

BRITAIN AND EUROPE THE LAST RITES?

Julian Priestley | *former Secretary General of the European Parliament from 1997 to 2007 and member of the Board of Directors of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute.*

Julian Priestley analyses the new UK/EU relationship. Indeed Britain is currently at the heart of the discussions in the EU, given the attitude of its government towards the fiscal compact and the budget negotiations, and the evolutions of its political parties and public opinion.

In Britain when a family decides not to have a party to mark some calendar event it is usually said, 'We're having a quiet New Year' or 'I'm having a quiet birthday.' The celebration of Britain's fortieth anniversary of its membership of the European Community will be a particularly muted affair.

Any boisterous carousing is more likely to come from the other side. Britain's dedicated anti-Europeans will congratulate themselves on the UK's progressive disengagement from the European project; the 'veto' of the Fiscal Pact; the negative position on the EU budget voted in the House of Commons (thanks in part to an act of crass opportunism by Labour MPs); growing public support for a referendum; the inroads now being made by UKIP in national as well as European elections, the toil in Whitehall drawing up an inventory of competences to be repatriated to Britain, and the first opinion polls showing a strong majority for outright withdrawal. All the while the daily drip feed of anti-European bile from most of the media continues.

There are also worrying but understandable signs that the rising optimism of the anti-Europeans is mirrored by the frustration and annoyance of the UK's friends and partners which begin to resemble the World War I recruiting song, "We don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go". As the UK government tries to appease anti-Europeans at home through a policy of surly non-cooperation it alienates even members of what used to be an almost automatic support group of countries from Northern and Eastern Europe. Patience with Britain is being exhausted, and resistance to any future demands for special treatment growing.

It is perhaps timely for those who count themselves as pro-Europeans here and in Britain to note a number of elementary points.

1. Would Europe proceed more speedily and efficiently without Britain?

A case can be made, and is made even by some British pro-Europeans, that Europe would proceed more speedily and efficiently without Britain. The counter-argument is that in areas where Britain is absent the record is not one of unadulterated success. The euro-zone crisis is looking like a chronicle of wasted time and opportunity which could still derail the whole European project. It alone accounts for most of the recent spike in hostility to the EU in the UK. It is also making Europeans elsewhere less European by the day. Britain may not have lifted a finger to help but the EU and its institutions have hardly covered themselves with glory in the management of a crisis, the responsibility for which is hard to pin on the British.

Despite its political, social and economic weaknesses the UK remains a major and open trading economy; it contributes importantly to multilateral defence activities; it is a permanent member of the UN security Council; it has global reach unmatched in the EU by any other member state except France; it is a stable if imperfect democracy deeply attached to the rule of law. The EU is not so powerfully positioned economically or politically to ignore the albeit largely untapped potential that a constructive UK could offer, as it contemplates deepening economic and political union and becoming a global power.

The UK has been a difficult partner throughout its membership. But even here we pro-Europeans should dispel some myths. Britain has contributed solidly to the building of the EU institutions. It has sent politicians sometimes of the first rank - not technocrats - as Commissioners thus implicitly accepting the political role of the Union's executive. British officials shaping EU policies are highly regarded. British MEPs are

among those who take most seriously and perform most diligently the core parliamentary tasks of legislating and budgeting. The internal market has to a considerable extent been promoted and defended by Britain; and the directives issued in its implementation have been taken more seriously in the UK than in some founding member states. Britain brings an extra dimension to EU deliberations on external policy; it has contributed usefully if fitfully to the first stages of defence and military cooperation.

Conversely, some member states which readily trumpet a European mantra on any occasion fall short when it comes to translating their rhetoric into any meaningful commitment to strengthen the Union. The solidarity so essential to bind the Union together has not only been wanting in London. The truth is that the EU has 27 member states all of which from time to time behave badly; the current crisis has shown nearly all of them at their worst. To imagine that it is the turbulent British who are the only real obstacle on the smooth path to federal union is a puerile delusion.

2. Are British political parties committed to the EU?

The situation in Britain is also less straightforward than it seems. The leadership of all three main parties favours staying in the EU. Neither Liberal Democrats nor Labour has backed a push to repatriate powers to the UK. Although David Cameron has hinted that a referendum might be appropriate to endorse the 'new settlement' were powers to be repatriated after negotiation, he has so far ruled out a referendum which could jeopardise membership. His junior coalition partner opposes a referendum.

Admittedly, none of these leaders is fully in control of a situation which has its own dynamic. The Conservative party has been infiltrated and now almost taken over by cut-price charismatics and sympathisers with the Republican Tea party. They regard Cameron as the continuation of Tony Blair by other means. They loathe the coalition and their hatred of everything to do with the EU is pathological. For almost the first time in its long history the Tory party is becoming an ideological one eschewing two centuries of pragmatism. The ranks of the radicals have been swollen as alarm grows that UKIP will deny them victory again at the next election by siphoning off votes in every constituency.

There is no discernible move to greater euroscepticism in the Labour party; and the more strident the

Europhobia on the right, the more likely Labour will stay broadly if tepidly pro-European. Ed Miliband opposes a referendum because he judges it would immobilise a future Labour government were it to be held, and sabotage it were it to be lost. But were the conservatives to commit to a referendum before the 2015 elections it could become increasingly difficult for Miliband to hold the line.

The Liberal Democrats remain stout-heartedly European but have lost the ear of the British people.

How could this play out? The first point to make is that despite press hysteria and the permanent agitation of the Tory right, the next key episodes of the soap opera that keeps on giving may appear only at a leisurely pace. If the Tories trail UKIP in the June 2014 European elections it is possible that Cameron would commit to an in/out referendum or a 2-question referendum to salvage his leadership; but it is difficult to envisage any scenario which could bring this forward before the 2015 election.

And then there is the inventory currently being conducted in Whitehall on the 'catalogue of competences'. This exercise which is taking up a lot of time and resources in ministries should lead to a report and conclusions before the end of 2014. It is almost inconceivable that the two coalition partners could agree to a list of current EU competencies to be repatriated. So the Tories will pad out their 2015 election manifesto with a series of demands for renegotiating certain parts of the Treaty, either promising to renationalise some policies or to extend opt-outs.

If they win a working majority at the election, which is looking a tall order - way behind in the opinion polls, UKIP snapping at their heels and constituency boundaries working against them - they would present their demands. In exchange for behaving well during an intergovernmental conference on fiscal union and economic governance ('behaving well' meaning not vetoing the Treaty, simply opting out) they would then be rewarded by their grateful partners with the repatriation of a significant number of competences.

3. Restoring British sovereignty?

They would then present their case to the British people along the following lines, "We have negotiated a new relationship with the EU. The others have moved forward and accepted the implacable logic of the single

currency with fiscal union, stronger federal institutions, etc. We on the other hand have not moved with them; on the contrary we have succeeded in restoring British sovereignty in a number of key areas. This is a good deal for Britain which we ask the grateful populace to accept.”

To say that this scenario is ‘optimistic’ is to underestimate the richness of the English language. First any serious repatriation of powers would jeopardise the integrity of the single market which has been the consistent priority of the UK for thirty years. The list of powers which could be returned to Westminster without undermining the common economic area appears paltry indeed. Apart from the common fisheries policy which is already hobbled most other matters are directly or indirectly central to the internal market.

Secondly, partners engaged in a complicated negotiation on new institutions and competences for a political economic and financial union would be seriously irritated by the face-saving sideshow with which the British would seek to distract them. And the fiscal compact precedent has shown how empty is the threat of British vetoes on Treaties. The institutions pay lawyers well to find ways around the recalcitrance of renegade member states.

Importantly, an intergovernmental conference trying to tackle economic governance of the euro area, effective budgetary discipline and a stronger European voice in external relations - the ‘real’ menu for Treaty change - would be a complicated business to say the least, and a lengthy one with its outcome mired in uncertainty. So the overall result to be submitted for ratification in the UK and elsewhere might not be known for years.

But above all the whole gambit - the growing ‘gap’ between the UK outside the eurozone and its EU partners as economic governance is reformed, the list of policy areas to be repatriated, and the renegotiation - would ultimately fail because the people it has

been designed to appease cannot be appeased. The Europhobic, nationalistic, rightwing of the Tory party want to leave the Union, and will settle for nothing less. They would treat the Cameronian strategy with the derision it rightly deserves.

4. A new phase of EU/UK relations?

So to those who assert that Britain is on its way out of the EU, the most sensible response would seem to be that nothing has been decided, we are entering into a new, long and complicated phase in EU/UK relations. It is a little premature to organise the funeral rites.

To those European partners who wish Britain to stay in the EU, the only advice that can be given should be to continue to treat the UK as a full member of the Union, to be firm when it seeks to sabotage EU initiatives for opportunistic reasons, but to discount the propaganda of the UK anti-Europeans that British exit is now only a matter of time. Accepting the Europhobic propaganda that the UK quitting is almost inevitable could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Above all the strongest riposte to the eurosceptics would be to resolve the euro crisis with an effective mix of budgetary responsibility, growth policies and showing solidarity to those member states currently enduring the worst social crisis since the War.

The main responsibility, however, lies with the British pro-Europeans, leaders and representatives in all three political parties, British industry, the trade unions, civic society, the voluntary sector and others who have remained essentially in a state of quietism since the 1975 referendum. They need now to organise. They need to rebut effectively and immediately the lies and misrepresentations churned out by the media and our own local ‘droite décomplexée’. They should prepare for a ground war, and build up a movement in all the regions of the UK. Above all they should raise their heads above the parapets and display some political leadership and passionate engagement after nearly forty years of meek defensiveness.

Managing Editor: Yves Bertoncini • The document may be reproduced in part or in full on the dual condition that its meaning is not distorted and that the source is mentioned • The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher • *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* cannot be held responsible for the use which any third party may make of the document • Original version • © *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*