Brand Finance speech

London, 2nd March

The other day I was going for a run round the park and the trouble is that it is getting a bit lighter

so that people recognise me more easily under my beany hat and as some fit young geezer shot past me – not much hair, looked a bit like one of my former advisers - he sang out one of those cheery London greetings

 wankah! he said, and I am normally impervious but this time

I am afraid I seethed a bit, and I thought, you – you rotter

It’s a beautiful day, it’s a beautiful park, and the sun is just peeping over

that gorgeous London skyline – for much of which I gave planning permission

the swans and the coots are all innocently doing their thing and you have to go and be so rude

Do we have to put another sign up by the one that says don’t feed the ducks, saying don’t shout at the politicians?

 then I relaxed

and I thought what a wonderful country we live in

how privileged I am to be shouted at on my morning run because it shows

how minimal is the distance between the government and the governed

and if you doubt what I say then try to imagine Vladimir Putin, with or without his T shirt, running round Red Square and being shouted at

Would they abuse Xi jing Ping if he went for a trundle in Tian an Men?

They would not

They would scatter from his path like pigeons

and what we had there in that admittedly somewhat one-sided exchange was therefore something of incalculable value to this country and this economy

  the freedom to say more or less what you like to more or less whomsoever you choose

and as I say this I am conscious that people in Britain are worried about a sense that they are being muzzled

  and of course people should be vigilant about freedom of speech

when we are bowdlerising Roald Dahl

but nothing and no one can stop me reciting the song of the oompa loompas about augustus gloop

   augustus gloop

augustus gloop

 the great big greedy nincompoop

that made me weep with laughter as a child

and frankly I would be very surprised if anybody at SIS in Vauxhall behaved towards their secretaries as Bond behaved towards Moneypenny

  That doesn’t mean we should be banned from reading Fleming’s novels

and in all this debate we should never confuse our feelings of irritation at wokeness or political correctness

 with the genuine terror inspired by authoritarian systems

 where journalists are shot for insulting politicians

 where they are not hailed for exposing corruption but jailed

and we should remember how lucky we are to live in a country and a culture

where speech and thought are so free

  because it is those freedoms

 freedom of speech

 freedom to live your life how you choose provided you do no harm to others

freedom to love whomsoever you choose

  that turn this city and this country into a great magnet for talent

the world’s top chefs

– at one stage we had more Michelin stars than Paris

though the French were alerted to this and churned out a load of Michelin stars in a North Korean way

the world’s best minds

and that is why we have four of the top ten universities in the world

 one Cambridge college boasting more Nobel prizes than Russia and China combined

the world’s most astonishingly gifted musicians and actors and artists

  I think at one stage 6 of the best selling songs in the world were written in this country

the world’s best museums – the BM has more visitors per year than about 7 whole EU countries

 and it is that fantastic concentration of riches in one building that holds up a mirror

 to all of humanity and tells the story of the evolution of the human spirit

and if you give back the elgin marbles to Greece then you leave a huge gap in that narrative

and above all you have no answer in the years ahead to the theoretical claims for restitution from Egypt and Iraq and Syria and Lebanon and Turkey and Nigeria and everywhere whose treasures are housed in Bloomsbury

and suddenly in trying to please the world, and correct thinking

you have deprived the world of one of its great treasures

and cut some vital panels from its great pageant of human progress

Those gods and heroes came to our country in 1812 as refugees from the Ottoman lime kiln – they were going to be melted down to make cement - and they have become part of our lives

We can’t send them away any more than we should deport the 40 per cent of Londoners who were born abroad

 people come here

because they sense that excitement and that freedom and they know that they will not be judged

and they will not feel the lash of prejudice

 they know that they will be coming to a safe society where the police will apply the law to everyone high or low

 I used to make a joke about how they once arrested Prince Andrew in the shrubbery at Buckingham palace

 which I thought was pretty funny until they actually fined me for having lunch at my place at the cabinet table in 10 downing street

 and though I still don’t understand the rationale

 I understand the key point that the law is enforced without fear or favour

and that is the greatest freedom of all

 freedom under the law

-      because they don’t have that everywhere

and it is freedom under the law that enables the political and economic freedom on which we rely

 I mean capitalism

the freedom to spend our own money

 and I mean democracy

  freedom to vote for whomsoever you choose

 and of course the freedom to kick that person out at the next election

you can have capitalism without democracy

and there are some countries that even do well on the soft power index

and you can even have democracy without capitalism

or at least you can try

I think democratic socialism is the programme of Keir Starmer’s Labour party

 though I am not sure – I don’t want to offend the human bollard and wind him up more than I already have

  by the way even when I stepped down we were only a handful of points behind Labour – just saying

but if you want real success

if you want to be a soft power superpower, like the UK, then you need both

  you need capitalism and democracy

democracy matters

if putin had been living in a free society

with a free media he would never have made

the catastrophic mistake of invading Ukraine

  He would never have been so deluded about the true nature of that country

 Imagine if he had the BBC on his case, let alone Tory backbenchers

  instead of listening to a cabal of cronies

He would have known that the Ukrainians are a great and patriotic people and that they would fight for every inch of their land

and if China’s Xi had been living in a democratic country he would not have pursued the zero covid policy for so long

  and if you want a perfect example of why democracy and capitalism need to go together look at the covid vaccines

  who has been vaccinated

did you have sputnik or sinovac or sinopharm

no you had astra Zeneca, room temperature

 made in this country but licensed around the world in the most beautiful and moving example of UK soft power I can think of in recent years

It is a notable fact that after all the years in which we were told you could have capitalism without democracy

it was the free western open societies

 the winners in the soft power index

 that produced the vaccines that actually work

by the way you should feel free to tell these sorts of truths wherever you are in the world

 I made this point in Singapore in front of an audience that included various members of the Chinese communist party central committee

and the organiser felt it was necessary to apologise to the conference and the Guardian said that my speech was shocking

  so just want to check that everyone is all right

Guardian bearing up?

and at the heart of economic and political freedom is the idea of autonomy

the idea of trusting people and families to make their own decisions

to own their own homes, to spend their own money

because that autonomy is not only morally right

 it is the way to allow us all to be as creative and productive as possible and to enjoy what talents we have

and that sense of autonomy for individuals and families has always turned out to be the most innovative and efficient way of running an economy

and what goes for people and families is also true of countries

  that in my view was what brexit was about

 On June 23 2016 people made a momentous choice

they wanted to be free

they took back control of money borders laws

they did it against the opposition of the vast majority of the ruling classes

and in all the great power centres of our country

in what used to be called the establishment

 the bishops, BBC journalists, CBI

the readers of the Times, I am told, were 70 to 80 per cent in favour of remain

MPs, the Lords – all of them massively pro remain

and as soon as it happened there was a concerted attempt to reverse it

 or at least to stop the UK leaving properly

The Treasury particularly wanted the UK to remain in alignment with the EU legal order

that’s why we had all those arguments about the so-called Chequers deal

and many of us rejected that approach out of pure logic

 we said there was no point in leaving the if you were going to remain locked in to the single market

there was no point being a vassal state

there was no point in being a rule-taker

  you might as well be in the EU

so we fought trench warfare – and people like Steve Baker were heroic and as a result

 we are out of the customs union and the single market

 but you may remember the circumstances

 Under the terms of the Benn-Burt act – the so-called Surrender Act

we couldn’t leave unless we agreed to the EU’s terms

and there was no doubt that we faced a particular problem in Ireland

where we were told we faced a choice

If the UK wanted to come out of the customs union and the EU internal market

 and if we wanted to keep an open border across the island of Ireland – which we emphatically did, for the sake of peace on the island and the Belfast Good Friday Agreement

then we would have to make sure that we somehow checked on goods that might go from GB to NI and then on to Ireland

and that is what the protocol does

and purely to help the EU we agreed to check on goods entering northern Ireland that might

be likely to go into Ireland

and I thought that these checks need not be onerous

since there isn’t that much stuff that goes on from the UK to Ireland

and most of the goods stay in Northern Ireland

and the protocol itself contained lots of reassuring phrases

about how Northern Ireland remains in the customs territory of the UK

and will benefit from participation in the United Kingdom's independent trade policy”

   the protocol notes “the importance of maintaining the integral place of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom’s internal market”,

  but beneath the paint and plaster there was the cold steel reality of EU control

The commission was in charge, not the UK

   they did not apply it sensibly

we had the mad ban on sausages

and potted plants and tractors

 we had people unable to send parcels to their grandchildren

we had very serious diversion of trade

as British retailers couldn’t move goods like shortbread from one part of the country to another

even if they didn’t have stores in Ireland itself

 and of course these everyday frustrations were particularly acute for unionist communities in Northern Ireland

who felt that they were being cut off from the rest of the UK

 which was absurd since the large majority of Northern Ireland trade is with the rest of the UK

and the problem was that there was nothing legally that the UK government could do

and that is why we had the bill – so that we could sort it out

 because we had the majority to do it

and because it would have fixed all these problems

removed any border checks down the Irish sea

allowed the UK to determine VAT rules in Northern Ireland

 allowed the UK to decide on state aid and subsidies

and above all it would have allowed northern Irish firms to make goods and put them on the market in northern Ireland if they conformed to UK standards and not EU standards

and yet I do not for one moment believe it would have necessitated checks north south – certainly not by the UK. We would never have done anything of the kind

 It would have kept and respected the balance of the good Friday agreement

  and the EU did not like that bill

They did not like it because it took away their control

 but above all because it frustrated their key objective

by keeping northern Ireland in the single market for goods

 they made it much more difficult for the UK to diverge

and do things differently – because of the strains that would place on the union

 and I can tell you that in all my conversations with Merkel and Macron over the years that was the one thing they feared

 the UK actually taking advantage of Brexit freedoms so as to be more competitive

and so they used the northern Ireland problem as a way of keeping us more or less where they wanted us

their system, the European court of justice and all the rest of it, still glomped on and in some important respects still in charge of part of the UK

and I remember Merkel actually coming up to me and saying if you continue with this bill it will be a Shakespearean tragedy

well, she turned out to be right there

though I leave it to you to work out which tragedy it was

and so I was thrilled when in June that bill sailed unamended through the house

and I was pleased when the present PM when he said in his campaign to be party leader that he would continue with it

and so when I look at this deal I of course have mixed feelings

    This has got to be about the people of northern Ireland

the 1.9 m people

their businesses and their lives

and given that we have got rid of the Bill I can see why so many people are attracted to accepting a compromise

I agree passionately with Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, for whom I have the highest regard that the people of Northern Ireland need their assembly

and that they need their government

and though it is not now for me to advise him I hope he can find a way of reconciling himself and his party to this outcome and getting back into Stormont

but – and I will not be thanked for saying this - we must be clear about what is really going on here

this is not the UK taking back control

and although there are easements this is really a version of the solution that was being offered last year to Liz Truss, when she was fgn sec

this is the EU graciously unbending to allow us to do what we want in our own country

not by our laws, but by theirs

They are not scrapping 100s of pages of EU law

They are passing new regulations to allow

  British goods to pass from one part of this country to another

still under EU law

but with what they hope will be lighter bureaucracy

 21 data points on the forms, instead of 80

 to be completed by trusted traders who can show the EU that they have certain assets and goods for sale in northern Ireland to be prominently labelled not for EU

among many other provisions and restrictions

 We must hope it works and that it genuinely reduces frictions

though I am particularly concerned that goods going for processing or manufacturing in northern Ireland from GB – goods that are part of a supply chain – seem to be going through the red lane for firms above a certain size, which seems pretty crazy

and not supportive of the UK internal market

 What it certainly will not do is allow goods made in northern Ireland to be made according to UK standards unless they are also EU standards at least for sale in northern ireland

and in that sense this deal helps accomplish the EU’s key objective

and acts as a drag actor on divergence

and then beneath the bother and the hassle of these rules you have to ask yourself the key question

  Who votes for the people who decide these rules?

 who votes for the people who decide how your pet dog or cat can get to Northern Ireland and back?

 who votes for the people who make the laws about easter eggs or cakes or boats or any other manufactured goods?

 Who votes for the people who set the VAT rates on tampons in NI?

No one in England or Scotland or Wales and no one in Northern Ireland

 There was a reason the public voted us an 80 seat majority in 2019

and that was because they instinctively knew that we needed to fix all this

and that’s why we had the bill

I will find it very difficult to vote for it myself because I believed we should have done something different

 no matter how much plaster came off the ceiling in Brussels

and I will hope that if it doesn’t work we will have the guts to deploy the Bill again

and I will continue to campaign for what I thought of as Brexit

 because this is nothing if not a Brexit government and Brexit is nothing if we don’t do things differently

and we need to take advantage of it and we need to be seen to take advantage of it

  Let me give you an example – for years the scientists have been calling for the ability to do CRISPR genome editing

which is for some reason banned under a ruling of the ECJ

We can do it now

It does not mean frankenfoods..It does not mean we are all going to be attacked by killer tomatoes

 It would enable us to do all sorts of things to protect crops from frost and blight

Will we do it ? We are standing on the edge of the diving board

 Let us take the plunge – even if it would appear that under this deal those British genome edited tomatoes could not go into the making of a cheese and tomato sandwich in NI which as I say is a matter for regret

Let us dare to be different on the economy

 I know that covid cost a fortune and there was little we could do about that but there is no point in just emulating the high tax high spend low growth European model

  We should think about cutting corporation tax to Irish levels – or lower – and really turbo-charging investment to drive levelling up

really showing the world that we are different now because this is a brexit government or it is nothing

and because we are a brexit government we got the biggest share of the vote since 1979

  let me give you just some examples of the ways divergence has helped us so far

 Yes it really made a difference that we were out of the EMA and able to get the first licensed vaccine into the arms of any patient anywhere in the world

and that meant we had the fastest vaccine roll-out, and that meant we were able to come out of lockdown faster than the rest of Europe

and we staged the fastest recovery in the G7 and we still have the lowest unemployment since about 1974

and that was because we dared to be different

and we dared to be different on Aukus – which the FCDO would never have allowed if we were still in the EU

never have allowed such a rupture with the French and the raucous squawkus of the anti-aukus caucus

and we dared to be different when it came to the great geo-political crisis that frankly dwarfs what we have so far discussed today

 When it was clear that Putin really might be so insane as to attack Ukraine we were the first major European country to send quantities of lethal weaponry to help them

the nlaw anti-tank missiles that were so important in the battle for Kiev

 and that believe me would never have happened if we had stayed within the constraints of the so-called Common Fgn and Security policy of the EU

we would never have dared to be different if we had remained – as we were – deferential to the primacy of France and Germany and the so-called Normandy Process of 2014

and all I can say is how proud I am that by daring to be different Brexit Britain has encouraged the rest of Europe to give arms to the Ukrainians

 and we all know that our contribution is nothing compared to their heroism

  They are fighting for all of us – for Georgia, for Moldova, for the Balts, for Poland for all the periphery of the old soviet empire

They have the soft power

  they have a vibrant dynamic free and open society

They have elections that can go either way

and that is what they are defending

and that is what Putin hates and fears

 They have a president who is not only a great war leader but who was once the voice of Paddington in the Ukrainian version

and in the struggle between the Russian bear and Paddington my money is on Paddington

  but sometimes soft power needs hard power to defend it – and the Ukrainians need it now

The Ukrainians are fighting for freedom and democracy everywhere

Let’s give them what they need

  slava ukraini ! and thanks for listening