

Old friends; new partners

INTERVIEW WITH HE KAREL SCHWARZENBERG

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, THE CZECH REPUBLIC



KAREL SCHWARZENBERG was born in 1937 and as a young boy was forced to flee to Austria in 1948. He studied law and silviculture in Vienna, Munich and Graz. From 1965 he ran the family estates, returning to Czechoslovakia in 1989. From 1990-92 he was Chancellor to President Vaclav Havel. In 2004 he became a Senator of the Czech Parliament and served as a member of the Permanent Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. From 2006-07 he was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Committee, and was appointed to his present position in January 2007.

The Czech Republic has been an EU member since 2004 – what changes has its entry into the European Union brought to Czech foreign policy and what, in your opinion, has the Czech Republic brought to the EU?

Naturally, after the entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union, relations with the other European states became more intensive. We regularly meet and discuss once or twice a month, in particular within the Council of Foreign Ministers, and thus we also have an influence on one another's foreign policy. This is productive. We hear different points of view and this is most beneficial. Besides, as a member of the European Union we are much more interesting than before to many partners outside Europe. I have seen this for example during my recent trip to Asia.

What principles and priorities has the Czech Republic been promoting in the EU and what are the major topics it has been known to advocate?

I think that what the Czech Republic is known to advocate in Europe is above all the struggle for human rights. Naturally we are also working in the EU for our own interests and the interests of our region. To this end we have even established the Visegrad Four where we have been consulting on certain matters relating to our region. However in general – our role and our conduct in the EU are quite normal, perhaps with the exception in the above mentioned field of human rights where we are in a way out of the mainstream.

How do you see the current state of relations between the Czech Republic and Great Britain, perhaps also in an historical context?

In the past, Great Britain was in a way an example for us. And over the past fifteen years, after the Velvet Revolution and the establishment of the independent Czech Republic it has above all been a partner. We have similar views with Great Britain on how the European Union could work. In this our views are in fact quite close. We are both advocates of strengthening trans-Atlantic links between the United States and the European Union as a whole, considering it of primary importance. Naturally, both our countries also have their own interests, and additionally their specific political traditions, these are different in Great Britain when compared with the Czech Republic. But it is

also interesting for us and in a way also instructive to understand political life in Great Britain.

Beside the trans-Atlantic relations you have mentioned, what actually are the common topics on which you tend to agree with Great Britain?

Of course we are allies also in many other areas, one good example I have already mentioned is human rights. In particular, we both tend to take a hard stance towards dictatorships. There is likewise a common purpose between the Czech Republic and the UK in defence of freedom.

On the other hand, Great Britain and the Czech Republic are so very different – whether in terms of history or size; so how, in your opinion, have we come to share common views on some issues?

We have a similar way of thinking. This is of course the result of an alliance that has lasted, on and off, throughout the twentieth century, though not always entirely without problems.

You are known to visit Great Britain often. Why?

There are many reasons why I often visit your country, but mainly it is because I do love Britain. I was there for the first time fifty-one years ago, and have some distant relatives and many friends there. I love the countryside, both the English landscape and the wild Scottish Highlands. And I am fond of the dry English humour and what I enjoy immensely is the special character of the way of life.

What in particular do you enjoy about the British way of life?

Courtesy combined with a relaxed attitude. The fact that Britons never show too much ambition, never boast about success. I like all this. I have liked Britain since the time when I, as a young boy in Bohemia, after the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945, heard the beautiful Scottish tunes played by pipers. This made a deep impression on me and since that time my fondness for Britain has been a fact. Today I am pleased to see so many young Britons coming here, and so many young Czechs visiting Britain. And so I believe that what I unfortunately heard a long time ago, we will never again hear a British politician say in regard to the Czech Republic, that it is a 'far-away' country. **F**