

The Honourable Company of Air Pilots

Trophies & Awards Dinner 29th October 2015

Your Royal Highness, Master, visiting Masters, distinguished guests, my Lords, ladies and gentlemen

As a liveryman of this most august company I feel rather unique in being invited to respond, Master, to your toast to the award winners and your guests. However, I am deeply moved and honoured to have been asked to do so. As some of you know, I was for 12 years an international banker here in the City, but since 1983 I have been going straight as a politician.

My father was an RAF officer serving on Lord Mountbatten's staff in SE Asia Command and my mother a WAAF plotter at RAF Coltishall so aviation is in my blood. For me, the Trophies & Awards dinner is one of the highlights of my calendar, providing as it does a wonderful opportunity to mark extraordinary feats in the air and to honour those who have given remarkable service to aviation. I am particularly pleased that you have singled out the Military Search & Rescue Force for the Award of Honour which has contributed so much, not least in providing HRH Prince William with his military service. I very much regret the decision to hand over these responsibilities to a civilian contractor.

Master, you have rightly mentioned the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain which was a seminal moment in our nation's history. For me, its significance is encapsulated in that stunning stained glass window at the Rolls-Royce factory in Derby, depicting a Battle of Britain pilot, an eagle on his shoulder, standing on a propeller boss with the factory roof in the background, the inscription of which reads:

'Dedicated to the pilots of the Battle of Britain who turned the work of our hands into the salvation of our country.'

That message confirms yours, namely that the battle was won by the entire team, including those who built the equipment.

Today, air power continues to play a commanding role in military operations. As we tonight enjoy a wonderful dinner in this magnificent Guildhall, surrounded by our ladies in glamorous evening dress and dashing young airmen in the uniform of all three services, let us spare a thought for those Tornado crews now in the air and on the ground seeking to defend us from the evil of ISIL in Iraq, the intelligence

gathering Sentinel aircraft and the Voyager air-to-air refuellers, not forgetting the QRA Typhoon crews at Coningsby and Lossiemouth standing guard over the airspace of these islands or the distant shores of the Falkland Islands, whilst also reinforcing NATO's commitment to the Baltic States by conducting combat air patrols there. Anyone who has been to Afghanistan or Iraq will know of the extraordinary flying skills of our helicopter crews, not least the Chinook medevac teams whose heroic exploits saved countless lives.

All this reminds us of the dangerous nature of the world we now live in.

Since 2010 there has been a massive change in the international scene. The turmoil created by the Arab spring, the Syrian uprising, the Libyan campaign, Russia's illegal annexation of The Crimea, itself following the illegal annexation of a part of Georgia in 2008, its persistent probing of UK airspace, and the rise of ISIL have transformed the international landscape.

But that is not the end of it. The jury is out on Iran's intentions, North Korea remains an utterly irresponsible dictatorship determined to develop further weapons of mass destruction and the stand off between India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers, from time to time threatens to destabilise that important region. Most importantly, in this the week following the State Visit by the President of the People's Republic of China, that country is causing concern not just to the Japanese but more widely across the region. China has recently embarked on a relentless process of colonising uninhabited but disputed atolls in the South China Sea where they are building runways and port facilities, commendably prompting US Defense Secretary Ashe Carter to declare

'we will sail, fly and operate wherever international law permits . . . at times and places of our choosing.'

In fact, that is precisely what the US has done, provoking a backlash from China.

What concerns me is the extent to which our paralysis in the west is offering those flexing their muscles the opportunity to act with virtually complete impunity, posing the inevitable question where next? As Sir John Major reminded me last week, Britain continues to command respect throughout the world. We need to capitalise upon that position particularly at a time when the United States is consumed by internal politics.

Nothing leverages influence in the world more than defence. We have some formidable forces, including our nuclear deterrent, but we do need to bolster our defences. As I have repeatedly argued, it makes no sense to increase overseas aid by a staggering £5 billion a year whilst reducing the size of the Army, doing away with a maritime patrol capability and maintaining a fleet of destroyers and frigates numbering just 19.

The Queen's reign has seen a huge range of developments in aviation during which time the UK has continued to be a world leader. From the mighty Vulcan which first flew in 1952 and which only yesterday made its final ever flight, through the first turbo-prop airliner, the Viscount, the Comet, Concorde and the Airbus family, in the military field, the Lightning, Tornado, Harrier, Typhoon and now the UCAV Tyrannis, or Remotely – Piloted Air System as Sir Stephen Dalton would require me to describe it.

We need to continue to invest in maintaining Britain's leadership in aerospace and aviation. Airbus, all of whose wing technology resides in the UK, has delivered 9,331 aircraft and has a forward order book of 6,755 compared to Boeing's order book of around 6,000. With a 17% global market share, UK aerospace has a turnover of nearly £30 billion and exports of £26 billion.

But it is not just in the field of aircraft production that Britain is a world leader. London's Heathrow is the busiest airport in the world with over 73 million passengers last year, some 3.5 million more than Dubai but if you add in Gatwick, Stansted and Luton the figure comes to a staggering 142 million. All those flights managed by our superb National Air Traffic Services.

As an aviator I believe you can never have too many runways so I think additional runway capacity at both Heathrow and Gatwick has to be the answer. Speaking of runway capacity, I wonder how many of you recall the publication of Alan Clark's diaries in which he admitted philandering with a married lady and her daughters, then living in South Africa. On being told of the publication, the family announced they were travelling immediately to London to confront the cad prompting a Matt cartoon in The Daily Telegraph which depicted a newspaper vendor whose hoarding bore the headline:

'Alan Clark's mistresses fly into London; call for third runway at Heathrow'

Aviation must be safe but it should also be fun. Air displays are the second most popular outdoor spectator activity, offering both entertainment but also inspiration to young people. Whilst the Shoreham tragedy was just that it was the first airshow fatality involving a member of the public since John Derry crashed in Farnborough in 1952. Of course we need to learn lessons, but the magnificent Red Arrows, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and the myriad other display teams must continue.

As a Minister who had the opportunity to fly with the Royal Flight, I rather enjoyed the chance to offer the 125 crew a relief from the monotony of an A-B trip. Thus, the occasional tactical take off or a run in and break at Northolt involving a low pass at 250 kts seemed important.

This year has marked another milestone with Her Majesty the Queen becoming the longest-reigning sovereign in our nation's history. In my humble view, no sovereign has so lived up to her Coronation Oath to serve her people as she has done. Many tributes have been paid to Her Majesty but I hope I may be forgiven for paying a small tribute to our Patron. Those of us devoted to Margaret Thatcher, worried that civil servants might wear down her cast iron resolve, would nevertheless console ourselves that at the end of a long day the last word of advice would be proffered by her husband, Denis, the authentic voice of the saloon bar of the Dog and Badger.

The steadfast support which you, Sir, have given Her Majesty has been a key factor in the enormous public affection in which the British people and the wider Commonwealth of Nations hold the Royal family. Your no-nonsense plain speaking is itself legendary (and hugely popular) and politicians like me have not been spared. A pithy rebuke from you was every bit as instructive as a swing of Mrs T's handbag.

We are honoured and privileged to have you as our Patron and we look forward to many more years of your patronage.