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Theresa May's Donald problem



British Prime Minister Theresa May delivers her speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet at Guildhall, London | Carl Court/Getty Images

by [Charlie Cooper](#)

LONDON — U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May had a simple message during her first foreign policy speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet in London Monday: Free trade can save the world, and Britain will be its champion.

“Our departure from the European Union is not — as some people have wrongly argued — Britain stepping back from the world,” May told an audience of business leaders. “But an example of how a free, flexible, ambitious country can step up to a new global role.”

Her only problem: U.S. President-elect Donald Trump.

As she steers a course for her country after Brexit, May has cast herself on the international stage as a global advocate of responsible free markets. But the success of that agenda, and Britain's foreign policy, now hang on her ability to influence the new man in the White House.

"There is one particular problem for Theresa May," said former foreign secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind. "On the free trade issue, she's going to run right up against Trump's protectionism — but this is an area, along with NATO and various other things, where she might be able to influence him."

Trump teacher

In Monday's speech, the prime minister presented a vision of Britain that was both "profoundly pro-business," striking free-trade deals across the world, and also an advocate for the "overlooked," a nation that made sure that "prosperity delivered by free trade and free markets is shared by all."

It is a blueprint she thinks other countries can emulate to hold back the populist tide.

"Liberalism and globalization have delivered unprecedented levels of wealth and opportunity," she said. "If we believe, as I do, that liberalism and globalization continue to offer the best future for our world, we must deal with the downsides and show that we can make these twin forces work for everyone."

As world leaders come to terms with last week's U.S. election result, British diplomats have scrambled to try to establish the president-elect's priorities and likely policy direction.

Over the weekend, a memo from Britain's U.S. ambassador, [leaked to the Sunday Times](#) newspaper, assessed Trump as "open to outside influence." The British team in Washington believe they have better ties with Trump's team than any other country — with or without UKIP leader Nigel Farage, whose bid to become an unofficial envoy to Trump's team is [viewed extremely dimly](#) by Downing Street insiders.

"Trump has already made it clear in specific deeds and words that the U.K. is the country he is most comfortable with, partly because of Brexit," said Rifkind, a veteran of both Margaret Thatcher and John Major's cabinets and now a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute think tank.

"Theresa May is in an exceptionally fortunate position in trying to do with Trump what Thatcher was able to do with Reagan ... Britain can always over-estimate its influence. But it's a unique moment when you have a president who obviously has not thought through many of these political issues up until now."

Bigger NATO test

If May's foreign policy doctrine has been characterized by anything in her first four months, besides advocacy of free trade, it has been "ultra-pragmatism," said Professor Richard G. Whitman, visiting senior fellow at the Chatham House think tank. Her stance, clearly illustrated by her business-like reaction to Trump's victory, has been in contrast to predecessors Tony Blair and David Cameron, both of whom took a more moralistic approach to foreign policy, Whitman said.

While European leaders wrung their hands, May got on with the job and had what government spokespeople describe as a "warm" discussion with the president-elect. "There are values to her foreign policy, but the values are mercantile ones rather than what we were used to in the past under Blair," Whitman said, also citing last week's [trade visit to India](#) and talks with the Chinese vice premier in London.

"Neither was presented in grand rhetorical terms — it was about doing the deal," he said.

Downing Street has sought to play up the Thatcher-Reagan comparison, and May's pragmatic approach to Trump has gone down well with Conservative backbenchers.

Crispin Blunt, chair of the House of Commons foreign affairs committee, said that the U.K. was now in a stronger position to bring Trump around on issues such as free trade and NATO.

"On trade, he has already made clear we will be at the front of the queue," Blunt told POLITICO.

However, the bigger test of May's foreign policy will be whether she can persuade a president-elect, who has criticized NATO, to stand by the alliance in the face of Russian aggression in eastern Europe, Blunt said.

"It's very important that our diplomats, the foreign secretary and the prime minister get to work in trying to secure America in the defense of the liberal democracies and the global liberal international order so that we don't have miscalculations by actors like Vladimir Putin," he said.

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