

The Roots of Brexit

They go back at least to the Spanish Armada

by Conrad Black



Americans watching the spectacle currently unfolding in the British government should not be fearful that the entire British political system is cracking up. It isn't. The United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) has been contemplating its national strategic direction since World War II. Britain has been a Great Power since the emergence of the nation-state in the 16th century, along with the French, Spanish, and Turks. The general strategic division of Europe from the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 on was that France had the greatest army in Europe and Britain the greatest navy, and as it was an island, had little need for an army. It mainly engaged mercenaries to be its entry in topping up one side or another in the balance of power of continental nations and in some overseas activities. This is why there were Hessians in America fighting George Washington. Britain took what it wanted in the world, especially North America and

India, where they evicted France; South Africa, where they evicted the Dutch; and Australasia. And Britain took a series of maritime transit points of great strategic value in maintaining its empire: Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Cape Town, in particular.

This system continued through the First World War, although Germany, unified at last by Bismarck in 1871, succeeded France as the greatest land power in Europe, and Britain and France had to fight side by side to contain Germany in the First World War, with American assistance needed to defeat it, and Britain, America, and the Russians were all required to subdue Germany in the Second World War. So great were the British exertions in these wars, and so energetic had national sentiment in their former colonial empire become, that Britain ceased to be one of the world's greatest powers. Russia replaced Germany as the greatest power in Europe and the U.K. became the principal American ally in denying hegemony in Europe to the Russians. Britain managed the descent to the second rank of the world's states with more dignity than any other country that has ever had to meet this challenge, because of the magnificent Churchillian contribution to victory over Nazism and despite a few unfortunate slips such as the disorderly end of the British Indian Empire and the Palestine Mandate in 1947 and 1948, and the Suez fiasco in 1956, which tainted Anglo-American relations for several years.

About 60 years ago, Dean G. Acheson, who had been President Truman's able secretary of state, said, "Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role." That is the process that is reaching a decisive climax in London in the next two months. After Suez, the British tagged along with the Americans: Harold Macmillan with Eisenhower and Kennedy, to the point of not assisting France in becoming a nuclear power while Kennedy was trying to draw European military forces entirely into NATO and under U.S. command. (This was one of

the reasons why French president de Gaulle vetoed Britain's entry into the European Common Market, as it then was.) Harold Wilson got on well with Lyndon Johnson, a period when the U.S. was very much distracted by Asia, and the next prime minister, Edward Heath, put Britain's Commonwealth allies, especially Canada and Australia, over the side and plunged into Europe in 1973. Its membership was confirmed by 67 percent of voters in a referendum in 1975, but that was essentially an economic union and not a political one.

Margaret Thatcher came to office in 1979 and approved of the Common Market (though she renegotiated the terms of Britain's membership) but returned to intimate cooperation with the United States in working with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to end the Cold War. The complete collapse of the Soviet Union and of international Communism was a largely unforeseen bonus. As the Grand Alliance of Churchill and Roosevelt, revived as the special relationship between Thatcher and Reagan, was no longer necessary for pursuit of the common western interest against an adversarial superpower, Britain under Tony Blair hurled itself holus bolus back into Europe and signed on to the goal of an "ever closer Union" in Europe.

There was always a very audible level of misgiving in Britain about where the European project was going. In general, a broad swath of opinion was not for scrapping or subordinating the political institutions that Britain had elaborated over many centuries in favor of new and untested European institutions, and did not wish to have its relations with the United States and the senior members of the Commonwealth subsumed into the much less cooperative and comfortable relationship the major continental powers, particularly France and Germany, had with the United States, Canada, and Australia.

This tension between connecting to Europe or to the transoceanic world has been a factor in British government and foreign policy for centuries. When Charles I married the

sister of the French king Louis XIII, and Louis XIV gave refuge to the future kings Charles II and James II, there was great solidarity with France. When the Dutch prince of Orange became Britain's King William III, there was a close rapport with the Netherlands and against the French, and when the Hanoverian royal family became the heirs to the British throne (Kings George I, II, III, and IV), many considered that there was excessive British attention to German affairs. Britain has often been of Europe but has never really been in it, and it has much more in common with the other largely Anglo-Saxon and English-speaking democracies than with the continental powers.

The current absurd state of affairs arose when former prime minister David Cameron (2010–2016) promised a referendum on staying in Europe or leaving, certain that there could not be a vote to leave, but there was, 52 to 48 percent, in 2016. Cameron had to resign and was replaced by Theresa May, who claimed to be leaving when she was really advocating an arrangement of remaining in Europe with some modifications. She never indicated there was any chance of leaving without any departing arrangements, so Brussels made minimal concessions on behalf of the EU. Mrs. May's proposed deal, which would have been approved if Cameron had taken the trouble to negotiate it, was rejected by Parliament three times, all after she called an unnecessary election and lost her majority. Theresa May finally had no support left and retired earlier this year, and former London mayor Boris Johnson was chosen by the Conservative party to replace her. He has said he will try to negotiate a satisfactory arrangement with Brussels, but that he will leave without a compromise departure arrangement if he can't reach an acceptable one, and that he will not seek another extension of the departure date, which was supposed to occur last March. A bloc of 21 of his M.P.'s defected on the issue of possibly leaving without a negotiated agreement after Johnson secured Queen Elizabeth's agreement to prorogue (suspend) Parliament from next week to mid-October, just two weeks before the

October 31 departure date.

The Conservative rebels have joined with the five opposition parties (one Scottish and two Northern Irish parties and the Labour and Liberal Democratic parties) to deny the government's move to dissolve Parliament for new elections. They are going to legislate a requirement that there not be a "no-deal Brexit," as "crashing out of Europe" is called. Thus the opposition groups who could not agree on much else, will try to dictate and adopt legislation without attempting to remove the government. This is now the most absurd depth British parliamentary government has plumbed since the English Civil War in the mid-17th century. It is fatuous for the opposition parties to try to govern legislatively without control of any of the ministries, and as soon as there is what amounts to an expression of non-confidence in the government, which all but technically has already occurred, Johnson should be able successfully to request a writ of dissolution and of new elections from the venerable Queen Elizabeth II (Johnson is her 14th prime minister in her 67 years as queen).

I predict that the Johnson government will make an electoral arrangement with the Brexit party of Nigel Farage and will win a landslide victory against the fragmented opposition, a mélange of mountebanks, Marxists, and regional autonomists and separatists. The point of all this for the United States is that Britain will shift the balance of power in the world by a rapprochement with America after departing Europe, which was always conceived as a somewhat anti-American enterprise, in which the United States would be dispensed with when it was no longer needed to liberate it from the Nazis or protect it from the Soviets, and the European countries as a group would resume the role of world leadership the European Great powers had played prior to World War I. Britain is the world's fifth economy and one of its very most respected nationalities, and historically probably the world's most influential country, and in opting for a closer association with North America and

a loosened connection to continental Europe, there will be the most significant strategic adjustment in the world since the disintegration of the Soviet Union nearly 30 years ago.

As for Britain itself, its principal media outlets, the BBC and the *Economist*, *Financial Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *Times* of London, have rarely ceased for long in reviling the Trump administration, along with all his Republican and half of his Democratic predecessors since Roosevelt, and mocking the garishness of the American system generally. This unspeakable display of incompetence and dysfunctional hypocrisy should confer upon the British commentariat a trace of well-earned humility. Cromwell's dismissal of Parliament 370 years ago leaps to mind: "You came here to address the nation's grievances and you are now its greatest grievance. In God's name, go!" They shall go to the people, and, happily, many will not come back.

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