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“Britain, the Insular Global Player”

A fifteenth century Venetian traveller to London commented on the curious and irritating fact that English people thought they were better fed, better dressed, better informed than anyone else. Maybe we had not then acquired the habit of self-disparagement which we now espouse. Though we all know that our modesty is often just a way of showing how self confident we really are.

Perhaps not a huge amount has changed. In the awful Madeleine McCann tragedy PC Plodrigues made his appearance in the British press on about Day 2 and has held centre stage ever since. Short of the Portuguese police force having a Chief Inspector Jose Mourinho, it is hard to think of it being otherwise.

Island nations are somewhat different, especially one whose history has been one of resisting continental encroachment. I watched the trailer of the film about Elizabeth I, which is about to hit the cinemas.

Wily ruthless foreigners meet their just deserts at the hand of plucky Brits. Elizabeth I is a clone of Boudicca and Margaret Thatcher. We have a soft spot for Henry VIII, not least because he saw off the Pope. The point about the English reformation was not just about the finer points of doctrine, or even about reform. It was about not being pushed about by foreign potentates. When my Methodist father got engaged to my Roman Catholic mother in 1931 his aunt wrote him a severe letter telling him not to betray all those ancestors, stout Derbyshire yeomen all, whose Protestant bones lay in the churchyard in Darleydale. The betrayal would be to agree to have his children brought up as Catholics. I do not suppose my great aunt had much of a clue about the doctrinal differences between Wesleyanism and Catholicism, but she knew untrustworthy foreign ways when she saw them. It was not my father's immortal soul that was in peril, it was the heart and soul of England.

I do not mock these sentiments. 1588 was striking for the number of English Catholics who rallied to the flag. Better a persecuting English Protestant Queen than a proselytising Spanish Catholic king. English first; Catholic second. A recent Andrew Marr programme in which various pundits ranked British twentieth century Prime Ministers put Churchill, albeit slightly reluctantly, at the top because he had saved England. It is not just that we were saved by our efforts from tyranny. Our national identity and pride were safeguarded and reinforced. Most of us share that pride.

That history is a huge factor in our European reluctance. It is reinforced by sections of the Press often far beyond the true strength of feeling of their readers. But there must be a grain of popular sentiment for them to go with. The Murdoch Press does not waste its money going places where its readers are reluctant to accompany it.

And yet, Britain represents a huge paradox. People like me, the post war baby boomers, are now almost pensionable. We have no memory of World War II; no real memory of Empire, as opposed to the end of Empire. When I look at photographs of King George V at the 1911 Durbar in Delhi, they are evocative of history, not of a past that is mourned. Millions of our compatriots are British citizens today because of that imperial history but their own take on it is hardly likely to make them feel nostalgic for it.

And that is just one aspect of the British paradox. Our society has been transformed in my lifetime. That is not a uniquely British phenomenon; the same is true of most European countries. But, apart from the diversity of our own population, more foreign languages are spoken in London than in any other city in the world. London has almost certainly by now overtaken Chicago as the world's second largest Polish city. Tens of thousands of French, Italian and other Europeans work in London. The economics minister of Turkey, a man in his thirties, is one of eleven children of a poor Kurdish father. Until the recent Turkish election, he was an executive working for Merrill Lynch in the City of London. This picture is mirrored by the numbers of British people living and working abroad.

The City of London is the least "sovereign minded" place in Europe. When it comes to the economy, we are the least sovereignty minded country in Europe. The French have declared the manufacture of yoghurt a strategic national interest. We do not mind who owns our banks or water companies. We care about the fairness of competition and regulation, not about ownership. Famously, we transfer our tribal loyalty in football from one set of eleven foreigners to the next. What they do matters desperately. Who they are, or who owns them, matters not at all.

We preserve at all cost our separate national frontier: no passport less travel for us. And yet you are as likely to be arrested at Waterloo or Cheriton by a French immigration official as by a British one. At Waterloo of all places we happily submit to French immigration control.

These paradoxes extend into the conduct of our relationships with our partners in the European Union. The first European head of government to campaign for the single market in Europe was Margaret Thatcher. That single market is one of the very first obligations of the Treaty of Rome. Yet the “six” who so often portray themselves as the guardians of the European Holy Grail did very little about it for thirty years.

When Margaret Thatcher made her famous Bruges speech in 1988 she said two things that were shocking to fellow Europeans at the time. She attacked the European Commission as an aggressively centralising bureaucracy and she had the audacity to proclaim that Warsaw, Prague and Budapest, then still cities behind the Iron Curtain, were also great European cities. In other words, Europe and the EU were not one and the same. Commonplace now; revolutionary at the time.

John Major was campaigning for that enlarged Europe at a time when President Mitterrand was still saying it would not happen before 2010. Tony Blair was the first European Head of Government to call for the entry of the new member states by 2004. He was the first to champion the cause of Romania and Bulgaria because of the part they played in the liberation of Kosovo. The British government was and is the most vocal large member state in saying that the European Union must meet its 40 year-old obligation to Turkey and to allow Turkey to negotiate for entry into the European Union.

Successive British governments have done more than any other to campaign for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, not just out of national self interest, but because we have a view of fair and free trade, and of responsibility to the developing world.

It was Margaret Thatcher who, in 1985, proposed a new agreement on what was then known as Political Cooperation and was in fact the embryo of a common foreign policy. Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterrand, to whom she had sent her proposals in confidence, took them, topped and tailed them and published them as their own under the title “Treaty on European Union”. This was, as she commented at the time, the kind of behaviour that would get you expelled from a London club.

It was John Major in 1991 who sold to his European counterparts the notion of safe havens for the Kurds in the aftermath of the first Gulf War – and who subsequently used that European collective policy to persuade George Bush senior to back the scheme.

Tony Blair was the Prime Minister who, with President Chirac, took forward that cooperation in the St. Malo agreement of 1998 – paving the way for the European peacekeeping operations the EU conducts today. It was he who made the agreement in 2003 with Chirac and Schroeder that broke a deadlock on European defence and thus unblocked progress on the draft constitutional treaty. It was he who persuaded a reluctant and tetchy George Bush to accept the outcome.

It was Tony Blair who put climate change and energy at the top of the European Union’s agenda, and helped Europe to take a responsible lead on climate change while the US administration was still in a state of wilful denial.

This is the same country, Britain, that is now in lather over the European Reform Treaty, as we have been in lather over every previous Treaty amending the original Treaty of Rome.

I do not intend to get into the argument over whether the government made a commitment to a referendum which they should or should not stick to. I do want to say a little about the Reform Treaty. It does not create the post of President of the European Council. That has existed for thirty years. It does put the job on a more full-time basis. But this person will not be the President of Europe. He or she will have only the authority that all the individual heads of government give him by consensus. Similarly, the job of High Representative already exists. Whether or not he is called a Foreign Minister, and he will not be, that job too can only be done according to the authority given to him by Foreign ministers collectively, except insofar as he exercises functions as a member of the Commission – where again he can only act in accordance with the powers that have been given the Commission by consensus by the member states in the European Treaties. The Reform Treaty does allow for more decisions by majority vote but the only substantive areas are ones where majority voting is in our interest, e.g. the supervision of the protection of intellectual property rights.

It is true that the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice will be extended in the field of Justice and Home Affairs but it is worth unpacking that a bit. The Conservative Party has long argued that Britain does not want to hold up its partners if they want to go further and faster than Britain does, but that we should have the right to stay out of particular policies. This is exactly the opt-out that was secured at Amsterdam in 1997. So, we can stay out of measures to curb terrorism, illegal immigration and international crime but, of course, if

we do decide to opt into those measures we cannot then change the rules already agreed by 26 other countries.

And that brings me to the heart of the argument. We wrap ourselves in the flag of sovereignty as if it is a prize possession that you either own or lose. But, as Harold Macmillan told the British people when he first proposed that we join the Common Market 45 years ago: we share some of our sovereignty with others. But they share some of theirs with us. In other words the question is not just what we lose but whether there is a net gain in terms of our effectiveness, our security, our ability to achieve those things we want to achieve in our national interest.

Many of the opponents of the EU as it stands object, not just to its inefficiencies, which are inevitable in any large international organisation, and which can be corrected. They object to the fundamental nature of the organisation we joined in 1972. In other words, the argument is not just about the Reform Treaty but about the EU itself.

In 1985, Margaret Thatcher, ferocious opponent of any change to the European treaties that would involve a transfer of sovereignty, agreed to the Single European Act because she accepted that, if Britain wanted the single market, it could only be achieved by majority voting. Yes, that created the possibility that sometimes Britain would be outvoted and would be part of policies she did not like but more often than not the reverse would be the case: we would outvote countries who would otherwise thwart our aims. And so it has proved. Moreover, the fear that she and others entertained in the 1980s, of a move to a federal super state, has proved unfounded. The Europe that exists today, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its

expansion to 27 is a very different one, for good or ill, from that imagined by Helmut Kohl in the 1980s.

I think there are two issues for the future. One of them is to try to have a debate in Britain around the real issues. As Harold Wilson once said of his critics: “I’ll stop telling the truth about them if they stop telling lies about me”. That does require an effort by government on a more sustained basis than has been done up to now.

We also need to think about democratic control and involvement. The European Parliament is a state secret in Britain. Why? Not because it is ineffective, far from it. But because its existence is seen as a threat by national politicians. People complain that the European Commission is unelected. But were it elected, it would of course have a democratic legitimacy that would also threaten national governments. Part of this debate is therefore about choices. Part of it is about whether we want to help create a European demos. But if we believe, as I do, that our security, stability and prosperity are best served by working closely with 26 countries who share our democratic system and our values we should spend our time shaping that future, not fretting obsessively about the present or mourning forlornly for our past.