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***Why History Matters :
Britain and European Integration Past and Present***

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Why History Matters : Britain and European Integration past and present

In Britain, the theory, practice and development of European integration studies is largely dominated by policy think tanks and University Departments of Political Science. The role and place of history in the unique and often elusive process of European integration may not seem to have the same salience as debates like those that try to pin down the extent and range of state-like qualities that states now possess; what enlargement means and how to achieve it; the nature of European 'foreign policy'.

However, there is a growing corpus of work in which the developments from 1945 are being re-constructed by international teams of historians using archival sources. Historians can contribute to the general understanding of European integration, and , at the same time, we have our own debates, too : the role of economics; the role of individuals, of ideas, of political advantage; the linkages between economic and security politics; the relationship between the end of empires, the cold war and European integration, are just a few of them. Contemporary history is extremely hard - the quest for clear analysis and interpretation, when many of the actors are still alive, and when the issues are certainly still germane is certainly tough. It can also be politicised, and historians have to be prepared for unpleasantness from left and right. It may make some of us long for the archaeologists' job of teasing the past out of limited sources; for the reassurance of some political scientific methodological perspective against which to test our 'data'; even perhaps for the consultant's fee for an opaque prediction of what may yet happen.

My theme today is one of contemporary history. I am interested in the way that Empire / Commonwealth has played into Britain's postwar policies towards European integration. Although I shall talk about Britain, I hope that the resonance

across states will not be lost as I concentrate on one small set of so-called 'off-shore' islands. My sub-text is, that explaining how the past plays into the present not only helps us both to learn more about the past, but to understand ourselves, and where we are today. The past, we may say, is still here. I would like to suggest, further, that when we look at how our identities – or mentalités - are shaped, the national (and the regional) is still more pervasive than the 'European'. This is to reflect upon what I find, and is not intended as a normative remark.

Much has been written about Britain's so-called problems – the British have been portrayed as the awkward partner, as being in a dialogue of the deaf, the non-European European country, the quasi-US state – and it may seem an impertinence to revisit these questions. As we all know, the reasons for Britain's postwar characteristics are manifold : its constitutional traditions; its island status; the radical Labourism of early postwar Britain compared with more centrist continental social democracy; its special relations with the US; its desire for unsullied governmental and national sovereignty. (And this is both to ignore those who attribute our problems to sheer arrogance, nationalism, bloody-mindedness, antediluvian attitudes, and a desire to wreck).

So where and how does our Empire / Commonwealth history play into this picture? I would first like to argue that memories of Empire / Commonwealth have been projected as, by and large, being positive. This is not to make a historical judgement, but rather to reflect on how successive generations have processed the imperial experience. Imperialism has been re-inforced by positive images of war, and success in war in the twentieth century. Both these factors have played into a rather suspicious attitude towards continental Europe - often lumped together despite the very different cultures and histories than the continent itself has. Our mentalité - general public opinion, political party priorities, education, decision-making methods have reflected a kind of conservatism born of generations of imperial management. Empire, and memory of Empire also worked against the grain of adaptation to the postwar world in the perceptions of party and public opinion more generally. There has never been a major British political party unreservedly committed to European integration - the moves towards European institutions have been hard fought for and

driven by the exigencies of office, whether the party in power has been Conservative or Labour. European integration has also split both of the major political parties.

Much of this is well-known and well-researched. But how do we explain how the UK has in practice dealt with its imperial past – how 'history mattering', being significant has played into political developments. My argument here is that the *idée fixe*, if you like, has shifted from empire, to leadership. What has in part remained of the memory of an imperial past is a need to 'lead' or at least 'to be perceived to lead' - or to 'punch above our weight' as former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd once put it. Leadership is thus the principal way in which memory of an imperial past has been, often unconsciously, captured and cherished, shaped by the self-confidence which Norman Davies argues is part of our *mentalité*. A 'virtuous circle' of positive, collective memories has become a temptation and a trap for government. In practice this means being able to agenda-set, or to set conditions for participation in collective enterprises; to project power; and to display to public and party opinion at home qualities of leadership. So the 'need to lead' mentality - or at least the need to be thought to lead is my interest. I shall argue that, having understandably but disastrously, failed to understand the implications of integration policy in the early 1950s, the opportunities to lead, and therefore to feel comfortable as European players have largely been absent for the British. As we shall see, even New Labour has been imbued by this imperial overhang. The power of a national past is as powerful - if in different ways - as are the pressures to adapt.

The need to lead seems to be a genuinely integral part of the fabric of decision making. In 1945, national bankruptcy was seen as a temporary postwar blip, that would soon be overcome. The 1947 decision to go for an atomic bomb was what Peter Hennessy has called an 'of course' decision. In 1950, the Labour government chose not to take the risk of participation in the first experiment in supra-national, sectoral integration, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). This reluctance was most clearly expressed by the Permanent Under-Secretary's Committee: 'The United Kingdom cannot seriously contemplate joining in European integration. Apart from geographical and strategic considerations, Commonwealth ties and the special position of the United Kingdom as the centre of the sterling area, we cannot consider

submitting our political and economic system to supra-national institutions. Moreover, if these institutions did not prove workable, their dissolution would not be serious for the individual European countries which would go their separate ways again; it would be another matter for the United Kingdom which would have had to break its Commonwealth and sterling area connections to join them. Nor is there, in fact, any evidence that there is real support in this country for any institutional connection with the continent. Moreover, although the fact may not be universally recognised, it is not in the true interests of the continent that we should sacrifice our present unattached position which enables us, together with the United States, to give a lead to the free world.' It was not until Suez that the cold light of a post-imperial day began to shift attitudes, and then, for Britain, to cleave to power (to US power) and to proclaim interdependence, was a not unexpected response to that Anglo-French fiasco. Even as the Suez fiasco was underway, the British were suggesting to their continental partners better ways of running Europe - a new agenda with the proposed free trade area, rather than the Common Market, as the centrepiece of British planning.

In the postwar debate over European integration in Britain, both sides used the leadership argument to support their cases - Europe either needed British leadership, or Britain was still called to a wider enterprise than that based on the European continent.

Indeed, a major study by Edmund Dell on the ECSC is actually called *The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe*. Dell argues that the 'British reaction to the Schuman Plan was the failure to perceive that British participation in it was consistent with Britain's view of itself. It could be a global power, and at the centre of the Commonwealth and sterling area, and still participate in the Schuman Plan.' The Lee Reports (1960, 1) made it perfectly clear that Britain would lose its global leadership role if it remained out of the EEC, a view taken up by Harold Macmillan. Hugo Young talks of Edward Heath's desire, 'not only of extending Britain's influence in the world, but also of the controlling interest which membership of the Community would confer on this one country.'

Euroscepticism is a complex phenomenon, but the positive memory of Britain's imperial past played a powerful role in its development. Douglas Jay, MP, wrote and debated extensively against British membership of the Communities during the 1960s. He went on to be a leading campaigner for the 'No' vote in the 1975 referendum. 'Neither economically, politically, culturally nor sentimentally are we a merely European power - if indeed 'Europe' can be said to exist as anything more than a stretch of land from the Urals to the Atlantic coast. The British public just does not feel itself more closely allied to Poles or Spaniards than to the people of Australia or New Zealand.' Membership of the EC might look superficially like a step to a more united Europe and a move towards world organization and a wider international outlook for Britain, but actually 'it would reduce our influence'. The political kinship of Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand was something of the greatest value and overwhelmingly worth preserving, and Britain's influence in the world would be far greater if it could act as a bridge between the old and new Commonwealth in the interest of democratic institutions and racial harmony, rather than simply pursuing the aim of 'the merging of independent countries in one continent.'

These views were largely shared by the then leader of the Labour Party, Hugh Gaitskell, at the time of the first British application. His most famous appeal against the EEC was made at the Labour Party conference of 1962. Membership of a federal Europe would mean 'the end of Britain as an independent European state. I make no apology for repeating it. It means the end of a thousand years of history.... And it does mean the end of the Commonwealth. ... It is sheer nonsense.'

In the Conservative Party, the Suez group and others transferred loyalty to the Commonwealth 'as the offspring of Empire'. Enoch Powell reflected in 1991, that, 'When I resigned my chair in Australia in 1939 in order to come home and enlist, had I been asked 'What is the state whose uniform you wish to wear and in whose service you expect to perish?' I would have said, 'The British Empire'. I would have had no doubt in giving that reply. It was a world wide power that had decided to face its enemies upon the battlefield. And this gigantism, this delusion that big is great, the bullfrog mentality, has haunted Britain ever since 1945.... I also know that on my deathbed I shall still be believing with one part of my brain that somewhere on every

ocean of the world there is a great grey ship with three funnels and 16-inch guns which can blow out of the water any other navy which is likely to face it'.

By the early 1980s, British Conservatives were led by a belligerent Margaret Thatcher, and the British Labour Party had a manifesto commitment to leave the Communities. It is in this context that we shall examine the extent to which the Labour Party has shaken off the memory and inheritance of Empire in its European policies - how new is New Labour.

The 1997 Labour Party manifesto was up-beat on Europe. It reflected both change, and the traditional desire to lead and to change Europe itself. 'We will give Britain leadership in Europe' one manifesto headline screams. The manifesto draws upon Britain's historic role as a 'leader of nations'. It is quite nationalistic in tone: Britain will be 'resolute in standing up for its own interests', but will make a 'fresh start' with a leading role. The effect of this is appeared to be intended to reinforce Europe as a vehicle for the restoration of a natural global leadership role for Britain, harnessed to the instinctive sense of moral responsibility and internationalism that characterises the Labour Party. The EU is, as it were, taken for granted as a part of the British overseas landscape, although a Federal Europe is explicitly rejected in the manifesto.

New Labour's effort to draw a line under the past, was coupled with a propaganda campaign, 'Cool Britannia', during the early months of 1998, in which emphasis was laid upon youth, civilian virtues and the brand values of Britain as a clever and creative island and one of the world's pioneers, rather than as one of its museums, despite the ironic but presumably unintentional imperial connotations of the word 'Britannia'. There have even been suggestions that collective memories that have largely been sustained as positive experiences should be erased by treating them as negative experiences.

Blair clearly sees a Third Way in European politics, and told the French National Assembly in March 1998: 'There is a sense in which there is a third way in EU development also. We integrate where it makes sense to do so; if not, we celebrate the diversity which subsidiarity brings'. But what is striking about this speech, is that

it is nevertheless permeated by the desire to change and to lead. The European Third Way is presented as a project to change Europe, with a new agenda, new priorities, the creation of a peoples' Europe. This is explicitly stated by the Third Way guru Anthony Giddens. It can thus be argued that there has been a genuine shift in attitudes and approaches to the EU by New Labour. But the desire for leadership and the need to change Europe to fit Britain's interest has remained a central part of the rhetoric, if not the practice of European politics.

The caution surrounding the Economic and Monetary Union project is the clearest example of this. In the run up to the election it was clear that, in private, many senior members of the Labour Party felt that the EMU issue would evaporate. After all, a project for economic union has been proposed in 1970, for completion by 1980. The British gut reaction that this continental initiative would not run, much as was thought about the Messina talks in 1955, talks which set up the EEC. Yet the EMU question has starkly exposed the gap between the rhetoric of leadership and the inability to carry this out while outside the system. There remain grave doubts about the EMU project, but the government has been forced to try to move closer to membership, and to persuade British opinion that this is the right thing to do, as it is clear that broader 'leadership' arguments will otherwise founder. So, as was done with the first two applications to the Communities, the British have set conditions.

Equally, New Labour sees the EU as a means for projecting power out into the wider world. In practice, this has resulted in the recent initiative to extend the competencies of the Union to the field of security and defence. Although much of what was proposed in the St Malo declaration had been debated by our continental partners for some time, it was presented as an arena in which the UK was leading a new debate, although both the British and the French have put in paternity claims for the St Malo baby. The timing and place of the declaration - in France and by a joint statement with the French - was skilful, for Blair had reminded the French in his National Assembly speech that 'We are both nations that are used to power. We are not frightened of it or ashamed of it. We both want to remain a power for good in the world.' The airwar over Kosovo provided an opportunity for Blair at once to project British leadership in hard, military power terms, and at the same time to try and

agenda set- with the Chicago speech of April 1999 in which he began to outline the conditions for international humanitarian intervention.

Whilst emphasising the capacity of the government to project power through the EU, it has not tried to shake off the trappings of great power that the first Labour government of 1945-1951 established. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh in 1997 revealed that the Labour Government wished to play a continuing leadership role with regard to the Commonwealth. It was an exceptional occasion, and the government were determined to extract maximum benefit from it. Blair told the meeting, 'I cherish the ties of history.... But this does not define Britain for me or my generation. I want people like you to admire Britain for what we are; not what we have been.... Our foreign policy is changing. We are again becoming a central player in Europe. Our relationship with the US is stronger. Across a range of international bodies from the UN to the G8 we are playing our true role again. Our aim is to be pivotal.' New Labour has not wished to shake the consensus on nuclear weaponry, or on close ties with the US. This inheritance from Old Labour of 1945-1951 has survived the Third Way largely intact.

It is clear that the memory of the Empire, and the way that this has played into the determination to develop the Commonwealth, the retention of nuclear weaponry, and the cleaving to the only superpower, the US, has continued to affect the management of British foreign policy, even under New Labour, even with a more positive European policy. Memories of imperial greatness, reinforced by success in two world wars have been sustained over the cold war and the post-cold war periods. Continuity has perhaps been more powerful than change.

If Empire is lost without public trauma or defeat, it seems to be harder to move forward. It certainly takes time. An establishment view of the relationship between history and politics is given by Professor Kenneth Morgan who has commented, 'the rapidity and lack of tension with which Britain shed her imperial domain is perhaps the most notable of tributes to national stability and, possibly, maturity in the post-war world.... Britain shed her imperial role between 1947 and 1970 (Rhodesia excepted) with much skill and humanity. It was decolonization without traumas and without

tears.' Professor Robert Holland argues that change of shaking off the memories of imperial strength may take a generation. I would suggest that the time frame may be longer. Indeed, because imperial memories have been portrayed as being so positive, they have not yet have played themselves out in British politics, despite an increasing acceptance, in day-to-day life, of Britain's role in the EU. These direct manifestations of the old are mixed - ranging from the rabid, but short-lived nationalism engendered by the Falklands War, to the acceptance of a quasi post-imperial role concerning Iraq, (which is more frequently commented upon by Iraqi than British spokesmen), and to the low-key, but self-congratulatory, ending of empire in Hong Kong.

Although empire has virtually vanished, Britain's need to portray itself, especially at home, as a great global power with an instinct to show leadership has thus proved to be remarkably resilient. The qualities of this preoccupation with leadership have also remained remarkably constant over time - the capacity to convince the domestic electorate; to have the best of both worlds - to be at what Churchill called 'the very point of junction', and Blair calls the global 'pivot'; to be the 'bridge' between the US and Europe; to agenda set - hence the importance for British politics of redefining the EU agenda, as well as the St Malo initiative and beyond. New Labour's Third Way in foreign policy has, so far, been bolted on to, and has not fully replaced, received memories of Britain's imperial past and the concern for global powerdom and 'leadership' through which these imperial memories have been sustained. It is this analysis of our national history that, I hope sheds some light on current British attitudes to European integration past and present.

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