

Brexit is an Opportunity

by Conrad Black

There remain a few things to write about the British vote to leave the European Union. The current hysteria is the usual mindless idiocy of financial specialists who don't know anything about politics or strategic issues, especially when they unfold in foreign countries. It will pass quickly and, even if the U.K. does leave the EU, the economic effects will be neutral all round. The Treaty of Europe and its tenebrous thicket of a Constitution provide two years for negotiation, and despite all the huffing and blustering in Brussels, both sides will make a good-faith effort to salvage as much of the relationship as possible while liberating the long-suffering British public from excessive Euro-regulation.

There is no element in this of British hostility to Europe: The British like Europe and vice versa, and all can go on celebrating the fact that these countries are no longer making war on each other every few years as they did for centuries. Britain's hostility is to the arrogant, power-hungry, supranational apparatus in Brussels that is not accountable or responsible to the constituent states in the European Union or to the talking shop of a European Parliament, which has no authority and more interpreters than legislators.

This event must be seen in the context of British history. William the Conqueror in 1066, Charles II returning from exile in France in 1660, William III arriving from the Netherlands in 1687 to overturn his father-in-law, and George I who came from Hanover in 1714 to assume the lateral succession to the Stuart monarchs, all maintained contact and even authority in the countries that were their points of departure. But in the end, Great Britain always opts for the blue water – Empire, Commonwealth, and America – though it is always interested in Europe. It is as it has been: “of Europe but not in it.”

In recent times, Edward Heath took Britain cock-a-hoop into Europe in 1972. He was anti-American and even banned U.S. intelligence flights from British bases in Cyprus in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and refused to supply spare parts to Israel for Centurion tanks Israel had acquired from Britain (even though the war was launched by a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria). When Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979, she remained in what was then the European Economic Community but proved a hard negotiator for greater economic benefits from it for her country. As the drive was mounted to make what had been an economic community into a politically united federation seeking "ever closer union," she balked and her party pushed her out, in favor of people that would be more accommodating and less confrontational toward Europe. It was vintage British preference for hawking and wittering and offering slight reservations quietly and trying to suck and blow at the same time, endlessly repeating that "Europe is coming our way." This was the line of all Thatcher's successors: John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron. It was all a confidence trick, even if sincerely motivated. There are vast reservations in Europe about the always growing appetite for authority in Brussels, but the French, in particular, were waiting for the British to lead, so France could play a duplicitous double game – benefiting from whatever decentralization Britain could achieve while unctuously claiming fidelity to the closer union.

Now Britain is back to the starting gate, but its position is enviable: Europe will make some concessions to keep Britain, as the EU's largest customer, accessible. London will be more attractive than ever as a financial center, at least until the Obama reign of terror on Wall Street ends (and his most demonstrative corporate supporters, whom he has savaged, such as Jamie Dimon, can go back to sleeping at night). The top tier of the old Commonwealth – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and India (conditionally on its seriously pulling

itself together) – would welcome a revival of some level of solidarity with the British, and as a group these countries have as large a GDP as China. Any post-Obama administration (like any of the presidents between Hoover and George W. Bush) would be happy to warm up relations with the U.K. The idea that Northern Ireland is suddenly going to change majorities and opt for union with the Republic of Ireland, or that Scotland sees a fast track to secession from the United Kingdom and entry into the European Union, is just morning-after moonshine.

The United States has effectively squandered the immense strategic and economic preeminence that had been accumulated at the end of the Reagan era, and the United Kingdom has fumbled away most of the economic solidity and international prestige that had been amassed in the Thatcher years. There are superficial resemblances between the Leavers and the Trump movement: resentment of trade inequalities and ill-considered immigration policies that generate unemployment; resentment of incompetent, disconnected, and disdainful government; and anger that patriotic values are ignored or even despised. But the Leavers are led by people – Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, and Jacob Rees-Mogg – as socioeconomically distinguished as the Remainers. They were young fogeys in Thatcher's time and are ultra-educated scions of the establishment, or at least the upper middle class. They are extremely articulate, even by Oxbridge standards, but they are Churchillians in spirit and Thatcherites economically: the eloquent backbone of the nation, not rabble rousers. Nor do they have the background of Trump – a flamboyant developer, impresario, and television personality. The UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, is closer to a populist, and the Conservatives should welcome him into their ranks. But the leading Conservative Leavers have both tapped middle- and working-class fear and rage and end-run their peers in the political elites.

This is a factional change of great consequence within

Britain, seeking the repatriation of sovereignty. Every British Conservative leader, since Stanley Baldwin got a good look at the Nazis and retired in 1937, has either been pushed out, or quit just before being pushed out – even the great ones, Mr. Churchill and Mrs. Thatcher. It is a ruthless party and the factions rotate between trendy “modernizers” (one of David Cameron’s many questionable claims for himself), and both social (upper-class) and commercial (bourgeois) conservatives. But the Johnson-Gove-Rees-Mogg group looks set for a long time. The opposition Labour Party is in shambles, the old Liberal Democrats have virtually disintegrated, and the provincial agitprop organizations like the Scots Nationalists make no pretense to any views relevant to governing the country as a whole.

In the U.S., the centrists in both parties have barely retained control, as Mrs. Clinton has had to make a sharp opportunistic detour to the left to fend off the avowed socialist, Bernie Sanders. And Donald Trump had to go farther polemically than most people were comfortable with on immigration and trade, to scoop up the Archie Bunker vote, and to disguise the fact that he is a centrist and to the left of most of the other Republican candidates except Kasich, especially to the left of runner-up Ted Cruz.

It is getting too late in the American Bataan March to Election Day to bother with predictions. Trump has a comfortable lead on the economy, immigration, and national security, including dealing with terrorists. Mrs. Clinton is carrying more baggage than the *Queen Mary*, and if Trump can just focus on the main issues and stop babbling and fulminating in ways that make even natural supporters nervous about whether he is up to the job he seeks, he will win. What he has achieved up to now is astonishing; he has made his point and surely he has the intelligence to finish the job now that the hard part (prior to governing) is over.

A place where the Brexit vote should concentrate American

attention is on the utter failure of U.S. foreign policy toward Britain and Europe for 60 years, except for the Nixon and Reagan administrations. President Eisenhower brought West Germany brilliantly into the Western Alliance, but made a mistake in ignoring Charles de Gaulle's efforts to get an upgraded status for his country, which it earned in the subsequent decade. President Kennedy had the insane idea of folding British and French nuclear weapons into an integrated force under American command; he was incapable of understanding that Britain and France did not wish to be treated like Kentucky and Nebraska. President Nixon saw the dangers of a united Europe as potentially neutral in the Cold War and not a force in which the British – if subsumed into it, especially under the anti-American Edward Heath – could be relied upon as a durable ally. President Carter bought entirely into the idealism of European unity without, as usual, detecting the strategic implications, as the dream was largely fueled by a mad ambition to reconstitute Europe as the center of the political universe. President Reagan, with his close association with Margaret Thatcher and strong leadership at the end of the Cold War, saw it all plainly. But the Bushes and Clintons and Obama, as in so many areas, drank the wrong Kool-Aid, and didn't detect that a united Europe directed by undemocratic institutions run by almost anonymous people could become a Frankenstein monster.

The Germans don't mind, because they will be in charge and they are used to regimentation. Chancellor Kohl said, "a European Germany and not a German Europe," and there will probably be a hard-currency German bloc including the Dutch, Poles, Austrians, Czechs, and the Baltic and Scandinavian countries (except Norway). The Mediterranean countries, except for France in the higher stages of its cycles, never pay any attention to what governments do and are contemptuous of all of them and don't really care. The British are different and have shown that, and more leading American statesmen in the last two generations than Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger,

Ronald Reagan, and George Shultz should have noticed that. Brexit is an opportunity, for the United Kingdom, for Europe, for the serious countries in the Commonwealth, and for the United States.

First published in