"In the End, We Could Be a Country Like Canada"

What will become of the Britain after Brexit? Lord Waldegrave says there is a risk that the UK will break up. But it could find a future as a successful middleweight.

Interview: Bettina Schulz, London

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Lord William Arthur Waldegrave is a member of the Conservative Party in Britain and served in the cabinet from 1990 until 1997. He is now a life peer in the House of Lords. His latest book is titled "Three Circles into One: Brexit Britain: How Did We Get Here and What Happens Next?"

ZEIT ONLINE: In 2016, you voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union. Why?

Waldegrave: I had abstained from the membership referendum in 1975 because I did not think that the campaign at that time was honest. I thought we were telling the people that it was merely about joining an economic community and that we severely underplayed the political underpinnings. But in 2016, there were two reasons for my vote. One had to do with my children: They were clearly Remainers and their consciousness of being both British and European had grown in the way that people had hoped it would. So, I voted to remain. I also had a tactical reason: Britain had negotiated an extremely privileged position for itself in the EU with the exemptions from the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty and from Schengen. David Cameron also got the exemption from the EU's stated mission of an "ever closer union." It was a formal acknowledgment that we did not really share the building of a political entity. We got what we wanted. So, for me, it seemed to be a very bad time to leave.

ZEIT ONLINE: Was there anything Europe could have done to convince British voters to stay?

Waldegrave: I cannot see what Europe could have done. The most serious disaster was not Europe's fault, it was Tony Blair's fault: He did not use the exemption to delay uncontrolled immigration in 2004. That was a bad mistake. He thought these people would later vote Labour. Another thing, of course, was that the economic boom preceding the financial crisis was primarily felt in the south and in London. Its benefits were not shared equally around the country.

ZEIT ONLINE: Why is it so difficult for the UK to develop a kind of European consciousness?

Waldegrave: We pro-Europeans in the Conservative Party and in the social-democratic wing of the Labour Party were too feeble when it came to arguing in favour of the European ideal – of producing a new kind of political entity where loyalty would ultimately be to European institutions first and to national institutions second. That is not a dishonourable idea, but the British never acknowledged the political dimension of the EU. If we had been saying – as Helmut Kohl did – that we want to anchor the UK in a broader European entity, then we would have had ground to stand on. But we never even tried.

ZEIT ONLINE: Why not?

Waldegrave: Britain's fundamental difference was that in the 20th century, our institutions didn't fail. And because we never fully committed ourselves to the EU – as most of the other countries in Europe did – we were on extremely weak ground when it came to countering the nationalist story with a different narrative.

ZEIT ONLINE: Did winning the war make such a difference for the UK?

Waldegrave: The French diplomat Jean Monnet allegedly once said: "Britain's misfortune is having won the war." He meant that we were unable to put our past behind us. France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy: They have all been brave enough to put their defeats behind them, in a sense. But perhaps it is more difficult to escape from an honourable past than from a dishonourable past.

"We have damaged parliament. Even the monarchy. "

ZEIT ONLINE: What will be left once the United Kingdom finally leaves the EU? The Commonwealth? The special relationship with America?

Waldegrave: The Commonwealth is a lovely association, but it is not a centre of geopolitical power. The special relationship is a myth. And now we have ruined the relationship with Europe. We'll have to think of a new narrative.

ZEIT ONLINE: Prime Minister Boris Johnson doesn't seem too interested in looking for a new narrative. Indeed, it even looks as though he is destroying Britain's reputation as a country of stability.

Waldegrave: My concern is that in our long debate about Brexit, we have damaged – I hope not irreparably, of course – a number of key institutions. I never expected Conservative politicians to attack the Bank of England. We have damaged parliament. Even the monarchy. We are rather lucky in this situation to have a non-political head of state: the queen. If our head of state was a former politician, they would certainly have been involved in all this.

ZEIT ONLINE: What would you say to a politician like Boris Johnson, who seems more than willing to cause damage in his effort to win the Brexit battle?

Waldegrave: I am a Conservative, not an anarchist. I am not in favour of people who say: Let's throw all the institutions up in the air and see what happens. It takes many years to build up these institutions and you must be very careful about destroying them. I am not in favour of the current fashion of saying disruption is a good thing.

ZEIT ONLINE: Boris Johnson would, of course, argue that three years is too long and that institutions like parliament are obstructing the democratic will of the people.

Waldegrave: I don’t think it's a bad thing that parliament is being difficult. It's doing its job in trying to mediate a situation where 52 percent of the people wanted one thing and 48 percent wanted another. If 600,000 people had voted another way, it would have been different. It is very difficult to mix parliamentary democracy with direct democracy. I am convinced parliamentary democracy is the better system, because we know from all sorts of countries that plebiscites can be misused.

ZEIT ONLINE: Like in this case?

Waldegrave: I think leaving the European Union is a constitutional decision and any sensible country would have had a higher threshold than a referendum.

ZEIT ONLINE: Are Boris Johnson's politics irresponsible?

Waldegrave: I think his language was often irresponsible in the past, but I don't think he has done badly in office. Some of that past irresponsible language continues to stick to him, but he is one of those people who will perhaps turn out to be better with real work to do.

ZEIT ONLINE: Will there be civil unrest if Britain does not "get Brexit done"?

Waldegrave: Ultimately, I think we have to leave, because I would be very alarmed by the growth of a betrayal myth in Britain. I believe that Britain can live outside or inside the European Union, if we decide what we want to do. I would be very frightened of reversing that first referendum. Doing so could poison our politics for a long time to come.

"I would rather have remained"

ZEIT ONLINE: Still, living outside the EU has become a bit more difficult with Boris Johnson's hard Brexit, hasn't it?

Waldegrave: It all depends on what happens next. If a sensible, reasonably free-trade arrangement is achieved over the next two or three years, our economy will slowly recover, and we will adapt. It will not be the end of the world. It is very easy to criticise the deal, but I think it is more satisfactory than the May deal. That deal was vulnerable to arguments that we had merely surrendered our votes in the European institutions while effectively remaining, which would be the worst of all possible outcomes. Now, the deal at least has a clear leaving element to it.

ZEIT ONLINE: But does that "clear leaving element" justify the costs?

Waldegrave: I would rather have remained. But I think it is more dangerous now to try to reverse it than it is to accept the economic costs because of the political damage. Having been a treasury secretary, I am always a little sceptical of economic forecasts because they are always based on the assumption of business as usual. We Remainers should remember that talking only about economics to people who are focused on self-determination is foolish.

ZEIT ONLINE: In your book, you write that Britain cannot leave without losing Northern Ireland and Scotland. Is Brexit the first step in the break-up of the United Kingdom?

Waldegrave: Possibly yes. It is possible that we lose both.

ZEIT ONLINE: Where do you see the greater risk in Northern Ireland or Scotland?

Waldegrave: There are people in Northern Ireland who are now willing to leave because of the changes in the south. The Republic of Ireland is now by and large a modern country. In the 1950s and 60s, it was not. In the days of Eamon de Valera (Eds: Valera dominated the Irish political landscape for several decades until the 1970s), Ireland was run as a kind of theocracy. The church ran the country and it was corrupt. You could be a moderate nationalist in Northern Ireland and still not want to reunify. But I think there are plenty of people in the North who now think the Republic of Ireland has completely reformed and changed. It is a modern country. As such, I think there is a real danger of losing Northern Ireland.

ZEIT ONLINE: What do you think Britain will look like in a few years?

Waldegrave: I cannot see the future, of course. But if we were ultimately to remain, surely we couldn't remain in the EU in the same half-hearted way as we did before. We would have to say: We have been through this terrible time and now we are committed to making this thing work. We are real partners in it.

And if we leave, which I think is more likely, we must understand that we are not sailing back into some imperial time in the past. We should consider not punching above our weight but punching at our weight. Why do we have a seat on the Security Council? Why do we have nuclear weapons? Why are we trying to maintain two groups of aircraft carriers when America only has a total of eight? It's because we still feel ourselves to be part of the ruling group of the world, which we were back in 1945 and for a few years after that. But we aren't anymore.

ZEIT ONLINE: What's the option?

Waldegrave: There is a jolly good option: a middle-ranked country and a middle-ranked economy with great scientific and cultural skills. A country with lots of tasks at home that we have not yet dealt with, like the neglected former industrial areas in the North of England that we really need to work on. There are a lot of problems at home that we have to solve. In the end, we could be a country like Canada.

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