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**Global Soft Power Summit 2023**

**Rt Hon Boris Johnson**

**Introducer & Moderator: David Haigh, CEO Brand Finance PLC**

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**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, thank you, very, very much, David, and good afternoon, great to be here this Brand Finance Global Brand Summer, Global Soft Power Summit, and thank you. I’m delighted to be sticking up for the other point of view after last year. And I’m going to give you a bit of an analysis of soft power, first. And I’m going to begin by saying, I was going for a run the other day in the park, and the trouble these days is that it gets lighter and lighter so that I become more easy to recognize under my beanie hat. And some thick, young geezer shot past me, not much hair, and he looked like one of my former advisors. And he sang out a cheery London greeting, "Wanker," he said.

I am morally impervious to these types of things, but I’m afraid this time, I seized, and I thought, you, you rotter. I thought, it’s a beautiful day, it’s a beautiful park, and the sun is just peeping over the gorgeous London skyline, 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, and they’re going to have to put up another sign, by the one that says, "Don’t feed the ducks," and it be, "Don’t shout at the politicians."

And then I relaxed and I thought, I thought what a wonderful country it is that we live in, and how privileged I am to be shouted at on my morning run, because it shows how minimal is the distance between the government. And if you doubt what I’m saying, just try to imagine Vladimir Putin, with or without his t-shirt, running around Red Square and being shouted at. And what would they do? Would they do that? Would they shout at him? I mean, they wouldn’t. 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 to our economy, which is the freedom to say more or less what you like, more or less to whomsoever you choose.

And as I say this, I’m conscious of the people in Britain today who are worried about a sense that they are being muzzled. And of course, people should be vigilant about freedom of speech when we’re bowdlerizing Roald Dahl, but nothing and no one is going to stop me reciting the song of the Oompa Loompa, about Augustus Gloop, which you all remember, Augustus Gloop, Augustus Gloop, the great, big greedy nincompoop, which made me weak with laughter as a child, and frankly, I’d be very surprised if anybody at SIS in Vauxhall behaved towards their secretaries as Bond behaved towards Moneypenny. But 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 and 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’s 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 – have turned the city in this country into a great magnet for talent, with the world’s top chefs. The one stage, I think in London. I used to say when I was married, we had more Michelin stars than Paris, and the French were so alarmed by this that they churned out this in kind of a North Korean way to overtake us.

We have the world’s best minds in this country. That’s why we have four of the top ten universities in the world, one Cambridge College boasting more Nobel Prizes, I think, than Russia and China combined. The world’s most astonishingly gifted artists and musicians and actors. I think at one stage, six of the best-selling songs in the world were written in this country. We have to have the world’s best cultural scene, the world’s best museums here in London, the British Museum, which has more visitors per year than about seven whole EU countries, and I’m famed for my diplomacy, as you can see.

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 so 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, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Nigeria, everywhere whose treasures are housed in Bloomsbury and suddenly in trying to please the world and correct thinking, you’ve 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 line kill. They were going to be melted down to make cement and they’d become part of our lives. We can’t send them away any more that we should deport the 40% of Londoners who were born abroad, including me, by the way, people who come here because they sense that excitement and that freedom and they know that they will not be judged here and they won’t 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 of Buckingham Palace, which I thought was pretty funny, until they actually find me having lunch at my place at the cabinet table in 10 Downing Street, and although I still don’t understand the rationale behind it, I do understand the key point that the law is enforced here without fear or favor. 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, I mean, democracy, freedom to vote for whomsoever we choose, and of course, freedom to kick that person out at the next election. You can have capitalism without democracy. And there are some countries that do well on the soft power index that come into that category. And you can even have democracy without capitalism, or at least I think you can try. I think democratic socialism is the program for Keir Starmer’s Labor Party, though I’m not sure. I don’t offend the human bollard and wind him up even more than I have done already, the great secretary snooze fest as I call him.

By the way, I just want to just point out, purely for accuracy, when I stepped down, we were only a handful of points behind the Labor Party at that moment back in July. I’m just saying that.

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, because if Putin had been living in a free society with the 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 we had the BBC, the wonderful organization sponsoring us today, 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 you want a perfect example of why democracy and capitalism need to go together, look at the COVID vaccines. Who in this room has been vaccinated? Just about everybody. Absolutely everybody. Anybody not been vaccinated? Has any – okay, there you go, there’s a brave soul or whatever, you chose not to be vaccinated, fine.

But can I ask you, as a matter of interest, who had Sputnik? Anybody here have Sputnik? No? Who had Sinovac or Sinopharm? Okay. Who had AstraZeneca? I did. Who had AstraZeneca and Pfizer? Look, I think – there you go. AstraZeneca invented in Oxford, a room-temperature vaccine, licensed around the world, and I think it was one of the most beautiful and moving examples of UK soft power I can think of in recent years.

And it’s a notable act that, after all the years in which we were told you could have capitalism without democracy, it was the free Western open societies who tend to be the winners in the soft power index that produced the vaccines that actually work. And by the way, I think everyone should feel free to point this out.

I made this point at this point in Singapore not long ago, and it was felt to be so controversial that the organizers actually had to apologize, and *The Guardian*, said – I hope *The Guardian* is here, but *The Guardian* said my speech was shocking. I just want to check if everybody is all right with me saying that, and *The Guardian* is bearing up.

At the heart of this idea of economic and political freedom is the idea of autonomy, the idea of trusting people and families to make their own decisions, by owning their own homes, spending their own money, because that autonomy is not only morally right, but it’s the way to allow us all to be as creative and productive as possible, and to enjoy and make the best use of the talents we have. And it’s that sense of autonomy for individuals and for families which has always turned out to be the most innovative and efficient way of running an economy.

And what goes for people and for families is also, in my view, true of countries, and now here is where I come to the point that Guy Verhofstadt might not agree with, because in my view–and I’m conscious that this is not necessarily now a universal consensus, if not the devil, what–in my view, that was what Brexit was all about.

On June the 23rd, 2016, people made a momentous choice. They wanted to be free. They took back control of their money, their borders and their laws, and they did it against the opposition of the vast majority of the ruling classes in this country. And in all the great power centers of our country, what used to be called the establishment, the bishops, the BBC – you know, I hope I’m not – you know, being too controversial here. The CBI. Most readers of *The Times*, I’m told, where in fact 70% or 80% of the readers of *The Times* were in favor of remain, most MPs, the vast majority of members of the of the House of Lords, massively pro-remain.

Remember? I don’t know what the balance would be in this distinguished audience, but as soon as that happened there was a concerted attempt to reverse it, or at least to stop the UK leaving properly. And the Treasury in particular wanted the UK to remain in alignment with the EU legal order. That’s why we had all those arguments over the years about the so-called Checkers deal and many of us rejected that approach out of pure logic. We said there was no point in leaving the EU if you were going to remain locked in the single market. There was no point in being a vassal state. There was no point in being a rule taker. You might as well be in the EU.

So for years we fought trench warfare, with people like Steve Baker and David Davis, and many others, were heroic. And as a result, we are out of the customs union and we’re out of the single market but you remember the circumstances in which we had to do that deal under the terms of 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 that 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 Great Britain to Northern Ireland and then on into Ireland.

And that is what the protocol does. And purely to help the EU, we agreed to check on those goods entering Northern Ireland, as I say, that might go on to Ireland, and I thought those checks would not be onerous since there isn’t actually that much stuff that falls into that category. Most of the goods stay in Northern Ireland.

And it’s not my fault. I’m fully accepted. And the protocol itself, and this is why I signed it, contains 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. And the commission was in charge and not the UK. And contrary to my hopes there, they did not apply it sensibly. And we had the mad ban on sausages and potted plants and tractors, and heaven knows what, and people aren’t able 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 the other, even if they didn’t actually have stalls in in Ireland itself.

And of course, these everyday frustrations were particularly acute for unionist communities in Northern Ireland. Who felt they were being cut off from the rest of the UK. Which I which I bitterly regretted and I felt was absurd because the large majority of Northern Ireland trade is with the rest of the UK.

And the problem I had was that there was nothing legal that the UK government could do because we’d given that power away. And that is why we had the bill to fix it and to sort it out. And that is why I believe we had that majority of 80 seats, because I think the people in this country sensed that we needed to fix it. And that bill does fix it. It’s still in parliament. It does fix all these problems. It removes any border checks down the Irish Sea. It would allow the UK to determine VAT rules and the AT rules in Northern Ireland, state aid subsidies and so on. And above all, it would allow Northern Irish firms to make goods of any kind, put them on the market in Northern Ireland if they conform to UK standards and not EU standards, and so a dual standard regime was envisaged.

And I don’t believe for one moment that it would have necessitated checks, north/south, and certainly not by the UK. We would not have done anything of the kind. It would have kept and respected the balance of the Good Friday Agreement.

Now, the EU did not like that bill. They did not like it because it took away their control. And above all, because it frustrated their key objective by keeping Northern Ireland in the single market for goods. And that made it much more difficult for the UK to diverge and to do things differently because of the strains that would place on the union.

And I can tell you that in all my conversations with our friends in the EU over the years, it was that idea of divergence, that whole sort of Singapore on Thames concept, whatever you may think of it, it was that idea of divergence that they feared the UK actually taking advantage of Brexit freedoms so as to be more competitive.

And so in my view, they use the Northern Ireland problem as a way of keeping us more or less where they wanted, so that their system, the European Court of Justice and all the rest, it was still lumped on and in some important respect still in charge of part of the UK. And I remember Angela Merkel actually coming up to me at what I think was the G20 Summit 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 in June when that bill sailed through the House Commons unamended. I was pleased when the present Prime Minister and his predecessor said that they would continue with it. And so when I look at the deal that we have now, of course, I have mixed feelings. I’m conscious of where the political momentum is and people’s deep desire just to get on.

And this has got to be about the people of Northern Ireland, the 1.9 million 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. And I agree passionately with Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, for whom I have the highest regard, that the people of Northern Ireland need their assembly and they need their government.

And look, it’s not for me to advise Sir Jeffrey, but I hope that he can find a way of reconciling himself and his party to this outcome, which is the fact that we have and getting back into Stormont, but – and I’m not going to be thanked for saying this, but I think it’s my job to do so. We must be clear about what is really going on here. This is not about 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 Foreign Secretary.

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’re not scrapping hundreds of pages of EU regulations. They’re passing EU law. They’re 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, with 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, and to be prominently labeled "not for the EU," among many other provisions and restrictions.

Look, we’ve got to hope – we’ve got to hope that it works and genuinely reduces friction. I’m particularly concerned that goods going for processing and manufacturing in Northern Ireland from Great Britain, goods that are part of the supply chain seem to be going through the red lane for firms above a certain size, which seems pretty, pretty crazy, not supportive of the UK internal market. And what this will certainly not do is allow goods made in Northern Ireland to be made according to UK standards unless they are also EU standards for sale in Northern Ireland. Or at least, it is very, very unclear the extent to which that would be allowed.

It’s very unclear for foodstuffs, for motor manufacturing and all the rest of it. The EU single market remains paramount. And in that sense, this deal helps to accomplish the key objective that I spoke of. And so it acts as a drag anchor on divergence, which as I’ve said, is the point of Brexit.

There’s no point in Brexit unless you do things differently. 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 or back? Who votes for the people who make laws about Easter eggs or cakes or boats or any other manufactured goods? Who votes for the people who set VAT rates on sanitary wearing in Northern Ireland? No one in England or Scotland or Wales, and no one in Northern Ireland.

And I think there was a reason. As I say, the public voted us an 80-seat majority in 2019. And that was because they instinctively knew that we had to fix this, and that’s why we had the bill. And look, I’ll get to the punch line, but I’m going to find it very difficult to vote for something myself, because – something like this myself, because I believed that we should have done something different, no matter how much plaster came off the ceiling in Brussels. And I hope that it will work. And I also hope that if it doesn’t work, we will have the guts to deploy that bill again, because I have no doubt at all that this was what brought the EU to negotiate, seriously.

And in the meantime, I will continue to campaign for what I thought of—and what I think of—as Brexit and the logic of Brexit, because this is nothing if it is not a Brexit government and Brexit is nothing if we in this country don’t do things differently. And we need to take advantage of this, and we need to be seen to be taking advantage of it. Let me give you an example.

For years, the scientists have been calling for the ability to do something called CRISPR, C-R-I-S-P-R, something we all know about, genome editing, which for some reason is banned under a ruling of the ECJ. Well, now that we’re out, we can theoretically do it, and we have the capability to do it. It doesn’t mean Franken-foods. It doesn’t mean we’re all going to be attacked by killer tomatoes. It will enable us to do all sorts of things to protect crops from disease, from frost, from blight and so on.

Will we do it? Will the UK be in the lead? Will we dare to diverge? Well, we’re standing on the edge of the diving board, and it’s not clear to me that we are going to. So I say to you, let’s 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 – whatever, a cheese-and-tomato sandwich in Northern Ireland, which, as I say, or I think is going to be a matter for regret.

So let’s dare to be different and do things differently. And we should dare to be different. On the economy. I know that COVID cost a fortune, and there was not much we could do about that, but we’re out of it now, and there’s no point now in just emulating the high-tax, high-spend, low-growth European model. We should think, not about raising corporation tax, but cutting corporation tax to Irish levels or lower and really turbocharging investment to drive leveling up across the whole country, really showing the world what they wanted to see from 2016 onwards that we are different now because this is a Brexit government, or this is nothing.

And it’s because this is a Brexit government that 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 is the case that it made a difference that we were out of the European Medicines Agency and therefore 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 rollout, and that meant we were able to come out of lockdown faster than the rest of Europe. And we staged, therefore, the fastest economic recovery in the G7. And we have today, in spite of all the difficulties, the lowest unemployment since about 1974. And we will fix our problems. We will fix inflation. I have no doubt that the government will be successful in what they’re doing in getting inflation down.

And that was because we dared – that success with vaccines, was because we dared to be different and we dare to be different on AUKUS, which I don’t believe the Foreign Office would ever have allowed when we were still in the EU. I don’t think they would ever have allowed such a rupture with our French friends and the and the raucous of the anti-AUKUS caucus. And we dared to be different, finally, when it came to the great geopolitical crisis that frankly dwarfs everything that we’ve so far – that I’ve so far discussed, the day in which Andrew Neil mentioned just before I came on.

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, with the NLAW anti-tank missiles that were so important in the battle for Kiev. And believe me, that would never have happened if we had stayed within the constraints of the so-called Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. We would never have dared to be different if we had remained as we were deferential to the primacy of France and Germany on Ukraine under 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 now the rest of Europe to give arms to the Ukrainians. And we know, of course, that our contribution is nothing compared to their heroism. They are fighting for all of us. They’re fighting for Georgia, for Moldova, for the Balts, for Poland, as Andrew rightly said, for all the periphery of the old Soviet empire.

And yes, on soft power, they have the soft power. They have a vibrant, dynamic, free, 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 Ukraine, of Paddington the Bear in the Ukrainian version of the film.

So, I can say 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 that hard power now. Ukrainians are fighting for freedom and democracy everywhere. Let us give them what they need and give it to them now for Ukraine and thank you very much for listening.

(Break for direction.)

**DAVID HAIGH:** The thought occurred to me, I would ask the audience to say, who thinks Brexit was a good idea? Put your hand up.

Okay, so we don’t have…

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I got the feeling that might be the case as we went along, but I am undaunted.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Has Boris changed anyone’s mind?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I am undaunted. Look, I mean, anyway… the problem at the moment, and it’s about what we’re not getting right now. I think I’ve said it several times. This is a Brexit government or it’s nothing. We got a massive mandate to change. People wanted a change in their lives. They wanted to see things done differently. And I’ve got to put my hands up for this as much as anybody.

We haven’t done enough yet to convince them that it can deliver the change they want to see. And I think that they’re particularly dismayed about things like the small boats crossing the channel. But they all said they don’t feel the economic change. And so, we’ve got to break out of the model that we’re in.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Based on what you’ve just said, you’re obviously not going to be supporting the Windsor framework. Does that mean that you would expect to see a division?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think people have heard quite a lot about it. I’ve had people, camera crews outside my door, asking me all week what I think about this. You’ve had about half an hour of my views. Nobody can say you don’t know my views on this subject now, or you might say you haven’t heard my views on the subject.

What I want, look, it is clear that this is where people are now. And it’s clear from this room that this is what people… People want to move on.

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, do you think they –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** They want to do a deal. They don’t want any more ructions. And I get that, I totally get that. And I’ve got to be realistic about it.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Should there be an election?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, there is going to be an election. We’re going to win that election. That’s not till January or till the end of next year.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Okay, fine. So, just going through a few things, we’re talking about Ukraine there. Do you think there’s more we could do? And is Ukraine going to win? What more can we do?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think Ukraine is going to win, but it’s going to be very hard. And they need the maximum support; they need it now. And my argument is, why delay? What happens in this conversation, we always end up giving them stuff sooner or later. Well, if it’s the choice between sooner or later, let’s give it sooner. First of all, it was it was NLAWs, then it was HIMARS, then it was tanks. Now, the question is about aviation, about planes. It’s going to happen sooner or later. Let’s do it sooner.

**DAVID HAIGH:** But do you think it’s only going to be resolved militarily or is it going to be resolved by negotiation?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. Well, look, classically, people would say this is now tragically a war in which the Ukrainians are fighting, winning this war, but they depend on the support of us in the West. And they’re the heroes; they’re the heroes, but they do need support. We must not fail in giving that support.

What America has done has been absolutely spectacular. And I don’t think people have realized the extent of the U.S. support, $45-$50 billion now of support for Ukraine. This is a massive commitment to transatlantic security by the Americans. I do worry a bit that the atmosphere in Washington could change if Ukraine doesn’t win this year. That’s what needs to happen.

**DAVID HAIGH:** One of the things that was coming across in our research very strongly is that a large chunk of the world has not got the message.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I know.

**DAVID HAIGH:** And it doesn’t necessarily support the Ukraine.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I know. Well, we could try that, David. Why don’t we do another – we got massive support for Brexit. Let’s see. (Laughter.) I mean, I thought I did pretty well because you know how tough that audience was. I mean, you’ve got to be realistic. I had one vote in the audience at the start of the meeting. As selection meetings go, that was really very tough.

Let’s just see who’s basically a kind of Ukraine skeptic. Who thinks that the Russians might have the grain of a point? Who’s willing to say that in a London audience? Anybody?

I’m not hearing. Okay, right. That’s good, that’s solid. It’s one thing.

**DAVID HAIGH:** What comes from our research is that in quite large parts of Africa, South Asia, North Asia, they’re quite sympathetic. And one of the problems could be that Russia persuades China to come in on their side, give them materials because they feel it’s the Cold War and they’re being picked on. Is there a serious chance you think that might happen?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Look, I think that’s absolutely correct. I think that there are large parts of the world where it doesn’t seem as clear to them as it does to you and me. We feel instinctively this is right and wrong, this is good and evil. Nothing could be clearer to me. This is a sovereign, independent European country that was invaded in a brutal and criminal way, and we should do everything we can to help them protect themselves.

But I’ve got to tell you, that’s not how, whether it’s because they have governments that actually are quite partial to the idea of being able to invade their neighbors when they choose, or whatever, there are lots of mixed feelings about this. And I think it’s certainly true that Russian and Chinese diplomacy has been very effective.

And I think I was eavesdropping on your earlier conversation. We need to do better in getting the messages across. And I think the BBC is fantastically powerful and trusted, but I’ve got to tell you a tragedy. I remember when I was foreign secretary, being told that Russia today is at least as influential in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa as the BBC. And Russia today is actually more influential in Latin America than the BBC, or more watched. I don’t know about influential, but certainly has a bigger footprint. And that’s pretty chilling. I mean, this was years ago.

**DAVID HAIGH:** And do you think –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** People will only respond to the news they consume, and just as you’re hearing a lot of bad news about Brexit. People, they’re listening to that, and we’ve got to be smarter in communicating the reality of the situation.

**DAVID HAIGH:** I mean, one of the things that we’ve heard a lot about recently is the fact that they want to boost defense spending in the UK because of the war. And they’re talking about £11, £12, £13 billion pounds, the amount that is actually being spent on the things that promote communication, like the BBC and the British Council. On the other hand, they seem to be cutting it back and back.

I mean, we had this discussion last year and the year before, where everyone’s saying they think it’s crazy that we’re not actually putting far more money into it. I mean, do you have a point of view about that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, the BBC gets a lot of money from the license payer, as far as I can remember. I think the gentleman in the front row was pointing that out just now. And that’s a good thing. It’s a fantastic emanation of British soft power.

I’ve always wondered why the BBC can’t make more money itself. With all this cash coming in, why can’t they? Organizations like Netflix, they seem to make a bubble, too, Amazon –

**DAVID HAIGH:** BBC Studios –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What about all that? I think I said rather extensively in my speech, we’ve got the most talented media people in the world here in London. You’ve got all sorts of cultural advantages. Why aren’t we making better use of our talent?

**DAVID HAIGH:** If you look at the BBC finances, they make £5 billion a year, and I think about £1.6 billion of it comes from media. So the people that are sponsoring us, the BBC Studios, which is the external commercial part of the BBC, is making money. It always strikes me as weird that they’ll cut back the World Service, which is funded by the Foreign Office. I think they’ve just scrapped the Arab service and it’s really run on a total shoestring.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s very sad, I think. Yeah, look, I mean, these services, I tried not to do – when I was running, I really tried to keep all of that going, or as much of the foreign language stuff as we possibly could. I think that is sad, but I just restate my point.

Okay, when I go to BBC Studios, which I don’t do as much as I used to, for the very reasons which you all know – (laughter) – I’m amazed at the contrast between those BBC studios and a private sector media organization. And in the BBC Studio, and I love the BBC – thank you, BBC, for sponsoring this conference, etcetera; I owe everything to the BBC, they launched me, little did they know. (Laughter.)

But when you go to a BBC studio, wherever it is, some wonderful town or city in this country, it’s absolutely (palliating?) with people in polo necks, doing this, that or the other, loads and loads of people with clipboards, each knowing what their place in the hierarchy is. And that’s not the case in private sector media organizations, where the cuts and the pressure, the shrinkage of advertising has been so intense. There’s tumbleweed blowing down the newsrooms of some of these great, great, great local papers. And many of them have gone, and many of their business, much of their business actually cannibalized by the BBC because of the way they give local news as well.

So, it’s a great, big, wonderful thing, but I think it was the director general himself who was overheard the other day saying, what a fantastic – there you go, there’s one of them here – saying what a fantastic thing it was that they were able to get so much money from the license fee. And it is.

What I’m saying, as somebody who has to think about asking people across the country to pay a tax, which they can be jailed for not paying, is use that license fee well, and use it to generate lots more income.

That’s what I think the BBC could do. It could be the flagship for British media around the world. It could be the great content vehicle for all the private sector companies, all the private sector media. It could be the dreadnought that sails the seven seas for the UK and gets our message across. But I don’t know if it is doing that in the way –

**DAVID HAIGH:** Can we just come back to Brexit for a moment?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes, I don’t think we’ve heard enough about that. (Laughter.) Come on. I gave you about 15 paragraphs on Brexit.

**DAVID HAIGH:** (Laughter.) Let me ask you this question. I mean, clearly, you wanted to get it done. Rishi now thinks he’s got it done. When and if that goes through, Brexit will be done. So the question is –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, but it won’t be, but that’s the whole point.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Let me ask the question –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** There was no point in this – that was what I decided. There’s no point in this exercise if you don’t do things differently. If we are just going to stick in the middle lane and be a kind of relatively high tax, relatively high spend, very heavily regulated European economy –

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, here’s my question: What would you do different? I mean, I personally find it very hard to believe that we were going down to 19%, possibly to 17% corporation tax. Ireland sat there on 12%. I had my finger crossed that we’d go down to 12%.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What I would have done, in retrospect, what I wish we had done, and I spent an awful lot of time with my friend, the former chancellor and now prime minister, trying to see, we need you to just set out our stall about Brexit. And what I wish we had done is put a big “invest here” sign over Britain as soon as we were out of COVID, as soon as it was remotely credible. I think we should have done something. We should have outbid the Irish. We should have said, this is it. Come here. We will give you tax breaks of a kind, or –

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, you think tax rate should be 10%?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What it needed was a big, big sign that things were different and that the UK was the place to come to, because what’s so interesting is that I think the global audience, when it happened, thought, that’s interesting. What do the Brits mean by that? What are they going to do? And we had this long, long, long, long, long civil war about what Brexit was. And we never really, or we haven’t yet said we’re doing things differently. And that’s things like the genome editing, get on and do it. But we’ve got to move.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Right, but what else? What else should we be doing? Are they trade deals we should be doing? Are there relationships with other countries?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Of course, of course. But there are things you should be doing on financial services, on data. There is a huge amount that we should be getting on with. And I think that –

**DAVID HAIGH:** But it seems to me, as someone who did actually vote for Brexit, as you probably gathered, that I agreed with the principal and wanted to see something different. There have been several things that have been different that you just outlined, which I don’t think you get enough credit for. But as you say, there is no sort of manifesto of things that would make a real difference, starting with tax.

I mean, I just don’t understand why they’ve gone for high tax rather than low tax. And I don’t really know what the areas are that they could liberalize. Maybe you should set that out slightly stronger, and then people might support you.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I think that’s right. But don’t forget, it wasn’t a trivial thing. As I said just now, we were able because we had a different regulatory regime. And people will people will dispute this, but if you look at it, it’s absolutely true. We were outside the European vaccines program. We were able to do things very, very differently.

And we approved a vaccine faster than any other country. The Medical Health Regulation Agency, MHRA, was able to approve, I think, both Pfizer and AstraZeneca before anybody else. I’m fairly certain of that, and that gave us the edge in rolling out that vaccination program. And that was a totally massive thing. And I would say Brexit saved lives.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Right.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And I absolutely would. But people find it very difficult to accept that point. They say (makes noise), because I think the general sort of gloom about the subject has been so intense. When you look at stuff like the chemicals regulation, the financial services solvency, MiFID, all those sorts of things, these are areas where we’re now making progress, and Rishi definitely wants to make progress on them, but we need to be talking about it more. And I think what we’ve got to avoid is the idea that we can kind of make everybody love us more by sort of being more – just not being different.

**DAVID HAIGH:** I mean, one of the things I would like to get your view on is that now that we are not in the EU and we can do what we like, there are certain countries or blocks that we might get more friendly with. I mean, is, for example, the Commonwealth the answer? We’re having a session this afternoon. And how does the Queen’s death impact on the relationship with the Commonwealth?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** The Commonwealth is a brilliant institution, and 52 countries that have many of the young people of the world, the future markets of the world. We should be doing a lot more with it. And I don’t think as a country, the UK realizes what an incredible resource the Commonwealth is for us. And the French and the Germans used to say to me, this is fantastic. If we had something like this, we would make much, much more of it.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Thinking specifically about –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think we need to intensify our Commonwealth cooperation. I always felt Commonwealth summits were just to kind of diffuse. There were not enough clear objectives, whether on trade or whatever. It was too general. We need to find a way of making the conversation much, much more action.

**DAVID HAIGH:** At the moment, the debate about the Commonwealth is largely, now that it’s King Charles, not Charles, not Queen Elizabeth, is that going to result in the getting rid of the monarchy and it gradually diluting, or do you see it as something which we can inject more into? And if so, what?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think that the monarchy – I don’t know what anybody else thinks, but – I think one of the most stunning things about the sad death of Her Majesty, the Queen last year was how seamless, how natural the transition seemed. I don’t know whether it was just… I’ve got to say, as a politician, as somebody who cares passionately about it, I didn’t know. I didn’t know what would happen.

And I remember being in the House of Commons when the tributes were paid to Her Majesty, how absolutely uniform and how heartfelt were the tributes from all benches, not just to the late Queen, but also to the new King, and how emphatic people were in their support for the institution. I was really, really taken. Even really quite hardened left wingers on the other benches were very, very clear about what they thought, and said and meant. You could see that they meant it. And I think that the value of the institution was really proved.

**DAVID HAIGH:** One of the things we were talking about earlier is the outstanding performance of the UAE. They are the country that has done best, seem to be making the most investment in soft power.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** In your soft power rankings, yes.

**DAVID HAIGH:** What could we learn from them? Have we done things that we should be doing better as a result?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes. Well, the UAE, it’s an absolutely amazing country. And we, the UK, it’s like the Commonwealth. We have total amnesia; we forget our links. And the flag actually only went down in, I think, the (crucial?) states in 1971. And this is a part of the world where, like it or not, the UK is deeply familiar. We should be doing far, far more, and there is a massive opportunity.

And I had the good fortune to have a lot of time with His Royal Highness, Hamad bin Zayed. I’ve talked to him a lot about what the UK and the UAE could do. I think what we can learn from the UAE is they have fantastic PR. I mean, the thing with their space program is pretty good. I’m very keen on our space program, but it’s had a bit of a hiccup, and we need to keep going. So, I think much more trade. I mean, people don’t know about the extent of UAE investment in the UK. It’s massive, but we need to be (crosstalk/inaudible).

**DAVID HAIGH:** Well, I think a lot of people don’t know about the extent of investment by the UAE in lots of things, aid in Africa, space, all manner of different things.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yes, yes.

**DAVID HAIGH:** But just turning to the States for a moment, I mean, now that we are floating away from Europe –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, we’re not!

**DAVID HAIGH:** (Laughter.) Okay. Are we just –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** We’re not. I mean, just back on that sort of Ukraine point, I genuinely think it is true that we are now more influential in Europe about foreign policy, because we’re outside it or outside the EU structure, than we were when we were in it. I genuinely think it was the sight of Brexit Britain doing this thing that helped to galvanize the rest of the (crosstalk/inaudible) –

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, thinking about our relations –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** We’re not drifting away from Europe.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Thinking about our relationship with the U.S., then, are we just the 51st state? I mean, Putin says we’re a poodle to do whatever they say. What’s going to happen to the relationship with America?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, obviously, that’s not true because we don’t even yet have a free trade agreement with the United States, that I think it would be a good thing. I think the UK and the U.S. transatlantic relationship has been the great fact of the last 120 years in geopolitics. It’s worked; it’s helped avert disaster in two world wars. And I think you can see it working very well in the worst conflict now since the second world war, as Andrew Neil rightly said. And we are working hand in glove. I think it would be fair to say that there is strong support for the Ukrainians in both London and Washington.

And the result, one of the results of what has happened, geostrategically, is that NATO is very, very greatly strengthened. And that institution in which the U.S. has primacy, NATO is the incarnation of U.S. military power in Europe, and the UK is the number two. And that organization is now immensely strengthened by what has happened. And you can see that from what Finland and Sweden are doing. But also, I think the arguments are now about Ukraine.

**DAVID HAIGH:** We’ve got a couple of minutes left. I’ve just got one last question, which is really about ten years from now, what’s your future? I mean, are you going to be running for election in America?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think – no, no, no. Well, that’s an interesting idea. No, I had to give up my American citizenship because it was becoming very, very expensive, their ruthless internal tax department there. I was born in New York.

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, what’s the next big job? Is it head of NATO? What is it? Head of the Commonwealth?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I don’t know. I’ve got a big budget of words I have to write, and I’m churning it out. I’m scribble, scribble, scribble. I think that I’m going to –

**DAVID HAIGH:** You’re returning to the –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m going to get on – the things I’m going to say, I obviously need to do a bigger, a better job of explaining, and supporting and defending Brexit, and trying to get people to understand. It is clear from this wonderful meeting, which I thank you, that we need to do more on that, right?

I care deeply about the agenda that this government was elected to deliver, which was leveling up, and I do not want us to lose sight of that. The UK is hopelessly imbalanced as an economy. It is quite, quite wrong that so much wealth and productivity should be concentrated in London and the Southeast, and a huge waste of human and other capital. There is a massive opportunity for us to become the richest country in Europe by a long way, if we could level up properly. And I’m going to keep going on that.

And the last thing is Ukraine, and I kind of have a… I was able to build a good relationship with President Zelensky.

**DAVID HAIGH:** And you’re going to be doing more for them.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think it’s important to campaign for that, because the point you made, David, earlier was totally right. Too many people around the world don’t get it and they’re apathetic. And there’s also a risk in Washington that some elements of the Republican Party will start to go wobbly on it. And there’s some sort of crazy stuff. I don’t know whether you’re seeing this stuff. People start saying that Putin is a conservative. Give me a break. That’s a disaster.

**DAVID HAIGH:** So, we shouldn’t expect you to be returning to the plow in Oxfordshire any time soon. You’re going to be talking at large.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, no, no, no, I’m definitely – you mean The Plough, the pub? (Laughter.)

**DAVID HAIGH:** No, the Cincinnatus reference.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah. No, I’m going to be taking… I think it’s very, very unlikely that I’ll need to do anything big in politics again. I’ve done a lot. I think that I need to get on with trying to –

**DAVID HAIGH:** Making money.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, there’s that, but I’ve got big deadlines. I’ve got big deadlines, and pages and pages to write.

**DAVID HAIGH:** I think you should take notes from (Chris?) here. He’ll show you how to do the social media.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Is that right? Well, I know we all need to learn that.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Anyway, thank you for your time. We’ve slightly over.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much, David.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Thank you all for listening.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you all.

**DAVID HAIGH:** And lunch is now served upstairs.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you.

**DAVID HAIGH:** Thank you very much.

END