to survive.