



Wales and the Quest for European Unity

Summary

Britain is set to leave a European Union fundamentally shaken by the Euro crisis and struggling with the consequences of denying citizens the benefits of economic solidarity. It has created both an impoverished and now only slowly recovering economic periphery of states that should probably never have joined the Euro in the first place, and a political periphery made up of states who might never now want to join the single currency. Britain's reduced influence in European politics, a direct consequence of its wise abstention from the Euro, means there can be a Europe without Britain, despite the concerns of such founders as Monnet. A more difficult question, however, is whether there can be a Britain without Europe. Brexit has already begun to test the durability of the devolution compromise that was predicated on EU membership. The looming threat as UK frameworks are formed to govern the UK's 'single market' is the English problem. Some have even interpreted Brexit as largely an expression of English nationalism, taking back control from the EU but also, more dangerously, asserting more control over the governance of the UK. The notion of taking back control still lacks any meaningful definition. Quite how the UK plans to set its own terms of trade is unexplained. Many political

theorists argue that international organisations allow states to manage the ever increasing forces of interdependence. Britain certainly has not calmed these forces simply by voting for Brexit. If taking back control is seen as little more than the equivalent of Royal Assent – the ceremonial acceptance of rules set by others – it will be viewed either as a false prospectus or, more grimly, as proof of European mendacity. Should the promises of Brexit prove an illusion they might be replaced by the reality of identity politics. We would face not a new Elizabethan age of wealth and adventure, but spiritual division alike to that which threatened the reign of our greatest monarch.

Wales stands apart from its Celtic cousins on Brexit. The vote in Wales reflected the English preference to leave the EU, although, like England, Wales was deeply divided. Cardiff voted Remain more strongly than did London (albeit finely). Assembly Members, just as MPs in Westminster, supported Remain by a large majority. As devolution approaches its 20th anniversary there is a danger of an ever growing divide between politicians and voters. The Cardiff bubble has been thickened into a dome by strong European sentiment now largely absent from the post-industrial heartlands of Wales. If Brexit does usher in a retro Elizabethan age of buccaneering confidence, it risks leaving the former coalfield communities even further behind as British markets are opened wide to permit free trade agreements with new markets in China, India, Brazil and the USA. Automation at the same time

threatens to reduce further the remaining pockets of traditional employment. Should Scotland leave the UK in the 2020s the challenges facing Wales would have to be tackled in a mock Tudor union between England and Wales.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of British ambivalence to European union was its inadvertently constructive character. The UK acted as a check and balance on some of the more ecstatic projects aimed at swift union. The greatest achievement of Britain's turbulent membership was the Single Market which completed the foundational goal of the EEC – but it had expansive implications for the union which quickly troubled many Conservative politicians, although these same consequences were the actual rewards the EEC's founding fathers expected to flow in a Common Market. This was followed by another achievement of true magnitude, this one principally a matter of unity, in the transformation of the union into a pan European entity with the accession of the states of eastern Europe. Unity was always primary for British governments, it is what made enduring union possible. This explains the UK's cautious attitude towards the Euro. The debate on monetary union and the institutional rigour required for its successful governance, was perhaps most properly conducted in the UK. The consensus that emerged in Britain was not a rejection of the Euro in principle, but a realisation of what a potent force a single currency would be when member states were faced with deep macro-economic challenges. There was a particular danger of instability if the citizens of Europe were

not full participants in such decision making. The democratic deficit seemingly inbuilt into union would only grow in a monetary union lacking public consent.

Brexit occurred in the context of European governance which for a generation put union ahead of unity. The growing gap between citizens and European leaders has been debilitating and not responded to with much imagination or success. The collapse of the European Convention was, on reflection, a warning sign of serious ill health in the institutions of union. However, the lesson in Britain was learnt with tiresome rote rather than an endeavour to reform and reconstruct a union strengthened with democratic unity. Arguably this explains why facts were treated so lightly in the exchange of histrionic rhetoric which characterised so much of the debate. Brexit cannot end interdependence and Britain's need to manage the economic and political forces beyond the reach of national sovereignty. Bizarrely to Remainers, a geo-political scenario that was viewed as unpropitious in the 1960s is now the blueprint for a global Britain in the 21st century. If Brexiteers have had little regard for the benefit of union, Remainers were causal about the requirements for unity and the need to keep, or actually to place for the first time, the citizen at the heart of European governance. It is never wise, after all, to tell the people what is good for them, far less to scold them for not listening properly. The transformative promises of European union seemed rather feeble in the post-industrial heartlands of Britain. In these areas voting to leave the EU was a proxy for disillusionment with

the closed, elite-driven world of British politics. The failure of leading Remainers to realise that a Leave vote was distinctly possible even after the facts were explained in an arduous campaign, was indicative of a deep malaise. Just as the decision to join the EEC was principally a judgement on the state of Britain in the 1970s, so too was the decision to leave really about Britain today.

Wales is the most vulnerable part of the UK in the wake of Brexit. It stands to lose economically unless the direct payments currently received from the EU are matched in the future by the Treasury. Wales exports more by proportion to the EU's Single Market than other parts of the UK, and reliance on livestock in the agricultural sector promises to be a particular concern. British institutions are likely to be tested by Brexit as they must attempt at least to replicate the shared governance currently undertaken in the EU. While Scotland and Northern Ireland have enough political gravity to make a success of bilateral relations with Whitehall, Wales can only hope for a system of common decision-making to govern the UK's internal market. Although the quest for European unity did not have much salience in Wales until the 1970s, it has had a deep impact since. On the conceptual plane it has utilised ideas that were once prominent in the search for world peace. Ideologically the quest for European unity had its biggest impact on the nationalist movement in allowing it to develop a confident and open outlook.

And so Britain stands apart from the great project to unify the states of Europe. It will seek no doubt “a close and lasting association“ with the EU, to quote the British government’s hoped for relations with the European Coal and Steel Community 67 years ago. We are about to repeat that failure of statecraft only this time with the benefit of hindsight. Only the most intense rejuvenation of British institutions will keep the UK together, a quest for internal unity that might once again open the door to Europe.