BRITAIN AND EUROPE 1914 and 2014

A FUTURUS Special

by

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1914

INTRODUCTION

The commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War is also an occasion to reflect on how this tragedy came to engulf Europe and Britain and what lessons the events of 1914 have for Britain today.

Britain's involvement in the war came with stunning speed. After all, on 24th July 1914, Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister, wrote to his confidante, Venetia Stanley:

"we are within measurable, or imaginable distance of a real Armageddon … Happily there seems to be no reason why we should be anything more than spectators. But it is a blood-curdling prospect – is it not?"

Yet, eleven days later, Britain declared war on Germany.

One feature of Britain's entry into the war was that the speed of diplomatic and military events meant that political decision making was entirely confined to the Cabinet and a handful of others. The strong aversion to being entangled in a continental war – which was the main sentiment in the Liberal Party, among Liberal voters and newspapers, and in the people generally – had no time to make itself felt. Asquith noted in

another letter to Venetia Stanley on 31st July,
“The general opinion at present – particularly strong in the City – is to keep out at almost all costs.”

Asquith’s letter of 24th July demonstrated that ministers did have some appreciation of the scale of the carnage and tragedy about to unfold but also showed how reluctant politicians were to acknowledge how entangled they had become by moral, legal and political obligations.

THE PARALLELS: 1914 AND 2014

In 1914, Britain plunged in a few days from peace to war. In 2014, the peaceful absorption of Britain in the EU project has been going on for over 40 years. Yet many of the underlying dynamics and determinants have similarities as one would expect when the future direction of a state on key matters becomes an issue.

When the stakes are important, it is not a strained argument to note historical parallels. One can note the resemblance of US policy to support democracy since the 1990s, even without consideration for conditions on the ground, as a parallel to President Woodrow Wilson’s idealism of 1918 while the continuity of Russian policy and interests from the Tsars via Stalin to Putin are obvious.

There is, therefore, an inherent likelihood that a national state will exhibit similar behavioural characteristics to those it has exhibited in the past.

One of the most obvious parallels between the crisis of 1914 and the current day entanglement of Britain in the EU, is that, in each case, Britain played a re-active role. Britain had no interest in waging a war in 1914. Similarly, today, Britain has never proposed any move towards ever-closer union or indeed any European Union at all. Yet both happened.

Another parallel is that British politicians misunderstood the nature of what they were involved in. As Sir Edward Grey

mentioned in his speech to the House of Commons on 3rd August 2014, which effectively swung the decision for war, “There has been in Europe two diplomatic groups, the Triple Alliance (of Germany, Austria and Italy) and what came to be called the Triple Entente for some years past. The Triple Entente was not an alliance it was a Diplomatic Group.”

This was not a true description. France and Russia had since 1894 an ever tighter alliance extending to co-ordinated military and political action, staff talks, strategic railway building in Russia financed by French loans, agreed war plans and so on. Britain was not directly involved in any of this.

The Franco-Russian alliance had consequences. In the 1890s the German army revised its war strategy and rebased it on the Schlieffen plan, to crush France first in a two-front war. Moreover, while there was only one likely casus belli in Western Europe, that is France seeking to regain Alsace Lorraine, if the opportunity presented itself, there were numerous places in the Balkans where Russia perceived it had interests which could clash with Austria and, possibly, Germany.

Thus any Balkan war which engaged Russian perceived interests could quickly involve France and Germany. By being part of a ‘Diplomatic Group’ with such an alliance, Britain was not simply being in a diplomatic combination with two independent powers, it was attaching itself to a highly integrated military alliance with numerous trigger points in the Balkans.

In the modern era, British politicians continually fail to understand the nature of the EU project, which is ultimately to form a true European Union. They have attached themselves to what they often misrepresent as a trading area with limited political content when they are really becoming part of a very ambitious embryonic state with massive geographical, demographic and ideological objectives.

A further parallel between 1914 and 2014 is the influence of the Foreign Office mandarins, such as Nicholson and Crowe in 1914, who were constantly pressing for closer political ties with France and Russia and also constantly suspicious of Germany. In the July crisis there was a stream of memoranda and advice from the Foreign Office and senior British ambassadors which, effectively, urged Britain into war. One single example will suffice: a telegram from Buchanan, the Ambassador in St. Petersburg, stating the choice facing London was "between giving Russia our support or renouncing our friendship. If we fail her now we cannot hope to maintain that friendly cooperation with her in Asia that is of such vital importance to us."

British politicians have been subjected, in modern times, to constant Foreign Office pressure to yield over one issue after another in EU matters for fear of being 'isolated'.

The prospect of breaking 'European law' has also been used to intimidate British politicians who have allowed themselves to be coerced by what Gladstone called 'assertions'. Gladstone in his speech of 10th August 1870 was referring to those urging the binding of all British governments in perpetuity and all circumstances to every paragraph of the Belgian Treaty of 1839. 'Assertions' have been a weapon used by EU spokesmen and euphiles to keep British politicians in line with the EU project.

Then there was, and is, the continual reiteration that Britain had not committed itself. Sir Edward Grey insisted on 3rd August, in his speech to Parliament, that Britain had a free hand:

"We do not construe anything which has previously taken place in our diplomatic relations with other Powers in this matter as restricting the freedom of the government to decide what attitude they should take now, or restrict the freedom of the House of Commons to decide what their attitude should be."

Despite signing a treaty which clearly stated that it envisaged ‘ever closer union’, British politicians today continually assert that they have not subordinated Britain to the EU project and make speeches about their own vision of ‘Europe’ which is far different from that of other EU leaders or the written objectives and processes of the EU Treaties.

Both in 1914 and in modern times British politicians asserted they wanted and, indeed, possessed an independent freedom but did not take care to avoid entanglements which were seen by others as commitments.

THE BELGIAN TREATY

Britain declared war amid much self-congratulation that it was taking a moral stance in upholding the Belgian Treaty of 1839 which the German Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, declared was ”a scrap of paper”. Yet it is clear, from the records of successive agonised Cabinet discussions and other documents, that much of the Liberal Cabinet was not convinced the Belgian Treaty should be the determinant for war. Confusion also extended to the Opposition. The Conservative Leader, Bonar Law, wrote a letter of support to Asquith on August 2nd urging him to “support France and Russia” and did not even mention Belgium. Supporting Tsarist Russia’s adventurism into the Balkans was anathema to the Liberals and would certainly have been an unpopular policy. Next day (possibly at Grey’s instigation), the Conservatives fell into line and put Belgium’s neutrality at the centre of their stance.

The events of 1914 point to the need for clarity in decision making. As put by one historian, Geoffrey Miller, “when war erupted on the Continent in 1914, the Cabinet suddenly had to ask itself some searching questions – questions which should have been posed years previously”. A crucial issue in decision making is whether and how far treaties and legal agreements, often arrived at in very different circumstances, should be the arbiter of action or whether the determinant should be the consideration of national interests in their entirety among

which previous legal agreements are clearly a factor among others.

A further issue which was not considered by the Cabinet, was a cost-benefit analysis of Britain's entry into the war, not just the estimated cost in lives and treasure, but any analysis of what Britain's policy was actually meant to achieve. Gladstone's speech of August 10th 1870, referred to below, also was farsighted in stressing that any action must be "practicable":
"It brings the object in view within the sphere of the practicable and attainable, instead of leaving it within the sphere of what might be desirable, but which might have been most difficult, under all the circumstances, to have realised."
Policy needed a clear aim and a clear means of achieving that aim. It was never practicable or attainable for Britain to have secured Belgium's neutrality and independence in full against a German invasion without alignment with France. Gladstone recognized this in 1870.
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ASQUITH'S DETERMINANTS

One of the most vivid scenes in the historic week leading up to Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4th August 1914, was that of Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, opening up and showing to the Cabinet, on 29th July, a yellowed piece of paper, the 1839 Treaty of Guarantee to Belgium.

It was at this point that Cabinet Ministers endeavoured to find out what their predecessors had signed and what precisely Britain was committed to do. They never did agree what that commitment was but a majority agreed "a substantial violation" of Belgian neutrality would be grounds for Britain to initiate military action alone.

The Treaty shown to the Cabinet was annotated with notes by

Gladstone, who was Prime Minister in 1870 at the time of the Franco-Prussian war, and which was the last time the ‘scrap of paper’ had been taken out of the archives. Nor had Gladstone found it easy to decipher the meaning of the Treaty of 1839, Indeed, to clarify Britain’s position, he immediately made two further Treaties in 1870, separate but complementary, with France and Prussia. These Treaties defined that, in the event of France or Prussia violating Belgian neutrality, Britain would defend Belgium in conjunction with the party which had not violated Belgian neutrality. These Treaties expired twelve months after the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war.

The importance of Gladstone’s view was apparent when looking at a letter from Asquith to Bonar Law on 2nd August setting out his determinants for decision-making just 36 hours before Britain declared war.

“We are under no obligation, express or implied, either to France or Russia to render them military or naval help. Our duties seem to be determined by reference to the following considerations.
(1) Our long standing and intimate friendship with France.
(2) It is a British interest that France should not be crushed as a great Power.
(3) Both the fact that France has concentrated practically their whole naval power in the Mediterranean, and our own interests, require that we should not allow Germany to use the North Sea or the Channel with her fleet for hostile operations against the Coast or shipping of France.
(4) Our Treaty obligations (whatever their proper construction) in regard to the neutrality and independence of Belgium.
In regard to (1) and (2) we do not think that these duties impose upon us the obligation at this moment of active intervention either by sea or land. We do not contemplate, for instance, and are satisfied that no good object would be served by, the immediate despatch of an expeditionary force.

In regard to (3) Sir E. Grey this (Sunday) afternoon sent …[a] communication to the French Ambassador. In regard to (4) we regard Mr. Gladstone's interpretation of the Treaty of 1839 … on 10th August 1870 as correctly defining our obligations. It is right, therefore, before deciding whether any and what action on our part is necessary to know what are the circumstances and conditions of any German interference with Belgian territory." [note: all underlining has been added]

One should note that the short emphatic statement in point (2) contrasts with the conditional and vague references to Belgium in point (4). Of course, the government did decide within days to send an expeditionary force to Belgium and thus, effectively, created a Franco-British military alliance.

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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SIR EDWARD GREY

What is striking about the conduct of foreign policy under Edward Grey between 1905 and 1914 were two themes which resonate today in relation to Britain's relationship with the EU.

The first, was the avoidance of clarity and analysis. As Churchill stated about the Entente with France, "Everyone must feel who knows the facts that we have the obligations of an alliance without its advantages and above all its precise definition."

The second, was the secrecy of Grey's policy, the implied political obligations which he either created or did not check, and the evasiveness towards his Cabinet colleagues, to Parliament and to the electorate. Among other matters, this included the military conversations with France after 1906 without the knowledge of Cabinet, the agreed naval dispositions with France, the strategy of supporting France as a Great Power and the vagueness of the commitment to Belgian neutrality.

It was not just conducting a policy without the open support of Parliament and the electorate. The secrecy and evasiveness meant that other powers were unclear about Britain's attitude in the event of war. For example, the question of the vulnerability of the French coasts due to the relocation of its fleet to the Mediterranean, was mentioned by Grey in his famous speech of 3rd August, together with his curt dismissal of a pledge by the Germans not to attack the French coasts. If the British government, prior to 1914, intended to secure the French coasts, it should have openly declared its intentions. The German reaction in 1914 shows this would not have been controversial or led to German hostility per se.

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THE GENERAL CAUSES OF THE WAR

The causes of the First World War were, of course, much wider than any action of the British government. These were numerous and included Balkan nationalism, the Franco-Russian alliance, the German army's lack of civilian control and its reckless Schlieffen-based plan to invade Belgium and the German build-up of a massive naval fleet.

Following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife at Sarajevo, the actions of Germany, Russia, France and Austria meant there would have been a European-wide war whether Britain was involved or not.

Britain may have seen itself, in 1914, as a peacemaker. However, both France and Germany had taken the decision to go to war, as had Austria and Russia, without knowing the final British decision. The lack of clarity and the constant desire to have "a free hand" meant that, in the final analysis, Britain exerted no influence on the decision of the other powers. Britain had a 're-active role'.

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QUOTING GLADSTONE

In popular versions of the outbreak of war, Britain went to war because a German advance into Belgium breached Belgian neutrality which Britain was bound, by Treaty (the Treaty of London 1839), to uphold.

This is untrue. Britain did not automatically go to war because Germany breached another state's neutrality which Britain had jointly guaranteed, along with other powers. On August 2nd 1914, the day before it invaded Belgium, Germany invaded Luxemburg, which was also guaranteed by Britain and the other major powers by a Treaty of 1867 with the same wording as the Belgian Treaty. Yet, Grey argued to Paul Cambon, the French Ambassador, that the 1867 Treaty jointly guaranteed neutrality by all the signatories and action would only be required if all the other signatories agreed to take such action. He did not apply this logic to the case of Belgium. The decision to intervene in Belgium was, therefore, not a standalone moral decision but was part of the determining thinking that it was in British interests that France should not be crushed by a German military move through Belgium.

As already pointed out, Gladstone in 1870 did not interpret the 1839 Treaty as invoking automatic war and he acted to clarify Britain's position by making new treaties.

Moreover, both Lloyd George and Churchill were on the record as stating that a German transit across Belgium would not necessarily mean Britain would be involved in fighting for Belgian's neutrality. A number of the Cabinet went further and would not agree to any war in which Britain was not directly threatened.

On August 3rd, in his speech to Parliament, Grey discussed 'what is our position in regard to Belgium'. Careful reading of the twin Treaties of 1839 show there was no sole British

guarantee of Belgian neutrality or independence. The guarantees in the 1839 Treaty were from the big five European Powers jointly and, in any case, were guarantees to Holland of Belgian neutrality in its own foreign policy, rather than Belgian neutrality per se.

In the course of his speech, Grey quoted at length from Gladstone's speech of 10th August 1870, at the time of the Franco Prussian war (which can stand as a template for any British government's approach to the Treaty of Accession to the European Community of 1972). In essence, Gladstone was saying that the Treaty obligations were subject to the circumstances that changed over time.

"There is, I admit, the obligation of the Treaty. It is not necessary, nor would time permit me, to enter into the complicated question of the nature of the obligations of that Treaty; but I am not able to subscribe to the doctrine of those who have held in this House what plainly amounts to an assertion, that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding on every party to it, irrespectively altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises. The great authorities upon foreign policy to whom I have been accustomed to listen, such as Lord Aberdeen and Lord Palmerston, never to my knowledge took that rigid and, if I may venture to say so, that impracticable view of the guarantee. The circumstance that there is already an existing guarantee in force is of necessity an important fact, and a weighty element in the case to which we are bound to give full and ample consideration. There is also this further consideration, the force of which we must all feel most deeply, and that is, the common interests against the unmeasured aggrandisement of any Power whatever"

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BRITISH INTERESTS

Grey stated, and evidently believed, as did Asquith, that the future of France as a Great Power and some kind of support for Belgian neutrality, but not Luxemburg, were in "British interests". "But I want to look at the thing [the threat to France] also without sentiment from the point of view of British interests and it is on that I am going to base and justify what I am presently going to say to the House."

The origins of the First World War and, in particular, the British decision to go to war, have been analysed more thoroughly than almost any historical event.

Historians have particularly investigated what were the determinants of the Cabinet decision for war. Was it the moral commitment to France through previous naval and military discussions which gave the obligations of an alliance without precision? Was it the more narrow naval decision to tell France and Germany that Britain would not allow the German fleet to come through the Channel? Was it the supposed obligations of the Belgian Treaty? Was it that France should not be 'crushed' as a great power?

Clearly, the fact that there were so many possible determinants of war in themselves showed the untidiness and incoherence of pre-1914 British foreign policy. Asquith's cabinet can be blamed for their failure to ask searching questions on the secret military talks and naval dispositions.

In the end, both Asquith and Grey put British interests, as they saw them, above everything, above friendship, naval obligations and written treaties.

The determinant for Britain declaring war in 1914 was the decision, by the British government, first the Asquith/Grey group, then the majority of the Cabinet, that it could not allow France to be crushed or massively weakened as this would threaten Britain's independence of action and, ultimately, its security. Of course, this had to be seen against the

background that the government did not know if France would be crushed and, in any case, France was only involved in the war because it had an alliance with Russia of which Grey said, “we do not even know the terms of that alliance”. That was a feeble and insecure basis for being part of a Diplomatic Group when one party (Britain) was excluded from the relations of the others (Russia and France).

It was not the moral obligation to France, nor the potential threat to the French coasts following the relocation of the French fleet to the Mediterranean, not Belgium, but sheer British interest in not seeing France crushed.

British interests could, and would, be extended to cover France “not be crushed as a Great Power”, which they believed would compromise Britain’s independence and security. It also, to some extent, extended to doing something about upholding the perceived obligations to support Belgian neutrality and independence. However, it seems that the Asquith supporters, including Lloyd George and Churchill, mainly regarded the German invasion of Belgium as useful in clarifying the decision to go to war in a clear cut way that could be presented to the British people. As Asquith wrote to Venetia Stanley on 4th August, “We got the news that the Germans had entered Belgium … This simplifies matters, so we sent the Germans an ultimatum.”

It is the conclusion of this study that the Asquith Cabinet were poor statesmen in allowing such a plethora of determinants but that, in the end, the concentration on what they thought were British interests was correct.

WRONG ASSUMPTIONS

This, of course, raises the question as to the correctness of their judgement of what were British interests. In this context the relevant British interest for the Cabinet was to avoid France being ‘crushed’ as a great power and whether this was a possibility depended on assumptions about the French

army, the German attack plans, and the actual worth of the small British expeditionary force. Reading Asquith's letter to Law of 2nd August it does seem as though this interest, to avoid the 'crushing' of France, was not to be made the subject of an immediate decision. After all, any 'crushing' would not take place for weeks or months.

That was the logic and language of Asquith's letter to Bonar Law of 2nd August. The question of Belgian neutrality and Britain's purported guarantees then became the lever to get Britain to declare war. At this point, this was Britain acting alone. France was not at war because of Belgian neutrality but because of its refusal of a German ultimatum. However, as Gladstone had foreseen, British military action in support of Belgian neutrality was not practicable without French support. At this point Britain and France's interests merged.

At least we can imply from Asquith's letter what Britain would not go to war for: It would not go to war for Russia or Luxemburg. War on behalf of Belgium independence depended on the circumstances.

One may enquire why it was a British interest, in 1914, that France should not be 'crushed' while this was not so in 1870? Of course, Germany had got stronger relative to France since 1870 but, in 1914, France was fighting alongside Russia, undoubtedly a Great Power as it was not in 1870. Indeed, on the face of it – and in the analysis of the German army – the Franco-Russian alliance was becoming more powerful. Was it really likely that the German army would succeed in marching 900 kilometres around Paris to 'crush' France while its own eastern provinces were invaded by Russia? It was far too easily assumed by the British Cabinet that France (and Russia?) would be 'crushed'.

In the event, by mid-September it was clear from the battle of the Marne that France was not "crushed". The German army, which was fighting hundreds of miles from the Channel coast to

the south east of Paris, was retreating and a large part of it had been detached to fight Russia.

It is important not to look at the events of 1914 through the lens of later developments in the First World War, let alone the Second World War. The German army in 1914 was never interested in, or aimed at, the French Channel ports.

The Marne battle was based on manoeuvre and actual casualties were relatively small in this decisive encounter.

The fact that France incurred massive unnecessary casualties in the Plan XVII 1914 attack plan – and would continue to suffer enormous losses in 1915 and 1916 so that, by 1917, there was indeed a danger of France being "crushed" – cannot alter the fact that, in 1914, France was not "crushed" and, therefore, the Asquith chain of reasoning that committed Britain to war, that France would be "crushed" and "crushed" quickly, was incorrect.

By the middle of September 1914, fears of France being "crushed" were already out-of-date. The French were, if not winning, holding their own in conjunction with Russia. After the Marne the German army in the west stayed mainly on the defensive. The German Commander, Moltke, had been relieved of his command. If they had not undertaken senseless attacks the French could have continued at least a stalemate war. Indeed, the provision of unexpected large armies from Britain and its Empire were counter-productive. Their availability encouraged both British and French commanders to be reckless with casualties. This does not seem to have been considered by the western powers.

But, of course, once taken, a major political decision – such as entry into war – has enormous long-lasting consequences.

One of the purposes of this study is to understand what were the determinants of British action in 1914 and how far the action was based on treaties and legal questions. It seems

that British interests were the final determinant but the Cabinet judgement of what these interests were was dubious and, in turn, rested on questionable assumptions.

France had been “crushed” in 1870, but this had not triggered British intervention. Even if it is assumed that France’s existence as a great power was more important in 1914 than in 1870, it is difficult to see why Britain could not have waited to see if France was looking like being ’crushed’ before intervening, despite the pressure from the French and British military.

2014

THE TERRIBLE COST

The British declaration of war on Germany on 4th August 1914 is widely agreed to be the most critical and far-reaching decision taken by any British government in the last two hundred years.

By the end of the First World War, a million British Empire soldiers were dead, many others were mutilated and suffered early deaths, the political and constitutional map of Europe had been torn up, and much of the accumulated savings of the great Victorian age had been squandered.

Such political instability had been injected into Europe that, within twenty years, a further bloody war had to be fought and the ties of the British Empire were so frayed that Britain made a rapid retreat from Empire after 1945.

WEAKNESSES OF 1914 REPEATED

All these developments led to a crisis of confidence in themselves among some British politicians who, by the 1960s, saw absorption in the project of European unity as an attractive option. “Outside, we would be in a harsh cold world” (an interesting example of its defeatism), as the Britain in Europe leaflet stated in putting the YES case in the 1975 Referendum. Yet the attachment of Britain to the

European project, which spread to almost all of the British political class from the 1980s, was based on some of the same weaknesses that had led to the week of crisis in August 1914. In the 1970s, joining the European project only attracted the support of slightly more than half of all MPs but, by the end of the 1990s, there were only a handful of MPs who were willing to contemplate withdrawal. This was a marked solidification of opinion.

These weaknesses in 1914, which were repeated in the 1960s onwards, can be described as a failure to even read and understand the meaning of diplomatic agreements and treaties, such as the Belgian Treaty – which the British government had signed; failure to clarify British intentions and understandings to other signatories and other powers in regard to those agreements, evasiveness to Parliament and the electorate about what were perceived to be other British moral, military and political obligations and intentions, especially to France, and a hope for the best without making preparations for other outcomes.

But, by 1975, the YES supporters were saying, in the words of Edward Heath, 'are we going to stay on the centre of the stage where we belong or are we going to shuffle off into the dusty wings of history?'. This was an extraordinary idea to promote – the amour-propre of politicians to be at the top table was being turned into an objective of policy.

Successive modern British governments have not only failed to read and understand the EU treaties. They have approached EU membership and negotiations as a matter of political emotion. In essence to be part of what the politicians called 'Europe' was to be modern and progressive.

Evasiveness has meant the repeated refusal to conduct a cost/benefit analysis of EU membership, an analysis which was done as a routine by the Swiss government when it considered joining the EEA [European Economic Area]. There has also been

over-literal adherence to the EU treaties in matters which should be interpreted according to changed circumstances and to British interests and certainly not decided by foreign lawyers. Others in the EU have been more realistic.

Indeed, Gladstone's analysis of the obligations of the Belgian Treaty, and the manner in which these should be construed, and the necessity for the "practicable and attainable", should be commended to the present British government when considering their obligations under the Treaty of Accession of 1972.

Take the question of free movement of people. For a long time, this Treaty clause did not cause any difficulty for the UK but now it does and, particularly, causes problems for Britain where almost half of EU migrant labour has taken up jobs. Gladstone's injunction was clear:

"I am not able to subscribe to … what plainly amounts to an assertion, that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding on every party to it, irrespectively altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises."

THE DETERMINANTS OF BRITAIN'S EU MEMBERSHIP

What was the determinant for the British political class to join the EU, and what was the determinant to stay in?

Even on 24th January 2014 David Cameron was still saying, "I'm confident that we'll have a successful negotiation and a successful referendum". Quite clearly, the alleged benefits of extra trade, jobs and investment were not determinants. After all, they were simply what Gladstone would characterise as 'assertions' and no cost/benefit analysis was ever produced. The MacDougall Report, and other subsequent analyses, showed that there was little economic benefit and, probably, dis-benefit.. These alleged benefits played the same role in 1972, and onwards, as the Belgian Treaty did in 1914 in diverting

attention from what were the real determinants.

We must then ask the same searching questions as to the determinants for Britain joining and remaining in the EU. Also, we can examine how far current politicians should be bound by treaties and legal agreements or whether they might take the more robust view outlined by Gladstone and acknowledged by Grey and Asquith.

Since 1960 British governments and the political class seem to have been driven by even more obscure and unfathomable motives. Have they simply followed political fashion for incorporation in large organisations? Is it the fear of being outside? Is it that political posturing and public relations have, indeed, driven policy?

Moreover, the European Union Treaty, like all treaties, as Gladstone had pointed out, was not to be considered a static document. Further, the EU Treaty had built into it the mandate for "ever closer union", which meant that it would always be an irritating factor. Every controversial new EU law or agreement had the same effect on British-EU relations as the launch of a new battleship for the High Seas Fleet had on Anglo-German relations before 1914.

Lack of analysis, and frank and honest debate, leads to lack of clarity which, in turn, means that, at every stage of the evolution of the EU, Britain has lacked influence and has not clearly stated what its aims were.

Nor has it been clear about what is unacceptable to Britain about the EU as it stands even now and David Cameron seems to have great difficulty in even formulating the details of what he wishes to renegotiate.

The fact is that the EU membership comes down in the end to the question of British interests. Is it in the interests of Britain that it should subordinate itself to a project which is aimed at "ever closer union" and a "United States of

Europe” as Viviane Reding recently stated on January 8th 2014? Or, as the NO Campaign in 1975 put it, “This will take away from us the right to rule ourselves which we have enjoyed for centuries.”

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It is possible to argue that membership of the EU increases the power of the British political class in Britain itself. Membership of the EU means increasing government, increased complexity and increased contact with other governments and EU institutions, all of which has to be mediated by the political class with ensuing power, perquisites and prominence. At the same time, the existence of EU institutions, along with other transnational bodies which often lay down the template for EU activity, allow more responsibility for major issues to be outsourced by British politicians. Increased power, with diminished responsibility, has been called names in the past. It is probably this, together with the crisis of confidence in the 1960s and after, which is a hidden determinant of British policy.

It is important to realise, as noted by former President Giscard, that it is British politicians who have agreed to all the extensions of EU powers, well beyond the Treaty of 1972 – they have agreed to decisions by majority vote, to massive budget contributions, to new powers in justice, social affairs, etc. The emotional commitment to the EU as a symbol of progressive, modern political action, like Grey’s moral commitment to France before 1914, became a fixed political idea. Grey’s moral commitment evolved into a political decision that it was Britain’s interest that France should not be crushed, that France would most likely be “crushed” by Germany and, therefore, military action must be undertaken in support of France. Similarly, the emotional commitment to the EU evolved into a political decision that it was in Britain’s interest that Britain must remain in the EU and, therefore, negotiate and allow further moves to “ever closer union”. In

both cases, the chain of reasoning was faulty.

In recent years, the German government, quite correctly, breached the Stability and Growth Pact when they considered their economy needed higher deficits. Regardless of whether this was correct economic policy or not, it was acting in what it considered as the interests of the German people, rather than sticking to a "scrap of paper". Similarly, the European Central Bank, quite correctly, acted on what it considered were the interests of the people of the eurozone, whether it was correct or not, when they breached the Maastricht Treaty and bailed out the countries of Southern Europe.

It was quite clear that the freedom of movement principle could lead, in some circumstances, to extreme numbers of migrants – as it has done with consequent impoverishment of Britain's poorest people. It was politically and socially in British interests to withdraw from this obligation, yet British ministers seemed to be incapable of following Gladstone's sensible analysis.

CONCLUSION

The events which so abruptly shattered the complacency of the Liberal government in 1914 are relevant to understanding the tangle into which successive modern British governments have enmeshed themselves, and the British people, in their membership of the EU. 'Searching questions' have rarely been asked, have been discouraged and those who raised them have been disgracefully smeared as 'narrow nationalists' or 'xenophobic'.

Both occasions exhibited similar weaknesses in political decision-making. On both occasions, the real determinants of policy were cloaked by extraneous matters, and by an outbreak of moralising self-congratulation. In 1914, it was the Belgian Treaty which cloaked the decision that France could not be allowed to be "crushed", although this possibility was soon shown to be an incorrect assumption. Since 1972, the

‘asserted’ economic benefits of EU membership have diverted attention from the real determinants of decision-making. The difficulty is that, while the 1914 decisions were understandable, if incorrect, it is impossible to understand the reasoning behind the political class’s unanimity about ‘Europe’ in modern times.

There will be many commemorations over the next few years and much regret will be expressed over the tragedy and the human losses and miseries which were the result of the war.

But the political principles are clear. Politicians must not be afraid to ask searching questions. They must seek clarity and precise definitions in regard to obligations. They must avoid secrecy and evasiveness to Parliament and the people.

Especially, they must follow Gladstone’s dictum about the commitment to treaties being dependent on the circumstances of the time and Sir Edward Grey’s repeated assertions that policy decisions must be based on British interests.