

ENGLISH EURO-SEPTICAEMIA: AN ACADEMIC AUTOPSY

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“A wave of wishful thinking, selective reporting and premature gloating is distorting Britain’s perception of the European Monetary Union project just when we most need to keep our wits about us”. Not my words, but those of Sir Leon Brittan, our Senior Commissioner in Brussels, writing earlier this year in one of our daily newspapers.

The Amsterdam Euro-Summit of Heads of State and Government in June 1997 was modest and workmanlike and certainly not the damp squib which the Euro-sceptics were predicting. The Single Currency may still be launched more or less on time, between a smallish group of qualified countries. But, in this country at least, almost any discussion of anything about Europe, these days, still generates more heat than lights. To be sure, there is a sizeable majority, both in the House of Commons and among businessmen, in favour of a positive British role in the EU. This pro-European majority is now reasserting itself; and a new Government in Westminster is promising new initiatives and ideas, to the relief of most Europhiles. But the Conservative Party is still at war with itself on Europe, to the point that the youthful (and not very frightening) William Hague will have his work cut out as the new Tory Leader. The professional economists differ considerably among themselves (as usual, let it be said). The City and Industry, increasingly speaking up in defence of the EU, are nevertheless far from monolithic and harbour a range of opinions. The News Media, paradoxically, manage to be mostly both foreign-owned and anti-foreigner. Thus the Independent complains that we have five national daily newspapers – including all the mass circulation papers except the Mirror – committed to what it calls a “common Euro-phobic ideology”. As for the General Public – while better disposed to Europe than most press barons allow us to believe, and anyway nobody’s fools – they constantly claim that they are kept in the dark about what is really going on.

I think that this is a pity. *Ich frage mich, warum?*

Having spent fifteen years in the Brussels Commission and over thirty years involved one way or another with European questions (if I include the Paris Embassy, the FCO Planning Staff, the Vice-Chancellorship of the UK’s most Europe-orientated University and my current Honorary Presidency of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies), I am too close to these matters to attempt a detached judgement. I am also conscious of a tension between the pieties and statements-of-the-obvious which arise from my experience at the foal-face, and my conflicting sense that the conventional analysis now needs to be adjusted in the light of certain apparent shifts beneath the surface of things (principally, changes in the EU as we have known it; but also a malaise in British politics and public opinion – the former more important than the latter, but the two of them symbiotically linked).

As to the pieties, I have always considered, and still believe, that there is and can be no viable alternative to full UK Membership of the EU, in which the best position, in our national interest, is “at the heart” (to quote John Major’s ill-fated speech, from which he was obliged to retreat by changes to the balance within the parliamentary Conservative Party which eventually drew him and them to catastrophic electoral defeat).

It may well be true that British public opinion has never been encouraged by successive political leaders to accept the full implications of our signature of a Treaty of Rome, the preamble of which speaks of laying the foundations of “an ever closer Union among the peoples

of Europe”; nor to reflect, similarly, on the Single European Act of 1986/87, with its pledge to “transform relations as a whole among their States into a European Union ...” with the aim of “speaking ever increasingly with one voice” and of “extending Common Policies and pursuing new objectives”; nor to take seriously to heart the precise aims of the Maastricht Treaty which Mr. Major thought acceptable at the time and which he carried back to a triumphal reception in the House of Commons in 1991. It may also be true that European affairs have for too long lacked transparency and been handled within a narrow circle of European policy makers moved by special interests, and with strong assumptions of their own, which have not played well – or indeed, played at all; – to European public opinion as a whole. I shall return to this later. It is also certainly true that British political leaders have rarely shown themselves at ease in the European Community/Union and have missed a series of golden opportunities, from the Messina Conference in 1955, which dictated the original shape of the EEC, to the EMU exercise of more recent years, in which the centre of gravity has been established in Frankfurt rather than in London. In the beginning, at Messina time, we were obsessed by our burdensome and time-expired extra-European commitments, whether “East of Suez”, or to the “Special Relationship” (of near-equal to more-than-equal) with the United States. A certain distrust, even disdain, also informed our attitude towards the continental countries which had not shared our own war record. We were condescending and incredulous towards the pretensions of the Founding Six of the original Common Market in 1957 (recalling the caption to the famous Thurber cartoon of a wine-tasting: “Merely a provincial little Burgundy, but you may be amused by its presumption”). Despite the fact that times have changed, and that we as a country must be ready to change, the British public have for many years been invited by their elected leaders to subscribe to models of the so-called Independent Nation State that belong to the last century not the next; and to share illusory pretensions of immunity, sovereignty and power, proper only to an Empire that has gone. The pound sterling continues to be invested with tōtemic status, as something which is not to be “dumped”, despite the clear lesson on Black Wednesday in September 1992 that, in global financial markets and currency speculation, a country like Britain, with limited reserves and a puny GNP, is incapable of exercising much, if any, real influence over the exchange rate.

Much more recently, the Euro-sceptic theme has been that “Europe” is not the best commercial bet: Asia is the place. Additionally, the earlier notion that we needed to be at the heart of Europe, fighting our corner while punching above our weight, has given place to the Euro-sceptic view that some of our special national interests need to be safeguarded to the point that we will actually need to disengage from European cooperation, even accepting that correspondingly we will lose influence. Such considerations came together in the Thatcher/Major prescription (spectacularly un-communautaire) for the Community: “the willing co-operation of independent sovereign states”.

But this does not change my perception that, deficient as our European diplomacy has been, it has been better than the pursuit of any “detached” or “semi-detached” policy towards Europe.

Still in the “orthodoxies” therefore, total withdrawal from the EU to a fully autonomous national base as the “Singapore of the North Sea” is self evidently impossible, and scarcely worth discussing.

The less drastic alternative advocated by the Euro-sceptics (there are minor variants, from a recommended EFTA-style free trade area with the EU from a position *outside*, to a “Pick-and-Choose” position *within* the EU, in which we would somehow remain in the Customs Union and the Single Market, but withdraw from Common Policies we disliked, such as Fisheries,

Agriculture, freedom of personal movement, regional and industrial programmes, etc.) is in my opinion simply not negotiable (because our partners would see no reason to continue to give us the benefits which suited us if we did not share in what was important to them), even if we were foolish enough to propose it (because we would in effect be foregoing effective means of influencing decisions in Brussels which would bear directly upon us, and of guiding future developments in vital areas where pooled sovereignty would give us more than we would enjoy if isolated and alone). At a more technical level, there would be huge legal problems with what the Euro-sceptics want. The Maastricht “opt-outs” set to one side, there is no Treaty provision for the unilateral abnegation of a solemnly accepted Common Policy. To take one example, the reaffirmation of national fishing rights would expose us to massive claims for compensation. I say nothing of the suicidal political consequences for a country like the UK of tearing up signed and duly ratified international Treaties (“repatriating sovereignty”, as the current euphemism has it).

The only realistic choice open to the UK therefore lies within the ambit of the agreed “opt-outs” on a Single Currency, social policy, etc.; and in choosing between any future “outer circle” and “inner circle” within the EU which may arise if a “variable geometry” Union does emerge one day, in which the additionality of adventurous new initiatives was confined to a smaller group or groups of EU Member States.

I mentioned earlier my sense of the general failure of post-war British policy. This is by no means absolute. There have been successes. Mrs. Thatcher was successful in securing, until 1999, better budgetary treatment. “Federalism” (not a very meaningful word, but one which has been used carelessly by continental partners, and perhaps also as a substitute for hard political decisions) was kept out of the SEA and Maastricht. We succeeded with our arguments, and our tactical alliances with other partners, in favour of the creation of a Single Market; of enlargement towards EFTA; of the drive against fraud, of the “ouverture” towards Central and Eastern Europe; of the liberalising of external trade; of the recognition of the implications for European competitiveness of the economic challenge posed by the newly industrialising nations; of the need for close economic relations – and perhaps some form of free trade area – with North America, etc., etc. We have also headed off – most recently, through Mr. Blair at Amsterdam – any move on Common Defence which could weaken NATO. In the absence of a general political will within the Union to conduct a sensible CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) going beyond the already established “political co-operation” procedures, we have developed pragmatic and workman-like links with individual partners such as the French, and to a lesser degree the Germans or Italians. Tony Blair will be able to build on all this over the next five crucial years, and do so with an elan which was lacking in all previous Conservative administrations since the Prime Ministership of Edward Heath.

But the fact remains that we British are not in control of the Union, or even central to it, in the way in which (ever so discreetly) we had hoped to be before we joined, and at various points since. Underlying British motives, being now well understood, are distrusted and discounted. Leadership in Europe continues to be exercised by the Franco-German axis, weakened and unbalanced though it has now become. We have neither converted that axis into a troika, nor broken it, nor established other axes of our own (mainly because no one else wants to be in an axis with us – least of all the Italians or Spanish, towards whom, intermittently, British Ministers have entertained ambitions).

So much for the pieties and orthodoxies of my “coal-face” thinking. What about the likely impact of the shifts I detect beneath the simple surfaces of things?

First, the changes within the Union. From the beginning of the present decade, we have found ourselves in a period in which many of the established wisdoms about the shape of Europe – its social, political and economical structures – are being called into question.

The rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in the Danish Referendum, and the wafer-thin majority for it in the French Referendum, are an obvious locus classicus. Neither the European Parliament nor national Parliaments have had any real success in overcoming what in Euro-jargon is known as “the Democratic Deficit” There is admitted to be a certain alienation from the EU on the part of ordinary people, as they move about their ordinary lives in Europe. The EU's institutions (Council of Ministers, Commission, Court, Parliament, “Comitology”, system of regulation) are opaque; the Treaties and other legal instruments are inaccessible and unreadable; the decision-making elites practise the mysteries of their religion, but do not evangelise the masses. The end of the Cold War has loosened some of the EU's cement. The passage of time, while it has permitted the emergence of a pan-European youth culture, has swept one side the generation of “founding fathers” and obliterated or rendered old-fashioned the trauma-derived political assumptions of those who set about the reconstruction of Western Europe in the 1950s. It may be also that the EU is the victim of popular disillusionment with Government as such, in so far as national Governments and Parliaments are held in disrespect, or seen as failing to satisfy popular aspirations and needs, throughout Europe.

Meanwhile, the EU faces substantial, perhaps even horrendous, nitty gritty internal difficulties. I readily grant that broad strategic international developments potentially matter more, I think of the future world role of China ; the future political mastership within Russia; the future commitment or otherwise of the United States to a politically stable and military secure Europe; the possible rise of a concerted pan-Islamic movement, hostile to European interests; major shifts in the distribution of industrial pre-eminence and purchasing power across the globe; the global economic and military repercussions of possible climate change in the first half of the 21st century. But, as it were “here and now”, EU political leaders face a raft of politically extremely sensitive issues on their own home waters, to which they have not yet fully directed their attention, and for the solution of which their own “political will” may be lacking. On this raft, there perch the budget re-negotiation in 1998; the opening of negotiations for the enlargement of the EU to the East, also in 1998 (and now complicated by lack of progress at Amsterdam); the concomitant need to reform the CAP (itself also up for review in the WTO at the end of the decade); a decision on a Single Currency by 1999 (with British participation more or less ruled out for the first wave, but with some prospect of later UK adhesion); the streamlining of EU decision-making and institutions imposed by the prospect of a Union with 20-30 members (already the EU 15 is quite a different place from the original EC of the 6 – yet, even at Amsterdam, agreement on necessary change was refused by the smaller countries); the search for greater EU “transparency”, in order to mobilise the public opinion which can no longer be relied upon to react predictably and to the point in national or EU-wide referenda; the possible need to break with the past practice and go for “variable geometry” or “flexibility” (i.e. for the freedom of some to move ahead without all), and the problem of how to square such arrangements with the “acquis communautaire” to which the Founder Members continue to attach high importance. The list is not exhaustive. Many of the issues are unglamorous. None of them is easy to tackle.

I put my finger on all this to make the point that the debate is now no longer, for me, a matter of “EU good/national chauvinism bad; Avanti good/Retreat bad; Thatcher bad/Delors good; Blair better/problem less acute”. The European structure is shifting under our feet. I do not

think it is crumbling. I feel certain that it will settle down in a solid shape which will somehow be the recognisable linear descendant of the structure bequeathed by the Treaty of Rome. But the important thing is that it is *now just* possible that a looser, more flexible Europe *will* emerge, in which UK decision-makers will no longer be faced with a “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude on the part of the rest of the EU. It is conceivable that the UK will not merely be able to continue to muddle along somehow in the EU, sometimes being constructive, sometimes obstructive, and sometimes out of the picture altogether, but that the UK might even be able to settle down comfortably and (in its own eyes) not without honour in the outer orbits of a more dispersed Brussels-centric or Berlin-centric European planetary system. New Labour could eventually find this as comfortable a prospect as New Conservative already does. But this only enhances my feeling of foreboding, and even of alarm, because it would involve a further retreat from the British aspiration to European “leadership” (even if only amounting to the determination to manipulate our European surroundings to our national advantage), and a further relegation of the UK to yet a lower football league in terms of our international standing.

The second instinct about change referred to at the outset of this article relates to the polity of the UK itself. Few parliamentarians, and almost no Cabinet ministers whatsoever, have ever been capable of conducting serious business in another European language than English. There has been only one year in the past twenty four of our EU membership when we have had a Prime Minister who was wholly committed to the enterprise. Parliament is itself not working properly, and has lost its hold on the affections of the people. Within the Conservative Party, paradoxically some years after her political demise, the flotsam of “Thatcherite” MPs – young, new to the job, ignorant of the past, Euro-sceptical and in some cases quite chauvinistic – continues to float in the froth of the running tide. The new wave have often rather different social backgrounds, and quite different policy assumptions, from those of the back benchers of my FCO days in the 60s or 70s. My Shropshire neighbour, the ex-MP Sir Julian Critchley, calls them “*garagistes*” (loosely, “used car salesmen”?) As a new political class, they do not inspire me. In the Labour Party, it could take Tony Blair (perhaps even posthumously, following the Thatcher analogy) 10 years to complete the triumph of “New” over “Old”, highly promising though his honeymoon beginnings have been. Under either Party, and notwithstanding the fact that the Labour victory at the last election has made British national diplomacy on EU matters much easier and potentially much more effective, nevertheless, back at Westminster, an antiquated, under-employed, ill-informed, monoglot, over-numerous, impotent and therefore sovereignty-obsessed House of Commons will still not grasp what is going on in Europe or readily permit Cabinet Ministers to exercise the imagination, and run the risks, within the EU which our longer-term national interests in my opinion require. It goes without saying that – at least until my elevation to it – the House of Lords (reformed or not) is, and will remain, marginal.

I conclude these reflections on Euro-septicaemia in the British body politic thus. We have not played our hand well in Europe; and will, perhaps, continue not to do so. Within certain limits, this may not matter too much, because the EU has a life of its own, we are not a central player, and there is no present viable alternative to full Membership. If, however, the EU generally runs out of steam, or changes towards to a looser association, it will not be the UK which will seek to “rally the ranks”. Any “semi-detached” British option which may then or thereafter offer itself, even if gratefully seized upon by our future political leaders, will in itself be a lost opportunity, and perhaps even a further step in the United Kingdom's long national decline.