



Future of the **EU27**



CHARLES POWELL

Interview conducted on 15 November 2019

Clare Gray: Hi everyone. We are honoured and delighted today to be joined by Dr Charles Powell, Director at the leading Spanish think-tank, the Elcano Royal Institute. Dr Powell, you are very welcome to Dublin today.

Charles Powell: Thank you so much, it's a great pleasure and an honour to be here.

Clare Gray: Fantastic, well we look forward to hearing your views on the future of Europe. I might start by looking at the **global role of Europe**. You're coming today to talk about the opportunities and challenges that Europe faces as a global actor. What steps do you think the Union needs to take to be a more effective player on a global scale?

Charles Powell: Well, as you may recall, the future High Representative and Vice-President Josep Borrell, in his hearings, made, I think, an interesting point when he said that, we have to think more strategically. We've all heard that this is going to **be a geopolitical Commission**, but I think his main point, which is interesting, is that we have to sort of join the dots. In other words, we have to take fuller advantage of the things that the EU does best, for example, **commercial policy and trade policy**, and link that to other strategic goals. I think this is something that hasn't been fully achieved. We often forget what an enormous normative power the EU still has, because of its 500 million inhabitants who make up the largest trading bloc in the world. And so, in this current crisis in which the liberal international order is obviously under a lot of stress, basically, I think **working with like-minded democracies** all over the world should be our top priority.

Clare Gray: And you mentioned there **policy linkage**, how much will this ability to project influence globally depend on the EU's ability to solve crises at home? I might mention **inequality, migration** and so on?

Charles Powell: It's not very original, but I think it's true when people say that globalisation begins at home. In other words, unless we make our societies function better, **unless we convince our own citizens that the EU is a worthwhile project at home, we will never be a credible global actor**. I like quoting Dani Rodrik, the famous Harvard professor, and economist who argues that, basically, we have to make three things compatible – economic globalisation, political democracy and national sovereignty – it is the inescapable

trilemma. Probably only the EU can help us do that, and if we manage to do that within our individual Member States, then perhaps we will be able to make the EU a more serious and credible global actor.

Clare Gray: And looking then specifically at **Josep Borrell** who you mentioned, obviously he is the Spanish Foreign Minister, what particular skillset do you think he will bring to the role of High Representative?

Charles Powell: Well, I'm probably a bit biased because I've known him for 25 years and I've worked with him quite closely. But I think two things, first of all, **he knows the European Parliament extremely well.** Of course, he was President of the European Parliament, but also he has a strong national background, not only now as Spanish Foreign Minister, but previously in earlier governments in the 1990's. So, I think he will work well with Member States, but also understand the growing importance of the European Parliament and the legitimacy that comes with that. He doesn't suffer fools gladly and he has a tendency to speak his mind, but I think that is also a positive aspect of his personality. So, I'm pretty confident that he's going to be a very strong HR/VP.

Clare Gray: A core part of his role will be **building consensus on foreign policy issues.** You recently mentioned that Brexit has brought the EU closer together, made it easier to build consensus on these key issues. Can you envisage any situation where it will become easier to forge agreements on foreign policy issues?

Charles Powell: Well, I strongly believe that both **Trump and Brexit have been external federators,** as we sometimes describe them. In other words, we have all realised how much is at stake, and how much we actually have in common. Although there are tensions within the EU, it is a very heterogeneous organisation now, but in spite of that I think we will be able to forge these agreements, essentially because of the external environment. I'm thinking mainly of the US-China trade and commercial rivalry, which is affecting all of us, and also the technological challenges that go with that. I'm not saying that without external threats and challenges we wouldn't be able to forge any kind of consensus but obviously, it is going to help. Perhaps Russia's revisionism is also another factor, although threat perceptions vary very considerably. I think, basically, that **the China-US rivalry will be the 21st Century issue** that is going to bring us closest together.

Clare Gray: And finally, then, just on Spain's role in this debate, traditionally, where does Spain position itself within the European Union? Which countries does it tend to ally with and on which issues?

Charles Powell: Well, I like silly jokes and my silly joke about that is that if I have to define Spanish European policy in one sentence, I always say **'everything with Germany, nothing against France.'** So, we have a very close relationship with both of those Member States. Spain has a problem, I think, which is that it has traditionally only really thought of alliances in terms of Western Europe and its needs, especially in a post-Brexit Europe, it needs to think about new partnerships and new leadership. For example, The Netherlands, which is a country that Spain doesn't have much in common with, for example, on its attitudes to the Eurozone, is now turning to Spain as a possible ally because of its strong position in the Single Market and so on. So, I think Spain is beginning to move out of its traditional comfort zone and think of, for example, countries in **Central and Eastern Europe, and the Baltics** as potential allies and partners and not just relying on the traditional Franco-German tandem.

Clare Gray: Dr Powell, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure.

Charles Powell: Thank you very much.