

# MICHAEL LOTHIAN

Former Member of Parliament, United Kingdom

## Ali ASLAN

Many Polish citizens in the last decade have made their way to the UK to study and work there, and that is why there was no mention of Brexit from Bogdan, but of course it has come up quite a few times. That is why I am delighted to welcome a former member of the UK Parliament from the Conservative Party, still a member of the House of Lords and a member of the Global Strategy Forum policy think tank based in London. Michael, we could not have had a debate about Brexit without somebody from the UK. I am sure you took diligent notes of what was being said, so give us your view from the UK and from London these days.

## Michael LOTHIAN

I have listened with great interest to what has been said. My view of Brexit, very briefly, is that it is an ongoing process, it is highly complex, and we could spend days talking about it and would not be any clearer at the end of it. Therefore, I'd rather like to think of Brexit as something that is going on with very detailed negotiations, in the end and in line with my general view of economics from my long political life is that the economic water finds its own level, whatever people try to do to control the way that it flows, and that in the end we will see Brexit achieving that too.

What I wanted to talk about today is the reason I am on a panel talking about the EU. I am here because, quite simply, while we are leaving the EU – and there is no doubt about that because the British people have spoken – we are not leaving Europe. That is an essential point – I personally am a quarter Italian and I have major European connections. Europe is part of what I am, but that does not mean that the EU is. I spent 30 years in politics talking to people across Europe who accused me, as being part of the British political elite, of being the problem in Europe, the people who were holding it back, and asking me why we did not just get out if we did not like it. Now we are told they want us to stay, and I am saying that we are staying in the crucial areas, which are very simple.

Elisabeth Guigou was talking about defence and security. European defence and security without the positive contribution of the UK would be a very poor option. We provide, for a start, more than anybody else in terms of military capability in NATO, and without the British contribution any European security system would be severely lacking. We provide an enormous amount of shared intelligence. We have very sophisticated intelligence systems in the UK, not least in GCHQ, which will be vital in the future to the fight against terrorism, and we will have a big role to play. Regarding the general area of foreign policy, Britain and Europe together – not in the EU but working together – have a major role to play.

There has been much talk about hostility during these conversations on Brexit, but without the resentment at integration and the fear of increasing bureaucracy, the situation could at the end of the day be much more productive. Steven read out a description of my country and said he did not recognise it; I do not recognise it either, and I think I know why. It was a newspaper article, but then he mentioned Boris Johnson, and I would gently remind him that Boris Johnson is more a journalist than he is a politician. Maybe that is why I did not recognise that description either.

I want to look instead at where we will be going after this. Richard Burt set us a very good challenge; he said that America is moving away from Europe and I agree with him. That is where we as Europeans should be concentrating and looking. We need, essentially, to change our philosophy – as Europeans, whether in the EU or generally. We need to stop being also-rans to American policies. We have to start defining our own policies. We have common interests, of course, and we will work together, but in the end we have an enormous role to play on our own.

I spent a lot of time in the Middle East in the last 20 years, and people of all sorts in the Middle East have asked me why the Europeans cannot deal with them directly rather than as part of the Quartet and always under the American umbrella. I feel that very strongly – we have a major role to play if we are prepared to disassociate ourselves, not



completely but from the policies of which the Americans are pursuing. Looking at what is happening in the Middle East at the moment, there is this terrible crisis in Yemen, in which we have a role to play. It is a role which should be played much more widely, but it is not. The UN has the principle of the responsibility to protect. I look at Yemen at the moment where thousands of people are dying, many more than would have died in Libya had we not gone in. Where in Yemen is the responsibility to protect? Why are we as Europeans not trying to deliver that, so that we can actually salvage something from this mess?

When you look again at what is happening in the general Sunni-Shia conflict, because we are still under the ambit of the US, if I may say so, we are still taking sides. You do not resolve conflicts like that by taking sides. I once used the analogy that if you want to referee a game, you have to be open to both sides; if you take one side you are cheering from the sidelines; and that is a very important element where we as Europeans could be playing a genuine role in terms of what could be the biggest conflict of our lifetimes in the future.

The last one is North Korea. We hear of the dangers. I heard more rhetoric this morning. Little Rocket Man is now being confronted by Big Rocket Man, and we are getting nowhere, except that the situation is getting more and more dangerous. We should be able to say, first of all, this is not a fight in which we have a dog, and we are not going to get involved directly in what is happening at the moment. However, if it comes to conflict we have a major interest, because the results of that conflict could impact upon us all, so we need to think very carefully about how Europe can position itself to make sure that this conflict is less rather than more likely.

There is another element I want to mention, because it is an old canard of mine – if we are to play a real role in achieving reconciliation and peace in the world, we have to change the UN Security Council. You cannot have a world order that is governed by people who are selected on the basis of the situation at the end of the last world war, and where one country has a veto and can stop any sensible decision being taken forward. That is a major challenge, but we in Europe should be playing a major role in trying to move towards that.

Finally, I want to look at where we go next in the world. There are new opportunities for the EU and the UK in the world. I used to be a historian, and what I see is that the smooth flow of history is often interrupted by periods of substantial change. Politicians naturally react to that by saying that we must not allow our comfortable positions to be interrupted, and resist it. However, in the end change happens, and if we are to be genuinely constructive, we have to accept that change and work with it. The integration of the EU may be an essential part of that change, but it has to be the right sort of change. It cannot just be returning to the rigid structures of the EU – it has to be a new vision, and that vision is still lacking.

One of the keys to the change we are seeing around us in the world is the growth in anti-establishment feeling. Looking at all recent political results, the one common factor is that people are voting against the establishment. We have to ask ourselves why that is. It is not just amongst the young. The reason that all these people are anti-establishment is that they are fed up with the old order. It is not enough for us to say, as they used to say on television 'Leave it to us; normal order will be resumed as soon as possible'. People do not want normal order to be resumed – they want change, and that change has to come through ideas and vision. That is what our world is lacking at the moment, yet I see in Europe the real vibrancy that can create that vision for the future.

We had a playwright in Britain who wrote these words, which were quoted many years ago by Bob Kennedy in America. 'Some men see things that are and ask why. I dream of things that have not been and ask, why not?' It is time that Europe started asking: why not?

#### **Ali ASLAN**

What you pointed out was very interesting, that Britain is leaving the EU but not Europe per se. That is an important message and we will see how that plays out in reality. You pointed out that in a sense perhaps the EU should even be grateful for Brexit, because now the UK is no longer holding up the process of true unification. However, if I understood you correctly, to dash any hopes, the British people have spoken and Brexit is final. This is what I heard you say, so for all of you hoping for a reverse coming from Michael Lothian, that will not happen.