Canada speech November 2023

Great to be with you all in this distinguished company

I feel as though I have arrived in Canada in the nick of time because in just a few weeks – unless we can avert disaster

there is going to be a trade war between the UK and Canada

I am afraid so

It wouldn’t be happening if I were still PM, but there is no doubt about it

At midnight on December 31 shops across Canada will no longer be allowed to import

British stilton cheese, or British wensleydale, or cheddar, or Leicester

or somerset brie or any one of about 30 types of cheese in which the UK now excels

and which have inspired an almost rodent-like devotion in some parts of the Canadian population

I am told that there is one shop in Toronto that sells 350 kg of British cheese every week

to feed the cheese-o-holics of this city

and how will they respond, when the knife comes down at the end of December

they will go crackers

they will revolt – and so my mission here tonight is to urge you big cheeses of Canadian business

to avert this disaster and to make sure that the Trudeau government does the right thing and extends the tariff rate quota that the UK cheesemakers are currently using

until such time as we come to our senses and do a proper free trade deal

and we should do it forthwith

The position is absurd

We are the oldest and closest of friends and allies – literally of the same realm

and never mind Wolfe at Quebec or what Canada did to pull our chestnuts out of the fire in two world wars

my own life has benefited immensely by the closeness of the UK to Canada

I began my journalistic career as the happy employee of a Canadian press baron

and though he hit a skiddy patch and did some time sewing mailbags in Florida

he is still Lord Black of Crossharbour, still in our legislature

and I will always be grateful to him for unthinkingly waving through my expenses

tragically modest as they were

and investing in British journalism

and when I first rose to prominence as a politician my most important early success was owed entirely to the genius of Canadian tech

Those big burly bikes that you see in London – hire bikes

with people weaving slowly through the traffic like drunken French onion sellers

there is a reason why those so-called Boris bikes look familiar to Canadians

and that is of course that they were invented and even manufactured here

and even though I shamelessly took the credit for them in London

I will always be conscious of my debt to Canada

The penetration of Canada into the UK economy is so deep that we even had a Canadian controlling our money supply and setting interest rates

It is of course a Canadian company that is going to be making the trains for our most important national infrastructure project, HS2

or at least for those portions the government has not yet cancelled

all these wonderful things have arrived from Canada to the UK

about 17 billion dollars worth of stuff in a relationship that is massively in Canada’s favour

and yet we cannot get our cheese on your tables after the deadline of Dec 31 and I say it is crazy

because we are not in a position – either of us – where we can afford to be complacent about the freedoms that made us so prosperous

free trade, free markets, freedom of speech, the freedom to elect and remove the people who govern us

because those freedoms are under attack everywhere

and 30 years after the end of the Cold war the number of liberal capitalist democracies is actually going down not up

and the values that we take for granted are eroded everywhere

We face the worst war in Europe for 80 years, and though Canada has been magnificent in its support for Ukraine

we must face the harsh truth

there are far too many countries around the world that are giving Putin the benefit of the doubt

far too many people – even conservative commentators in the United States – who think that Putin somehow stands for family values

and I say to them

what is conservative about using brutal violence to change the borders of Europe

What is conservative about bombing innocent civilians from the air

what is conservative about trying to snuff out a sovereign European democracy

That isn’t conservatism – that’s fascism

and we must fight it and help to Ukrainians to win

as they can and will and must

because if Putin wins the signal will go around the world that might is right, and that violence succeeds

and we will have a huge problem in the straits of Taiwan

where Xi has made plain that he wants to unite China with the island on which we all depend for semi-conductors

and that is why we need Canada and the UK to stand up together for freedom and democracy around the world

we need moral clarity about what is happening to Ukraine

and we need total moral clarity about what is happening in the Middle east

Whatever the faults of Israel, there can be no equating of Hamas and Israel

no equivalence between the massacres of October 7 and what the Israelis are tragically obliged to do to stop those massacres happening again

no equivalence between the Palestinian criminals and terrorists who are now being released, and the Israeli hostages, sometimes children who are being used by Hamas to buy the freedom of those criminals

and that should be obvious

but I am afraid that it isn’t obvious to huge numbers of people in both our countries

and that is why we need to make the argument to the world and make it together

because I believe we will win

the liberal capitalist democracies will eventually win through – even if the landscape seems dark and forbidding today

and I will tell you why – because in the end it is political and cultural and economic freedom that produces the things the world really loves

we make the best songs, the best movies, the best bike hire schemes

we have the cities with the best restaurants and the best nightlife

and the best universities – the ones that people want to send their kids to

we make the best vaccines and my friends we make the best and most individually perfumed cheeses in the world

have you eaten cheese produced by an autocracy? Have you ever eaten Chinese or Russian cheese?

I rest my case

but we cannot be complacent

we have only days until the Christmas holidays

let’s send a message to our governments that between friends and partners as close as Britain and Canada there can be no barriers

let’s get that free trade deal done, stilton included

not just for itself, but as a symbol of an alliance and a friendship that is ever more vital to the cause of freedom around the world

thanks very much for listening!