

Brexit: Less There Than Meets the Eye

In modern democracies, public discussion of the most momentous matters is bound to be reduced to what the political and media elites believe is the lowest common denominator. Everyone knows what his income is and who foreigners are, so it was almost inevitable that the debate in Britain over its possible departure from the European Union should be reduced to whether its economy would gain or suffer by a “Brexit” (British exit), and whether it would be better able to control its borders from an influx of immigrants if there were no interference from Brussels.

Whether so momentous a change should be decided by a single plebiscite in which it is possible, depending on turnout, that the wishes of less than 40 per cent of the adult population will carry the day, may be wondered; but it is not discussed. Most constitutions require that a proposed constitutional change earn at least half the votes plus one to be approved (and in the case of the United States, the threshold for approval is higher than that). This is for good reason. The deeply corrupt referendum on Scottish independence—which excluded the large number of Scots living in England and elsewhere, as if they had lost caste by leaving the homeland, even temporarily—assumed that a 300-year-old union could and should be broken if there was one more vote in favor of doing so than in favor of not doing so. There is no presumption in favor of the status quo.

Nor is there much discussion of what the result of the referendum will commit the government to do should the Brexit side win. Past EU referenda on such matters as treaties and constitutions, if the votes went against the wishes of the political elites, were simply ignored. Just because a man has been elected by a democratic procedure does not mean he is a

democrat by sentiment or feels bound by the wishes of the people. And this, in the context, is appropriate enough. The founders of the European Union, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, believed in (at best) a very reduced role for the people in directing political affairs, the people supposedly being ill-equipped to understand them. This underlying assumption explains why European politicians seldom speak in plain terms about the European Project. They know the population would reject it and might agitate against it. And so the exact nature of the Project (the construction of a Yugoslavia on a vast scale) is delicately hidden from the view of the vulgar as if it were the Ark of the Covenant.

Consider, in other words, that even a popular vote for withdrawal will not necessarily result in withdrawal. The subsequent negotiations will be sufficiently drawn out for most everyone to forget the result of the referendum, in which they were not passionately interested in the first place. Few will care if, in the end, the vote is disregarded.

For myself, I believe the European Union to be, if not a disaster, an unnecessary monstrosity, though more of a brontosaurus than a tyrannosaurus. It is a peaceful vegetarian monster that munches its way through society rather than a carnivorous one that tears it apart with its vicious teeth. It feeds on regulation rather than on meat. Its lack of overt aggression makes it a difficult enemy to confront and defeat. By its incompetence and its promotion of ambitious mediocrity, it will make life less good than it might otherwise have been, but not intolerable—at least not until it breaks up in acrimony.

In theory, it would have been better for Britain never to have joined so sclerotic a union founded on essentially Colbertian[1] principles, doing so precisely at the moment when that model, which served well enough in the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War, had lost its dynamism. But I think it is important to understand that

the problems Britain now faces lie much deeper than its membership in the European Union, and have little to do with it. In or out, therefore, the challenges will remain the same.

There are no EU regulations preventing us from educating our children properly, for example, yet we do not do so and have been failing to do so for years. It is not the European Union's fault if we have to import labor so that even elementary jobs are done properly. It is not the EU's fault that we have the highest crime rate in Europe. It is not the European Union's fault that our infrastructure is the worst in Western Europe, or that our streets are the dirtiest and our youth the most drunken in Europe.

The European Union did not make our population one of the fattest in the world. It is not responsible for our failure to raise our productivity. The EU is not responsible for the evident incompetence of the British public administration, which is in my view quite incapable of managing immigration whether it is subsumed within the Brussels structure or not. It is not the European Union that enforces the low levels of research and development by British industry. It is not the European Union that imposed so much bureaucracy on my own profession, medicine, that doctors now find themselves doing paperwork (computerized) for as much time as they spend treating patients.

By the same token, it is not to the credit of the European Union that Britain now has almost full employment and a respectable rate of economic growth (though how durable these will prove to be remains to be seen).

In the end Brexit is almost a distraction from the real problems of British society. Its partisans argue that the European Union is destroying our traditions, but the British people have long shown a less than robust attachment to them, anyway. There was not so much as a sigh, let alone a protest, when the previous Prime Minister, Tony Blair, [changed the](#)

[constitution](#) on a personal whim.

The notion of the free-born Englishman has long since been of no application. The average Briton wants to be a ward of the state and regrets only that the state is not generous enough. The threats to Britain come mostly from Britain, not from the European Union.

[1] Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), Louis XIV's finance minister and the father of economic *dirigisme*.

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