

Brexit and the New European Balance of Power

by Conrad Black

The absurdly exaggerated reaction to the British vote to leave the European Union demonstrates the complacency and incompetence of the governing elites in Britain and Western Europe, and how those attitudes rippled out, unchallenged, in the international media and financial markets. There is some analogy with the comeuppance given the American political class by the fighting bulls of left, centre and right: Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. In both these principal sections of the Western world, the political institutions have been misused by feeble, cynical and inept leaders. There are both similarities and distinctions between the American and European experiences, and both should be recognized.

The similarities between the levels of public discontent in the United Kingdom and the United States are that the countries are angry and fearful at job losses to unfair trade agreements, and unwise and illegal immigration, and at the lassitude and patronizing detachment of their executive and legislative leaders. In Britain, the special flourish is the anti-democratic nature of the Brussels authority that intrudes more and more constantly into the lives of average people. Brussels is essentially supranational civil servants issuing an unceasing torrent of authoritarian directives down on all parts of life in the EU. This imposition has grated steadily on the British, from the display of bananas in supermarkets to the (one-size-fits-all) size of condoms, to the revocability of the decisions of the highest courts of the United Kingdom by the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

This is where the U.S. comparison stops – that country has not surrendered its sovereignty, but its voters are outraged that

since it became the only, and unrivalled, superpower since the Roman Empire, it has blundered into the worst economic disaster in 80 years, decades of costly Middle Eastern wars that have been expertly and bravely conducted by the armed forces but have diluted America's strategic position, and a feckless foreign policy that has waffled between bellicosity (George W. Bush) and appeasement (Barack Obama). The country keeps turning out the rascals and getting more incompetent and venal rascals. At least in the United States, the despised political class isn't a group of foreigners and it is possible to get rid of them, as the country is doing, without complicating foreign and constitutional relations.

Before becoming too alarmed about developments in either the United Kingdom or the United States, let us remember that the people are right, in both cases, to be profoundly dissatisfied with their governments and to seek reform by the legitimate and constitutional means both countries have developed and refined and protected over centuries. And between them, they are chiefly responsible for the spread of democracy in the world, including in most of what is now the European Union.

The Brussels bureaucracy, though there are representative groups within it of all 27 member nationalities, is largely run by the Belgians and the Dutch, countries that have spent their national lives trying to equivocate between the larger Western European powers, especially the French, Germans and British, but once upon a time, the Spanish and the Holy See and the Holy Roman Empire in Vienna also. Their ruling classes think they have a natural vocation to conciliate, persuade, rule, and even swindle or confound their larger neighbours, all in the holy name of the declared, but no longer supported, goal of "an ever-closer Union." The unspoken message in the collective thinking of the Euro-federalist elites has been, among the ambitious functionaries of the little countries, this was their path to power; and among the leaders of the larger countries, this was the way to rebuild

the pre-eminence of a united Europe in the world, after the European civil wars of the last century and the annoying requirement to bring in the Americans to keep the Russians back. The Americans, after performing the service, were dispensable (and only too happy to depart). The Western alliance is atrophying while waiting for redefinition and a new *raison d'être*. As I have written here before, this is a place where Canada could play a key role, as it could, and should, in reviving the top tier of the Commonwealth (Canada, U.K., Australia, India, Singapore, New Zealand) as a coherent but not artificially united bloc, in close relations with Western Europe and the United States.

The Europe Britain has rejected, led by the unelected ciphers of Brussels, was a mad concept and it was never going to work as planned. All sane people celebrated the end of the terrible animosities that had riven Europe since the Middle Ages, especially the Franco-German rapprochement achieved by German chancellor Konrad Adenauer and French president Charles de Gaulle in 1963. The Common Market, which began with six states and the Treaty of Rome in 1957, grew in lurches, including de Gaulle's somewhat capricious veto of British entry in 1963, and became the European Union, committed to a federal state of 28 sovereign countries. There were repeated instances of hair's-breadth referendum results in different countries. When the centralizers lost, they followed with new plebiscites, as the Euro-engine chugged with more and more difficulty toward its goal.

The greatest voice of caution after the retirement of de Gaulle in 1969 was Margaret Thatcher, who was finally pushed out by her own party despite having been the greatest peacetime prime minister in British history, at least since Disraeli and Gladstone (and a very good war and Cold War leader also). Her offence was overt Euroskepticism, and she has been proved right and last night was her victory, too. Her young disciples of 30 years ago, Michael Gove, Boris Johnson,

Jacob Rees-Mogg and Iain Duncan Smith, will take over (that is, take back) the Conservative Party and the British government, subsume with high honours the gallant Nigel Farage and his United Kingdom Independence Party, and chart a new course. The John Major-William Haig-David Cameron era in that party has been one of timorous bobbing and weaving, "trimming," as the British say, if not, in Cardinal Newman's expression, "shovel-hatted humbug."

This is not a vote against Europeans or even against Europe, nor will it divide the U.K. as the ungracious Remainers are saying. It is a vote for Britain to be governed by the British and to co-operate closely and fairly with the European countries. It is not really a vote to leave, but a vote to renegotiate for the next two years. Gove and Johnson are broad-minded, fair-minded modern Thatcherites, and they will strike the right balance between defence of British domestic interests and retention of good relations with the European powers. Prime minister Edward Heath threw Britain's lot in with Europe, and put the Commonwealth over the side. Thatcher bet on the special relationship with the U.S., and she and Ronald Reagan were the principal victors in the Cold War, but that relationship couldn't survive the last two American presidents. Britain has come full circle.

The economic reaction is the usual idiocy of currency speculators and money managers, and will calm down quickly; even if Britain did withdraw altogether, the economic consequences would be neutral. But the mask has fallen from the plump, ruddy face of Brussels.

I predict that there will gradually emerge a German-led bloc, including the Baltic and Scandinavian countries (except Norway), and the Netherlands, Austria, and probably the Poles and Czechs. In former four-term chancellor Helmut Kohl's expression, it will be "a European Germany, not a German Europe." It will to some degree be the Grosse Deutschland sought by Bismarck, but assembled now by friendship,

prosperity and example. The Germans will probably want to retain a couple of weak members in the euro to soften it and facilitate the sale of sophisticated German engineered products abroad.

The French will revive, after years of political floundering, as they always do eventually, and will more or less be at the head of the Mediterranean group and Belgium, in a looser echelon of states. The Eastern European members will progress at their own rate toward the French- or German-led groups. Britain will revert to its game, played with great skill from Wolsey to Thatcher, of being friendly with all but shifting its weight as necessary to prevent the worrisome pre-eminence of any, and recruiting the Americans when they can't hold the balance themselves. There will be some level of a Common Market with easy flows of money and people (but not swarms of migrants), between all the present EU members.

It will be better government for Europe, and a great chance for Canada, if for the first time since the Mulroney era (apart from Stephen Harper's support for Israel) anyone in our Foreign Affairs Ministry has the imagination to grasp it.

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