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Why, and with what results, has the UK been an “awkward partner” in Europe?

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Introduction

It is fair to say that the 20th century British foreign affairs were characterized by a partial feeling of difference and distance towards Europe. This essay will voyage through some of the moments that shaped and influenced British European foreign affairs directly and indirectly.

In the main section – Awkwardness Histories – a chronologic chain gives us the basic reasons for this sense of alienation and the consequences for Britain that came from each of its policies, as well as an analysis of how Britain behaved depending on the different conjunctures and trends.

On the third section the essay goes face to face with the dilemmas that will arise for the UK in the future, exercising some brief prospective proposals before concluding with a summary of the main points.

Awkwardness Histories

“We do not want the most vital economic forces of the country to be handed over to an authority that is utterly undemocratic and is responsible to nobody” (in Black, 2000 p.303)

With these words Attlee’s Labour government rejected giving birth to a project they saw would be an inevitable failure (1950). The idea of a federal Europe never made any sense to Britain that saw the USA, its Commonwealth and its Empire as the strongest bets against a post-war Europe seen as a poor partner with its economic, political and military structures devastated. The special relation with the US and the Empire offered prestige to British leaders, giving them a sense of uniqueness and making them look down on the rest of Europe. Churchill’s enumeration of the four pillars of this compartmented reality (USA, URSS, Europe and the British Empire) portrayed well how Britain detached itself as a potential European power.

The need to restructure and defend itself against right wing, war-causing political forces united Europe. The European Economic Community (EEC) was part of this process. Insular Britain, despite its active role in the war, did not witness the conflict as directly as the continent did and so never quite shared this integration project that wanted to go beyond economical and commercial affairs. This belief culminated on a British inspired European Free Trade Association (EFTA) that competed with the EEC and was, in contrast, restricted to commercial matters. This organization lacked any ideological or political concerns proven by the fact that had Portugal as a member¹.

¹ Portugal had seen its entry in the EEC denied due to its dictatorial regime.

Things changed when the EEC turned out to be an economic success and EFTA a failure, making Britain hunger for a place in the “bus she had missed” a few years ago (1961 application). A shift of interests also occurred: from the far-East (Commonwealth) to the new priority that was to prevent Western Europe from capitulating to Soviet interests. This attempt was also a reaction to decline: the Empire was slipping away, its naval predominance was no more and the Commonwealth system was limited, if not ineffective. The place on the bus ended up being denied by De Gaulle (1963) that saw England as being too close to the U.S.A. and too arrogant².

A worried and ambitious Wilson retried, motivated by the problematic fact that Britain was being left apart from the fast growing EEC and by the problems in the American affair (Vietnam war, retreat from Suez, cuts in defence), but, in 1967, devaluation struck Britain that also lacked good diplomatic abilities.

The U.K. had to wait until 1973 to join the common market. Heath made an outstanding effort longing for a role in the international system and a modernisation of Britain. He was also very much helped by several contingencies: De Gaulle was now out of the way; disposition to surrender to policies like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); and small divisions in the Conservative Party concerning Europe. “If you can’t beat them, join them”, and that was exactly what Britain did when it realized there was no escape from interdependence pressures anymore. In fact joining was seen as an attempt to try and control these pressures.

The European challenge was however far from over. In fact, this was only the beginning of an unprecedented political challenge. In 1974 Wilson was back and with him a new Atlanticism fearful of the European undemocratic “capitalist club” that he

² The UK wanted the EEC to stay commercially open to the Commonwealth, in this way Britain would obtain the best of two worlds.

now believed was a cause for a loss of economic management power. For instance, his cabinet carried out a re-negotiation attempt of Britain's terms of entry in the EEC and launched a polemic referendum on EEC membership (yes won with 67.2%).

Then came the Thatcher years, Atlanticism and European awkwardness persisted, the centre was in the USA Alliance (closeness to Reagan's attitudes to society, domestic politics and foreign policy). Thatcher did take Britain into the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) but truth is that she always gave the impression that she saw the "EEC as a German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe"³. This ended up undermining her cabinet and party unity.

Britain's inability to deal with Europe reached its peak with John Major. In the 1992 "Black Wednesday" he forced retreat from the ERM. The Conservatives were shattered into pieces and accused of incompetence, failing over Europe after several attempts by Major to prevent decision-making from falling into the European Commission (EC) hands (the Maastricht signing was seen as a political euthanasia by euro-sceptics). The 90s witnessed the end of a long Conservative era that was never able to sort out its antagonisms between euro-sceptics and pro-Europeans, which clearly stained its credibility.

The 1997 elections brought New-labour and a more European Britain but this was not a radical turning point in the way Britain perceives Europe. The divisions in public opinion, on the political parties and a Murdoch-owned press obligated Tony Blair to have a very cautious approach concerning the recommendable level of integration (exe: decision not to risk a referendum; Britain not part of the "cradle of euro" countries). A federal Europe is very far away from Tony Blair's intentions but he does expect to play a leading role in the decision-making of a Europe made of

³ Black, 2000 p.312; see also speech at the College of Europe in Bruges in 1988.

independent nation-states. The decline phase of the Conservatives was also accompanied by the growth of the Liberals/Social-Democrats, the most convict pro-European party that can possibly come to transform the traditionally bi-polar British system. Overall, if it is true that the richest, the youngest, the best educated and a major part of the party elites, appear gradually conquered by the European integration processes, the public opinion continues to show reluctance in abandoning the pound, therefore the biggest of surprises would be for a “yes” on a national referendum about the issue.

We can summarize the “awkward theory” historical arguments in 5 points: UK insular position and geographical detachment; its mainly naval power rather than a power focused on land, making it see itself as a global and mobile force that went beyond the regional land interconnectivity that Europe offered; the fact that it has never been invaded or occupied; the idea that it is institutionally different from Europe (unbroken democratic tradition; different system of law - British common law vs. European Union (EU) codified legal law -; the absence of a written constitution tradition and its “conception of democracy that favours strong, majority government without mediation”⁴ colliding with EU conceptions); both Labour and the Conservatives usually reached a certain consensus and strongly embodied national concerns while remaining divided over European issues.

Pondering choices: to be or not to be?

In one general trace, British diplomacy and policies towards the EU always defended inter-governmental approaches to the detriment of supranational ones.

Britain has, on the one hand, been constantly having difficulties to reconcile

⁴ Goodwin, 1992 chapter 10 –Democracy- p.224

the thirst for a large and appetizing market and, on the other hand, the maintenance of its national particularities and privileges. It has positioned itself in a less communitarian and integrationist stand sometimes limiting the UK action in terms of influence in the EU.⁵ An eventual “yes” to the EMU for example could possibly overcome the myth of the awkward partner. Someday we may have a more Anglo-Saxon influenced Europe, focused on precision budgetary policies and with a small communitarian budget. In fact, Britain may choose to “swap” integration in the EMU for the guaranty that a federal EU won’t be created and that supra-national EU institutions will not take-over key elements of the foreign affairs and defence policies. Despite this, the UK is likely to remain outside the EMU until the European collective decision-making process reveals itself successful and not likely to harm the vitality and competitiveness of the British pier activity sectors.

The British foreign office has basically two options: it can either, privilege direct relations with the U.S.A. and focus on virtual and almost mythical British Empire or assume a central role in the relations between the USA and the EU, reinforcing its capacity to decisively influence the latter.

Conclusions

In the end Europe had a clear and deep impact on British political history and foreign policy. In fact, the last century witnessed a great shift in the British way of looking at the world: from hegemony, major decision-making power, Britain changed into a simple joint partner of the American and the European systems. In a sense, it spent the century wandering lost between Europe and the USA in a painful dilemma

⁵ It will, for example, have less influence in the monetary policy if it remains outside the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)

that still torments Britain today (Iraq invasion, European constitution question and the euro issue). When the American and the Commonwealth clutches failed, the UK never felt “at home” in the European community.

A self-centred, commercial and economically obsessed Britain generally always had “its own consistent view of how Europe ought to relate to the rest of the world” (Young, 2000) and was tormented by the ambivalence between two forces: the fear of the changes provided by UK’s membership in the EU against the persistent wishes to expand its national interests in international affairs, control decision-making, oppose federalism, promote free trade and help Europe stay away from a “Fortress Europe” trade system. Decisions, decisions, decisions...

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