

Britain's Global Role in a Changing World

Report of UfP pre-Election 'Hustings' Event - Saturday March 21 2015

'BRITAIN'S GLOBAL ROLE IN A CHANGING WORLD' was the theme of the Uniting for Peace pre-Election 'Hustings Event' held on Saturday March 21 2015 at Wesley's Chapel in London. Representatives of six political parties - Conservative, Green, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Peace and UKIP - gave presentations and shared a forum on key global peace and security issues. UfP Chair Vijay Mehta, welcoming all present, said there was a great deal of public anxiety about Britain's future and its place in today's highly unstable world, and such concerns needed to be seriously addressed. Rita Payne, President, Commonwealth Journalists Association and event chair, introducing the speakers, said the 2015 UK General Election was a very unusual one: it was difficult to know voters' priorities but Britain's place in the world was of concern to many.

Kerry Pollard, Labour candidate for St. Albans and formerly its MP, stressed "the world today is more unstable than ever before". Highlighting key areas of conflict and instability, he saw the lack of a solution to the long-standing Israel-Palestine dispute, the challenge of ISIS and violence in post-Saddam Iraq, the problem of Ukraine between Russia and the West, the India-Pakistan nuclear confrontation, and the massive proliferation of all kinds of weaponry around the world, as the major challenges. There was an urgent need "to scale down all categories of weapons, especially nuclear ones". UK should not renew its Trident nuclear weapons system, but pursue diplomacy "to get nuclear weapons scaled down" across the globe. Military approaches to problems and notions of retaliation should be replaced by careful diplomacy and Mandela-style leadership: the adage "An eye for an eye - then the whole world becomes blind" must always be remembered. In the Open Forum, he was critical of the West's policy towards Russia - "Putin has been demeaned by the West".

Simon Nayyar, Prospective Conservative Candidate for Feltham and Heston, had undertaken volunteering in Africa and had a special concern for international development. On the recent Budget, he said the economy was improving and

Britain was "the come back country". The event was being held close to the City of London, an outward-looking financial powerhouse accounting for 13% of UK GDP. He stressed that in today's "very uncertain world with major strategic risks", including the "extraordinary barbarity of ISIS" and President Putin's "desire for Russian territorial aggrandisement", Britain with NATO had to maintain strong defence including nuclear weapons. The range of external threats, uncertain future and desire of some other countries to develop nuclear weapons, justified the renewal of Trident - "we must keep our Continuous At-Sea Deterrent" - but at the same time UK should pursue multi-lateral nuclear disarmament. He was proud that under a Conservative-led government UK had committed to the UN Millennium Development Goal target of 0.7% of GDP for international development: the big-scale immunisation programme for children in sub-Saharan Africa was an example of the great benefits UK's aid programme was bringing to those in need. It was morally and politically right for Britain to provide that kind of assistance. In the Open Forum, he said the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [TTIP] would boost jobs, economic growth and prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic; he rejected criticisms it could be used to privatise the NHS. He said there was nothing sinister about the TTIP negotiations being held in secret, as such was normal practice in such matters. He feared Iran wanted to build nuclear weapons, seeing this as another reason for UK to keep its nuclear deterrent.

Paul Reynolds, Liberal Democrat Foreign Policy adviser and Candidate for West Ham, had worked in both conflict zones and development regions. He reminded the audience the Liberal Democrats had opposed the 2003 Iraq War; they supported a peaceful approach to relations with Iran and a negotiated settlement of its nuclear programme issues. He did not consider Iran was preparing to build nuclear weapons, and quoted a CIA report stating it did not currently have any. He said the post-World War One Sykes-Picot Agreement [deciding UK and French spheres of influence in the Middle East] had laid the foundations of many of today's problems in that region. He stressed that in recent decades "war and the prospect of war have become the first recourse, not the last resort" on a number of key issues, an approach which only increased conflict and instability in the

world. "We must get back to a diplomacy-led approach to international affairs." It was important to understand whether a specific problem was primarily a local one or a global one, and how the local could become global. He understood ISIS as primarily a 'local' [ie regional] problem which had "become stretched to being a global one" with supporters from many countries. He said UK foreign policy should "be very sceptical about military action" and instead be dedicated to "the vigorous pursuit of peace". In the Open Forum he said NGOs had raised genuine concerns about TTIP on which reassurance was needed before agreement was concluded between the negotiating bodies - EU and NAFTA.

Jean Lambert, Green Party Member of the European Parliament, believed today's rapidly changing world demanded a changed international politics, recognising "that the world today is very hard to negotiate amid its complexity." The UK retained a high reputation around the world for upholding democracy, the rule of law, human rights and other democratic values, and these should be the fundamentals of its foreign policy, not the retention of nuclear weapons. UK should unilaterally renounce nuclear weapons and give the lead for worldwide nuclear disarmament. Security of the environment should be another fundamental of UK international policy, eg. securing adequate water supplies where needed. Campaigning for gender equality was another component of peace-building. It was counter-productive for UK to pursue a narrow national self-interest over against the international community: "our national interest is the international interest." In the Open Forum, she expressed concern TTIP would have negative effects for the NHS. As a general principle, UK foreign policy should be guided by "a consistent, values-based approach", which in practice should be "very careful". First there should be clarity about the desired result of UK policy on a specific issue, then equal clarity on the means to achieve that result.

Rev. Philip Foster, author and UKIP activist since 1998, said UKIP was a "growing movement, but still in its late teens." A retired Anglican clergyman and missionary, he said he believed Jesus Christ was the only ultimate answer to the world's problems, but until that time humanity had to do its best to manage the world's difficulties. Declaring that "trade is basic to economic advance", and quoting from Adam Smith on the benefits of trade free from government

regulations, he said the European Union was "not a great free market but a heavily regulated market", a "supra-regulatory body keeping out free trade" by its "regulations to protect the enclosed Europe". This system discriminated against African and Asian countries trying to export their products to Europe. "The EU is a customs union, not a free trade organisation." Churchill's original idea of a 'Council of Europe' for co-operation between the nations of Europe, would have been better. In the Open Forum, he said corporate power allied with EU regulations was very disadvantageous for UK. NATO may have kept the balance of power during the Cold War, but since the latter ended, it had "not been a force for peace" and "EU expansionism" was now a danger. "The West bears a large responsibility for events in the Middle East and Ukraine."

David Brown, General Secretary of the Peace Party, said the party had been started in 2001 to "try to establish a peace presence in politics and put peace into the political mainstream." Peace could only be built on the foundation of ethics and values. Because of its past actions around the world, for good and ill, Britain had a responsibility towards the rest of the world. As a rich and powerful country, it certainly should have a global role - but such should be undertaken with humility. Recent foreign policy interventions had gone badly wrong, and lessons should be learned. It was vital to get away from the concept of 'enemies', and substitute dialogue for confrontation and conflict: even in the case of ISIS, dialogue was needed. 'Cultural' obstacles to building peace included the balance of power concept, which did not make for stability; the exaltation of competition, which should be replaced by co-operation; the media's obsession with conflict, driven by profit-making. He believed the EU could play a constructive role for peace in the world. Agreeing with UfP's '4Ds' - Disarmament, Demilitarisation, Development, Democracy - he wished to add a '5th D' - De-escalation. In the Open Forum he strongly opposed Trident renewal and advocated UK nuclear disarmament.

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