

Speech by Baroness Berridge in the House of Lords

The UK's international relations in the light of Brexit, including its future engagement with the UN and the United States, and the report from the International Relations Committee on the UK and the UN: Priorities for the new Secretary-General

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My Lords, part of the answer to the questions of post-Brexit international relations and UK engagement with the UN raised in these Motions was stated by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. He said that the Commonwealth is,

“yet another forum in which Britain—our country—is able to express our values, to get things done and to get things moving.”

I declare an interest as I am working on a Commonwealth initiative on freedom of religion or belief. I, too, miss the contribution of the noble Lord, Lord Howell, because he would have been championing the Commonwealth as usual.

As the noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, said, the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, said in her evidence to the Select Committee that the Commonwealth has “little or no visibility” at the UN. This is not surprising given the lack of resources for the Commonwealth for such diplomacy. A multilateral network of nearly one-third of the world’s population, all democracies, is nearly invisible at the UN. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers represent the UK at the UN, and the Commonwealth as an institution is nearly invisible. Post-Brexit must mean enhanced Commonwealth engagement for the United Kingdom, but with a clear strategy and a clear plan to achieve that enhanced status.

The United Kingdom is the only P5 and current Security Council member from the Commonwealth. Twenty-three of the states which have never been on the Security Council are Commonwealth members, and many do not have the resources for permanent diplomatic presence. Commonwealth representation at the UN could be thematic outside the regional groups that Commonwealth nations rely on; for example, trade, anti-slavery, climate change or indigenous peoples.

Will the Minister outline whether the Government will give increased resources for UN relations as recommended at paragraph 202 of the Select Committee report and, if so, will we ensure resources for the visibility of the Commonwealth, not just for the support we give to the Small States Office? Will Her Majesty’s Government’s strategic priorities include building the Commonwealth in this post-Brexit era? The UK is due to host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2018, and I hope that the UN Secretary-General will be invited, but if there is no visibility at the

UN, why should he? In the words of the noble Lord, Lord Howell, when will we utilise this underutilised network? Many British citizens from Commonwealth diaspora are looking to Her Majesty's Government to see whether the immigration we will undoubtedly need will come once again from their countries of heritage.

The United Kingdom was elected to the UN Human Rights Council, and this month we begin our two-year term. Among our commitments is to promote the universal right to freedom of religion or belief.

This brings me back to thematic or transnational issues. The UN is often criticised for its interstate response to issues, but it is an interstate body, so that will be how it will respond. The noble Lord, Lord Reid, made the point that the rise of transnational communication by social media means that transnational phenomena, such as religion, are taking on a new dynamic and need to be understood by the UN. Rightly, the Select Committee says the UN should seek to engage youth and civil society. But a huge part of civil society is not NGOs but FBOs—faith-based organisations which deliver aid, development work, education and healthcare. The UN struggles to work out how to relate to religion, its leaders and these bodies which are vital to fulfilling the SDGs as well as reducing global terrorism and conflict. How will the United Kingdom fulfil its commitment on the Human Rights Council to freedom of religion or belief if the UN itself does not understand religion?

The United Nations should take its model from religious leaders. The leadership of the more than 1 billion Catholics recently passed to the global south. When one sees the United Nations on our television screens, it always seems to be based, obviously, in either New York or Geneva. That is undermining the universal nature of human rights as a global south phenomenon.

The United Kingdom should encourage the UN and its Secretary-General to engage with religion and with freedom of religion or belief. Generalisations are dangerous, but at a time in which anti-Muslim sentiment, along with anti-Semitism, nationalism and related movements, is rising in parts of the world, Britain has taken great pains to defend its Muslim population—although not always perfectly—from discrimination and persecution. The United Kingdom's more nuanced voice and understanding as a P5 member will perhaps be better received by the world's 1.4 billion Muslims than those of France, Russia, China and now, sadly, the USA.

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