

International Affairs Forum Interview

January 26, 2007

By Jason Miks



International Affairs Forum speaks with Dr. Robin Niblett is the Director of Chatham House. Prior to this he was Executive Vice President and Director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C.

International Affairs Forum: You have just taken up the post as the new director of Chatham House in London after spending a number of years at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. What do you think are the major differences between the think tank communities in Europe and the U.S.?

I think there's a big difference between the two environments, driven largely by the US think tanks' heavy focus on policy solutions and quite often less on the analytical side. The simple reason is that most of the big think tanks – at least those working on foreign policy – are populated by people who have been in government, or looking to go into government, and who therefore have as their audience people in the policy orbit. So the most noticeable fact is that there are many think tanks, because they reflect a whole plethora of views and interests. America has a much more divided system of government than is the case in most European capitals, so not only are they full of people who have the opportunity to go into government, which is rarely the case in Europe, but they are they are naturally more e focused on policy.

Think tanks in America also exist almost as the oil in the wheel between, in Washington's case, large departments that don't always have time to coordinate with each other, and they act as neutral forum between government agencies and the legislature, which obviously has separate responsibilities.

So what you notice in the United States, which is much less the case in London and other European capitals, is the very open, competitive nature of policy formation in Washington. This compares to a more controlled system of policy formation and debate in Europe where policy might be debated in the Houses of Parliament or another legislature, but where the civil services tend to be much more closed. In many cases the executive is part of the legislature, so you don't have those levels of checks and balances and

competition that provide very fertile ground on which think tanks can navigate.

IA-Forum: Have you noticed any changes from when you left the U.K.?

I think there is some change going on. Europe is developing aspects of a more vibrant, and I suppose more competitive, area for policy debate outside of government. This has been brought about partly simply because of globalization, where governments find it increasingly difficult to control this distinction between domestic and foreign aspects of policy. It's also driven by the difficulties that formerly self-contained departments had in dealing with problems but who now find themselves cutting across each other in a world that is less vertical and is much more horizontal.

In other words, in the U.K. for example, the Health Department needs to be as concerned about whether the Ebola virus is going to get out of Africa and travel to the U.K. The early warning mechanism might be the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office is responsible for controlling the border, and the Health Department is responsible for the response. The ability of the Health Department to coordinate across all of these is sometimes quite challenging for large bureaucracies, and again there is new space, even in Europe, for think tanks to act as inventors and clearing houses and proposers of ideas on how government might work differently.

I notice as well that legislatures are also trying to play a more active role in trying to apply a check to executives in foreign policy, which was often seen as a purview of pretty great independence for prime ministers and presidents. I look at the UK in particular, where the parliamentary groups are much more active now than they were when I left London. Where do they get their information from? The government isn't necessarily going to supply them with a position. So they will work much more with think tanks and institutes to develop their thinking and ideas and see what there is to probe and investigate.

I think London is an interesting city from which to play the think tank space. People find themselves here in the thoroughfare of international affairs. We are well located globally, between time zones, and we have a very international, cosmopolitan population, very integrated globally – probably the most global of all capitals. And therefore I think there is some room for institutes and think tanks in the U.K., in London in particular, to be able to talk to a global agenda from a capital that is quite global, and from governments who seem to be redefining British foreign policy in a more open way. Probably a less transatlantic way and in direction that goes beyond traditional questions of U.K. foreign policy that was more heavily transatlantic focussed.

IA-Forum: Relations between Europe and the United States have been strained in recent years. Do you think these strains have resulted from a specific U.S. administration or are there just more fundamental differences between the two?

A bit of both. My view is that there are some structural elements that are making it harder for the United States and Europe to be able to develop joint responses to the common problems we face. But there is no doubt that there's almost no danger that they do not face in common, to be frank. Whether it is proliferation, threats posed by new economic actors, terrorism - across the board.

But my concern is that Europe is just less interesting to Americans now, and I think this would be the case if it was Democrats, Republicans or any other kind of administration. Europe is resolved for most Americans and while there are still some odds and ends - a little bit of enlargement to go on into the Balkans maybe - clearly Europe will continue to be preoccupied internally. I think especially with the failure to ratify the constitutional treaty a couple of years ago it reminded Americans that maybe they needn't have been so worried about where Europe was or wasn't going at that time.

And you add to this the fact of very different approaches to government. The European Union was built around compromise, the dilution of sovereignty, compared to America which has grown more and more powerful and is as attached as ever to its sovereignty. If you draw in the reactions to 9/11, I think America has this sense of being besieged by threats from outside America. It's therefore quite focused, as I think any administration would be, on how you keep those threats as far from your shores as possible, even if it means fighting them in Afghanistan or Iraq or Somalia. Whereas I think for most European governments, the UK included, threats are from within, and that leads to a very different view about the types of responses you want to apply.

So I think there are some very fundamental structural things. There's no doubt that this Bush administration, certainly in its first guise from 2000-04, pointed to the extreme differences between these two approaches and I think the U.S. was very much driven in the beginning by a belief that if it pursued its national interests it would be in the world's interests, including Europe's.

And even though it has become much more moderate in its relationships with Europe, in particular since 2004-5, and has sought to consult much more effectively - and has consulted much more effectively - we really seem to have hit the limits of collective U.S.-European power to make a difference and to affect things. If you look at the Arab-Israeli conflict, the situation in Iraq, and the Doha trade round - you take your pick - U.S.-European cooperation is

proving difficult on the kind of global agenda that people are suggesting will be its meat and potatoes in the future.

So I'm not saying this is a forlorn hope. We have no choice - European and current and future U.S. administrations have no choice but to work with each other to try and face these common challenges. But the mechanisms for doing so are not well developed. NATO is not the right forum for this. The U.S.-E.U. summits have evolved into ineffective ways of trying to coordinate these big agenda items and we really need to think as much as anything about how we think about them, and how we prepare instruments for action, as well as we do thinking about the solutions.

IA-Forum: Despite the strains in the U.S.-European relationship, the Bush-Blair relationship has generally been viewed as strong. Do you see this changing with changes in leadership?

There will definitely be a difference in tone and difference in outlook on the U.K. side. On the other hand, if Gordon Brown becomes prime minister or later if there is another Labour prime minister or Conservative Prime Minister, there are certain structural things that tie the U.S. and U.K. together beyond whether we think Iraq has been good or bad. The cooperation over intelligence is vital - the U.K. needs access to U.S. information and the U.S. needs access to U.K. information. The nuclear relationship remains a lynchpin. Both those aspects are really quite unique, as are some of the relationships between defence companies and defence technologies. So with these areas that receive less attention, future prime ministers are going to be aware of the value of that relationship.

I think what is going to change is that it will be difficult for any future prime minister to play the role of being a bridge between the United States and Europe - I think the days of that kind of terminology are done with. Not necessarily because they cannot work together, but because the United States and Europe are just very different even from what they were like five years ago.

IA-Forum: You delivered a statement last year to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on 'Islamic Extremism in Europe.' Do you think there is anything that Europe can learn from the U.S. on how to tackle extremism within its borders?

I'm not sure that this is something that the United and Europe can learn from each other on. I think that ultimately individual European governments need to look inside themselves - into the systems of incentives and disincentives they have established.

I think it will be possible for European countries to learn from other European countries, but even there you have to take into account the big differences. For example the British have a heavily Pakistani Muslim population while the Spanish have a Moroccan Islamic population. These populations have different roots, different forms of extremism, and different forms of forward looking Islamic capacity.

As you know, every one has tried something different. Britain has tried multiculturalism, the Dutch have tried tolerance, the French have tried integration - and none of them seem to have worked very effectively. So I think this is way too atomized to be learning lessons across the Atlantic. America is by nature a melting pot and Europe is by nature not. So I think European countries are going to have to work this out for themselves.

IA-Forum: Thank you.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org

