



Brexit? Look Before You Leap

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This writer, a lifelong Anglophile who currently lives in New York but still keeps a home in the West End of London (and as a result ends up paying stiff taxes in both countries) must declare an interest in the so-called Brexit referendum of June 23, 2016. In his view being an Anglophile (or an Americanophile or an Italophile, for that matter) does not equate with being an unquestioning fool.

Whatever the outcome, the “In or Out” British plebiscite risks turning into a serious mistake. It will weaken the already far from rock-solid Western alliance, possibly triggering similar misguided initiatives in the rest of Europe, and it may well trigger a widespread economic crisis. What’s more, this British exercise in populism masquerading as direct democracy, will offer a god sent opportunity for mischief-making to an exceedingly clever and ruthless tactician by the name of Vladimir Putin, who on Europe may have different ideas.

The question “In or out of Europe” as a result, as seen from dispassionate friends of what only a few American politicians still call deferentially “Great Britain” should be what on this part of the Atlantic is bluntly called a no-brainer. Let’s face it, dear little Englanders. Your country we all respect and admire, in spite of its great imperial past, and the huge advantage of having a global language called English everyone strives to learn or at least understand, is no longer a Premier League player.

Britannia, contrary to what still says that old famous British patriotic song, no longer rules the waves. Like any other mid-sized European nation, this rightly proud island in the rapidly changing multilateral power game now taking shape must content itself with a respectable role in the second or even third division. In fact, if truth must be told, since its withdrawal East of Suez in 1956, Britain on the international scene has been riding on America’s political coattails, clinging to the notion of a Special Relationship with its powerful cousin.

As for continental Europe, Britain’s attitude has always been ambivalent. When pressed to choose between the Continent and the deep blue sea, the British nearly always tended to opt for the latter. Right from the outset Britain, while accepting a trade alliance, was against the idea of an “ever closer union between the peoples of Europe” as featured in the preamble to the Treaties of Rome signed in 1957 by France, West Germany, Italy and Benelux.

This British opposition at first sight seems strange. It was Churchill in 1946 who first advocated in Zurich for “a kind of United States of Europe” as a first step towards reconciliation and partnership between France and Germany. Events however soon took a different course, with an

impoverished postwar Britain struggling with food rationing, austerity and decolonization, and West Germany, Italy, Benelux and France growing rapidly in the “economic miracle” of the 1950s.

What Churchill had in mind was probably a British-led Europe which his country, by then run by a Labour government, had neither the economic strength nor the political will to translate into reality. When the Rome treaties were signed, Britain certainly did not want to be part of an “ever closer union”. This is the reason why, in order to stop the European train dead in its tracks, it counter proposed to the newly created European market the plan of a European Free Trade Area or EFTA, totally devoid of any political contents.

EFTA however rapidly faded into semi-insignificance. When Britain, finding itself sidelined, decided to apply for membership to the EEC in 1961, its entry into the club was blocked by the repeated vetoes of French President Charles De Gaulle, who once famously declared: “l’Angleterre, ce n’est plus grand chose” (“England is not much anymore”). British membership was eventually granted, after De Gaulle’s resignation in 1973, together with Denmark and Ireland.

End of the European saga then? Not quite. The question, as it is now totally forgotten, with the new Labour government of Harold Wilson was put to the British in a first referendum on Europe in 1975. Faced with the question: “Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community?” 67% of voters, replied: “Yes”. Since then, courtesy of the handbag-banging Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher, the story of British membership to what is now known (unrealistically) as the European Union - grown to an unmanageable behemoth of 28 nations - has become an endless litany of renegotiation, “opt outs” and sheer prevarications.

Once again, like his Socialist predecessor Wilson more than 40 years ago, the conservative premier Cameron has called yet another referendum on Europe for low-grade political calculations, in order to split his populist opponents and win reelection last year, which he did. Brexiter, since in Britain there is no turnout quorum, might well win even if only a minority of voters decide to go to the polls. And even if they do not prevail, the upshot is likely to poison the political atmosphere, in Britain and way beyond.

The current wave of “Referendumania” spreading in Europe, warns Catherine Fieschi of Counterpoint, a London think-tank, if used unwisely – Mr. Renzi of Italy please note – can increase voters’ alienation, making politicians look as if they do not know what they are doing. Plebiscites are no substitute for grown-up leadership.

Opting out of a European block of over 500 million, which currently absorbs 44 per cent of British goods and services, in purely economic terms, for a relatively small country like Britain makes no sense. But the problem is that in today’s dysfunctional politics sheer logic and mature statesmanship take a back seat – in London, in Rome and, which is far more dangerous, conceivably even in Washington.

Parochialism and demagoguery is the name of the game. We are living, as the old Chinese curse says, in interesting times.