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ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

Back to the 1960s or Further Back? Brexit as a European Dilemma between Past and Future

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'To be or not to be . . . European' seems to be an ever present British dilemma. When they are in, they want to get out, and when they are out, they want – or need – to get in. That has been true in times of both war and peace and reflects the fact that Europe may not be liked and embraced easily by the British, although it constitutes a fate that Albion cannot easily avoid. You might expect that a learning process would eventually kick in and make the dilemma easier to handle, but in the light of the present Brexit affair such expectations seem unwarranted. Europe is still a British dilemma, which in fact is also a European dilemma.

When the United Kingdom applied for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1961, having first declined to participate in the elaboration of the Rome Treaties, it was the French President, Charles De Gaulle, who repeatedly vetoed UK membership. It is not without irony, therefore, that it is now another Frenchman, Michel Barnier, who is making it difficult for the United Kingdom to leave the EU. There seems to be an element of repetition in history after all, and one may ask whether the prospect of Brexit signals that Europe is heading back to the 1960s, to a period when Western Europe was split into two competing market blocs, and Europe as whole into three, with the Comecon as the Eastern Bloc's third leg.

The 1960s saw a divided Europe. There was the Cold War East–West divide on the one hand, and Western Europe itself was divided into 'the Inner Six' (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany) versus 'the Outer Seven' (Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), on the other. The Seven organised themselves into the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) as a response to the creation of the EEC by the Six. EFTA was a rather asymmetrical and odd construction with one major state, the United Kingdom, and six smaller states, including, as a special member, Salazar's Portugal. It was the Macmillan government that had paved the way for the Portuguese dictatorship's entry into the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), which seems to indicate that European friends were a dear commodity for the British as a consequence of their (self) exclusion from the Treaty of Rome.

In many respects, EFTA fitted the UK well. It was a loose free trade arrangement in industrial goods only, lacking strong supranational institutions, but still a useful instrument for counter-balancing the EEC and exerting influence on the rest of Western Europe. As the only major power in EFTA, UK governments had some leeway in bending EFTA rules to their own advantage, as the Wilson government did when it unilaterally imposed an import surcharge in 1964. Thus, it is no wonder that some Brexiteers today seem to be longing for an arrangement resembling the good old EFTA days in the 1960s. History has its uses.

The idea may not even be as far-fetched as it sounds. One scenario for the future EU, aired by the European Commission and others, consists of strengthening supranational cooperation especially on matters related to the Single Market and the European Monetary Union (EMU). If this should happen, it would drive some EU countries to the margins, for example the Scandinavian members, who in response would probably seek new market arrangements, including with the United Kingdom. If this should materialise, a Europe split into competing

market blocs could reappear, with a smell of the 1960s hanging in the air. The smell might even be amplified by another ongoing development with historical currency, namely the return of an East–West divide caused by the increasing anti-European and anti-liberal democracy mood in some Central and Eastern European countries.

However, EU scepticism and anti-democratic populism are not only on the rise in Eastern Europe. These are much broader European phenomena, of which the Brexit vote was one product. Any similarities between the present day and the 1960s can only be partially relevant. Europe and the world of 2018–9 is very different from the 1960s. Many anti-EU populists of today, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Danish People's Party (DPP) and the Finn's Party (formerly known as The True Finns) seem to be longing for the 1960s, when political realities – concerning nation states and national sovereignty, citizenship and migration – were simpler. But competitive globalisation and Europeanisation have changed all that.

Nostalgia for the bygone era of the 1960s often conveniently glosses over historical details. It is important to remember that although UK governments saw many advantages in EFTA, the Macmillan government had decided to apply for EEC membership almost before its signature on the EFTA Treaty had dried. As they saw it, the problem was one of power, influence and economic potential. Being left with 'the dwarfs' in EFTA was not the optimal way for the UK to develop and exploit its political and economic potential. At exactly the same time a debate raged within the country about the decline of the UK and its decreasing world power status as the result of the loss of the empire and poor economic performance. Joining the EEC, Macmillan and others hoped, would be a way of 'saving the Titanic' by reversing the decline. The EEC (and from 1967 the European Community, EC), oversaw impressive growth rates and was seen by many as the key to reasserting European power and influence in the world. Or at least Western European power, which is precisely why US governments generally were very supportive of Western European integration and why they were so keen to see the UK be part of it. It was a Cold War logic asserting itself, bent on strengthening the Pax Americana imperial system.

This Cold War logic is long gone, and with it US support for European integration. With a President in the White House, who, among other things, has even managed to cast into doubt the solidarity clause of the NATO framework, you would think that the Europeans had all the reasons in the world to try to reassert European political principles, organisation and power. This calculation is certainly visible at the elite level, among the EU institutions in Brussels and among some European governments, as is testified by the European – including UK – attempts to safeguard free trade norms, support the Paris climate accord and fight against US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and their unilateral trade sanctions imposed in its aftermath. It is an uphill struggle, however, not only because of the obvious difficulties for Europe to match US power and capability, but because at the moment Europe is disintegrating rather than uniting.

Without the Cold War ties binding Western Europe together, as they did in the 1960s, the prospect of one nation cutting itself lose from the rest of the EU has important repercussions. Given the fundamental dissimilarities between 2018–9 and the 1960s, Brexit is no longer only a British dilemma. It is equally an acute European dilemma for a number of reasons.

First, Brexit risks creating reciprocal animosity and rivalry between Europe and the United Kingdom. It will be a problem for both parties. Europe will remain a political and economic challenge to the United Kingdom. It remains to be seen if, from the British perspective, this challenge – under a new world order characterised by an unpredictable United States, a rising China, a self-asserting Russia and serious migration, climate and ecological problems – is better handled outside than inside the European Union. For Europe, the British farewell is a serious blow to its global economic and political clout and position. This is bad in itself, but a potential rivalry with the UK may also lead to an undermining of the cohesion of the Union. If the UK comes to act as an independent maverick, perhaps by assisting the United States in fostering or enlarging rifts and strife between 'Old Europe' and 'New Europe,' or by lending support to

various national EU exit campaigns, this will be a problem for the Union as much as the cause of constant conflict between the EU and the UK.

Second, Brexit is dangerous to the EU because of the way it was enacted and the message it sends. The message was clear: if you do not like it in the Union, you can always leave. That is fair enough, and the EU treaties allow for that. But it would be devastating for the Union if it increasingly becomes the norm to host referendums on whether to stay or leave the Union. Referendum rules and requirements differ from state to state, but in step with the rise in Euroscepticism and parties representing Eurosceptic views in national parliaments, the pressure for holding such referendums will likely only become larger. A copycat reflex triggered by Brexit may be on the cards, only tempered, maybe, by voters in other countries witnessing the actual problems Brexit has created at home.

Third, such a reflex is all the more likely because national political systems and governments are under strain. Brexit is in itself a symbol and product of the new populist turn in European politics. Vast strands of the populations of Europe, including the UK, are angered and concerned about immigration, globalisation, Europeanisation and a general feeling of lacking political control. 'Take Back Control' was a dominant 'Leave' slogan; its message resonates strongly with populist parties and some governments all over Europe today. The call for a 'return to the nation state', and in some parts of Europe even for a new autocratic illiberal democracy, shows that Europe is increasingly stretched and unlikely to cope. Borders are going up, not down. Brexit is a radical challenge for all those who see the EU as the best or perhaps only way of promoting European interest and liberal democratic values in a global system characterised by increased protectionism, tightened border controls and abandonment of multilateral solutions.

Understanding the past better allows us to see that we are not heading for a return to a (modified) version of the 1960s, regardless of the nostalgic claims that such a thing would be possible. At the moment political ideas and conduct across Europe seem to derive much more inspiration from the 1930s, characterised by widespread protectionist and autocratic impulses and a renewed appetite for a 'strong man'. It will be a vital time for Europe after the UK has left because there is a fight to be fought for all liberal and democratic forces – one which may even come to show once again, as it did in the 1930s, that it is impossible for the UK to turn its back to Europe. Europe is not a choice but a fate to the UK, and much would be won if the British came to appreciate this historical rule.

Since Brexit is a European dilemma, it is tempting to argue that the EU could be more flexible in helping the UK government out by granting it a special relationship. But there is an important difference between being 'in' or 'out'. As members of the EU, countries can sin and can be granted special concessions or opt-outs. This happened in relation to the terms of UK membership and rebate during the 1970s and 1980s, and concerning Denmark in 1992 after the 'no' vote to the referendum on joining the Maastricht Treaty. But these flexible times are long gone; the UK has forsaken these options by leaving. The problem is that special concessions granted to the UK today would risk immediately generating a number of special concession demands from other member states, and even from non-member states. It would open a Pandora's Box of unforeseeable consequences. As former Danish Foreign Minister, Uffe Ellemann-Jensen recently put it, it is a hard to ask, as the UK government has done, for concessions that would undermine the principles of the single market. Therefore, it seems that both the UK and the EU remain trapped in a navigation between Scylla and Charybdis. It remains to be seen if either of them will return as Odysseus.