

B

Some Reflections on 23rd June

DR NEIL SUMMERTOWN CB

On 23 June, UK voters will be asked to take a momentous decision after more than 40 years of UK membership of the European Union. It will be even more momentous than the Scottish referendum of September 2014.

The two campaigns are looking very similar: vision, emotion, excitement. Romantic adventure looks to be on the side of the leavers, as with the SNP in 2014. The opponents, as in 2014, emphasise the risks of leaving, particularly the economic risks – the downside in terms of foregone financial prosperity for all; “Project Fear”, as the leave camp likes to say. It is this contrast that makes those arguing for the status quo look dull and boring – that great risk in modern democratic campaigning which so favours the Trumps and the (Boris) Johnsons who cultivate their larger-than-life, jokey, not to say buffoon-like, images (when they have got their nominations, they will abandon that in order to appeal to the centrists without whom they cannot be elected).

Not the least of the ironies of 2016 is that many who argued passionately to keep Scotland within the UK are now arguing to take that Kingdom out of the European Union, and the arguments are similar. An English-determined vote to leave (as it seems it would be, since the Scots are likely to follow the SNP in voting to remain) ought in logic to reignite the call for Scottish independence, and make it all the more illogical to resist the argument. The Balkanisation of an exited UK is a risk that has been little spoken of so far.

A vote to leave the UK in 2014 would certainly have initiated a lengthy period of great constitutional and organisational uncertainty for Scotland, and even more so for the remaining parts of the United Kingdom (a matter scarcely mentioned in the Scottish campaign). What would the remaining UK have looked like? Leaving the EU will be uncharted waters in economic, organisational and even constitutional terms. What, for example, will happen to the now very substantial body of UK legislation which has been shaped by decisions within the EU over the past 45 years? This is not being discussed. As legislation of UK parliaments, it would, unless repealed or modified, remain in force after the two-year withdrawal period. But we do not know what would be modified, nor do we know to what extent it will in practice be possible to modify it, given that the price of satisfactory trade deals with the EU might well be the retention of much of existing European regulation on the same single-market, level-playing-field grounds as now obtain. The leavers are confident that the EU will want to do trade deals with an exited UK. But that means gearing UK manufacturing and services to EU requirements. Escaping from the EU may prove to be a great deal more difficult in practice than a simple vote on 23rd June.

Further, in the UK detailed regulation often results not from European legislation itself but from the propensity of the perfectionist UK government machine to embroider and add to implementation legislation. On the other hand, there is a real question whether, if the UK had been left to itself, it would have made the degree of, for example, environmental improvement achieved during EU membership.

Another legal misunderstanding is that human rights decisions that we (particularly Christians) do not like come from the EU. In fact, the European Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Court of Human Rights which administers it, fall under the umbrella not of the EU but of the Council of Europe at Strasbourg, which embraces the 28 EU member states as well as 19 more (making 47 in total), including Turkey and Russia. Voting to leave the EU has no direct relationship to UK membership of the Council of Europe and therefore to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights.

That in turn leads to the point that voting to leave the EU will not at one bound return absolute sovereignty to the UK Parliament, though one might think so from the campaign rhetoric. The fact is that virtually every bilateral and multilateral agreement made by a sovereign state puts its

sovereignty into commission with others. The UK is a party to literally thousands of international agreements made in the past 100 years and, taken as a whole, they attenuate sovereignty. (The NATO treaty does so, for example, because it binds the UK to go to the assistance of any member state which is attacked.)

Another widespread misunderstanding is that the European Commission (the European civil service which proposes European legislation) is a bloated bureaucracy, hell-bent on creating detailed, unnecessary, inefficient, bizarre and wasteful regulation. In fact, the European Commission is quite small compared with the armies of national civil servants, especially bearing in mind that 6,000 are the translators necessary for the 24 official and working languages. The Commission has some 33,000 staff and the European Parliament 8,000 (compared with 405,000 civil servants in Britain, plus many more in non-departmental public bodies, and some 1,800 serving Parliament.) Though the comparison is not direct at all, these figures can be compared with the populations of the European Union and the UK which in 2014 were 508 million and 64.5 million respectively.

The financial performance and probity of the EU is often called into question in the UK, and concerns UK Christians. It is true that at the end of the 1990s the European Commission of the day fell on that question. But in 2014 the Court of Auditors' conclusion was that the EU's accounts were correctly prepared in accordance with international standards and presented a true and fair view, and that the figures for EU revenue were legal and regular. Its judgment on payments was that they were materially affected by error, the estimate being that payments were irregular in 4.4% of cases, compared with the materiality threshold of 2%.¹ There was still work to be done therefore, but now hardly the catastrophic picture sometimes still represented.

Whether the UK is or should be part of Europe is a peculiarly modern question. We forget that there was scarcely any such debate before 1800. The political class saw Britain as a European state which could not afford to neglect the continent. Up to the Reformation, the British Isles were fully integrated into European (Catholic) culture and it was only in 1559 that the English crown lost its last continental territories (though replacements were acquired with the Hanoverians). Britain continued in close contact with the continent, not only in trade, but in phenomena as various as the grand tours of the aristocratic young and the treasure that Britain poured out between 1650 and 1815 to ensure that shifts in the European balance of power did not threaten her position in Europe and her security.

Globalisation in the nineteenth century offered wider possibilities to the UK (and to other European powers). The result was not only a global empire now long gone, but an enduring Atlanticist option, based on the close intellectual and cultural ties between the USA and the UK (the Republic of Ireland, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Sweden have them too). But the world wars of twentieth century surely demonstrated that the UK could not regard itself as other than fully integrated into Europe – that the continent was not far-away countries and peoples of whom we know nothing. So, the USA fervently hopes that that the UK will vote to remain, while Russia hopes that it will vote to leave. History has given the UK the advantages of both the Atlanticist and European options, and, by managing them both in a fluent way, it can maximise them. In this context, Euroscepticism can be construed as one of those periodic lurches in one direction which threatens a balance which advantages the UK.

But are there any specifically Christian dimensions to the debate? Not many and not obviously perhaps. And it is certainly not easy to find direct scriptural guidance for voting on 23rd June, though one does recall the efforts of pre-millennial exponents to equate the horned beast of Revelation 13 with Europe!

There are one or two sub-texts, however.

Most British people are quite unaware that the European project has been deeply Christian

¹ European Court of Auditors, 2015 Activity Report, at <http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/AAR15/COVERPAGE-VIGNETTE.jpg>

Democratic in character, owing much to Catholic social thought². That has now largely been displaced by post-modernist secularism – though Brexit will not defend the UK against that. A vote to leave is a vote to leave something which was at base a Christian project.

Brexit thought too has a couple of strands which owe something to British Christian thinking.

First, there is an element which owes its roots to right-wing Christian reaction, deeply suspicious of Catholic Europe as a popish plot. This is the Protestant thread which was foremost in British-ness for more than 300 years. It is still very common among older, particularly nonconformist, evangelicals – I find that they are often sympathetic to, if not active in, UKIP. There is here much nostalgia for a simpler “Christian” world which never existed and for the loss of which “Europe” can be blamed.

Second, Brexit thought often reflects the little-Englandism which owes so much to nineteenth-century English non-conformity, to a yeoman-independence which is against imposing itself on others and being imposed upon. As such, it is suspicious that the European project is essentially imperial, even Bismarckian, in character. Therefore, Brexiteers instinctively favour free-trade agreements between free and independent states to the ever-closer political union which has been in the preamble of European treaties since 1956. They appear to be closing their eyes to, or not trusting, the opt-out from “ever closer union” which the Prime Minister recently negotiated, an opt-out which was no small achievement at all in the European context.

After doctoral studies in the history of war, Neil Summerton was a British official in the Department of the Environment for thirty years and in that capacity had extensive involvement in negotiation on water matters in the European Union in the 1990s. So he knows the frustrations of the European game! He was a trustee and board member of Christian Research between 1990 and 1998, and has had long experience of local church leadership, and has written extensively on public policy, environmental ethics, history and governance matters.

² For its detailed pre-history, see Michael P. Fogarty, *Christian Democracy in Western Europe 1820–1953*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1957.

[1,768 words]