

Mar 31 2010

No Longer Special?

LSE Ideas

By **Professor Michael Cox**

A recently released report by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee has received more than its fair share of analysis by the *commentariat* who rarely, if ever, look at the committee's reports with much care. The reason for such attention is clear. The headline news coming out of the committee was that the 'special relationship' between the United States and the UK was either no more (if you read some newspapers) or (if you read others) was a term that should rapidly be expunged from public discourse. Nor was this all. The UK, it continued, should increasingly stand up for itself and not be as deferential to the United States as it had traditionally been in the past. It should even, sometimes, say no.

Of course, headlines are not designed to capture complexity or nuance; and so it would seem to be with this report. Indeed, its collective authors readily concede that the relationship still remained strong – stronger now than ever perhaps now that the popular Obama was in the White House. Moreover, they did not call for any new alignment with any other particularly special country, like say France or Germany. God forbid. Still, there was no doubting what the report was seeking to do: namely, set off a debate about why Britain's relationship with the United States might be in flux and should therefore be re-examined.

Such a rethink after Bush and now in the era of Obama – who has other, rather more important things on his mind than to worry about the sensibilities of the Brits – is to be welcomed. That said, the report suffers from one basic flaw: a disjuncture between the evidence presented and the conclusions apparently arrived at.

Thus while we are told that the relationship should not officially be referred to as being 'special', largely because the term is 'misleading' and might offend others if used too frequently, most of the evidence presented would appear to suggest that it is precisely that, most obviously in the area of intelligence (see p. 5). Nor does the special quality of the relationship end there. In the areas of trade, culture and finance for example, according to the report the two countries look like having an especially dense relationship – one of the 'densest' no less. Furthermore, on many big issues, the UK and the US look like they agree about most things. We even like to visit each other's countries in our millions. We also seem to like each other quite a lot. And we exchange our pop stars and movie actors and actresses with ease.

Finally, as Douglas Hurd pointed out in his written evidence, there is no chance at all of the UK waging a major war – and waging it successfully – without the complete backing of the United States. In short, it all sounds pretty "special" whether or not you like to use the term.

But this is not the main problem or the real issue. Basically, it is not so much what is in the report that is significant, as much as what remains unstated or understated. Put another way: what is really going on here?

Three things I would speculate. First, in spite of all the nice words about Obama in the report, there is an uneasy sense 'over here' that 'over there' they really don't give a damn any more. So, we had better get used to the fact; and what better way of getting ready for rejection at worst (indifference at best) than by acting a little bit coy?

Second, British power is on the wane – as Stryker McGuire of the LSE pointed out in a much quoted essay published in *Newsweek* last year (['Forget the Great in Britain'. 1 August 2009](#)). Decline does all sorts of strange things to people and states, but one thing more than anything else is for those so afflicted to speculate at length about who they are, what they are, who loves them and who doesn't. In this sense, I read this report as symptomatic of a crisis in the making about Britain's position in the world.

Finally, there is no doubt that whatever the UK might have gained from the relationship – and it has not been inconsiderable – it has fed British illusions about its role in the world. This was fine during the Cold War perhaps, and even during the 1990s before the rise of China, the uneasy emergence of the European Union, and 9/11. Now the relationship is proving more of a liability – however special it might remain. And this is what the report is really trying to say without, however, saying it too bluntly (that might after all damage the 'special relationship').

But where does this all leave the UK? In a most uncomfortable position I would suggest. Uneasy and uncertain about a relationship from which it cannot escape in a world that is now more dangerous than ever – and dangerous in large part because of the way Blair joined forces with Bush – the UK is caught between a very hard rock and equally hard place: between an affair she cannot abandon and a future she cannot contemplate without having her powerful, muscular lover by her side holding her hand and reassuring her that she still remains attractive.

[Professor Michael Cox](#) is co-Director of LSE IDEAS

This entry was posted in [Special Relationship](#), [Transatlantic Alliance](#), [United Kingdom](#), [United States](#), [United States](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).