

Are the British a Servile People? Idealism and the EU

Kenneth Minogue

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by Kenneth Minogue

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The betrayal of democracy by Gordon Brown's government in refusing to honour the New Labour Election Manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty will certainly become an issue at the next election. Indeed, if Britain is to remain a free and independent democracy, the betrayal must be the basic issue of that contest, for it is at the heart of the moral corruption that has overtaken our political process in the last generation. The feebleness of British governments since Margaret Thatcher in defending British interests against the encroachment of Brussels is undoubtedly the most revealing fact about the politics of our generation. In this short argument I suggest some ways in which that feebleness might be analysed.

One basic concern is the way in which political elites and bureaucracies work. A second concern, in Sections (5) and (6) of the argument, is to explain the curious cultural collapse of political skill and involvement among the British people. How has Britain sunk into mediocrity? What, we need to ask, is the spirit of the age? Let us take each point in turn.

1. The March of Alien Management

First, let us consider a major change in the situation of the British since 1945. At that period, we were governed by nothing beyond the elected Commons and the hereditary Lords at Westminster. It is true that we had signed up to various international conventions (about war, traffic and so on) and that we were part of a wider system of international law. But our Government in all essential matters made its own decisions according to a broad judgement of the British national interest. We were sovereign. Sovereignty is not, of course, the same as omnipotence, any more than individualism is a licence for self-indulgence. Britain was a responsible nation and the interests of others were always recognised as having a bearing on our own.

Since 1945, however, we have acquired a remarkable array of additional managers, indeed, layer upon layer of them. To them we have delegated extensive authority to tax and regulate us.



First must be mentioned the vast increase in international instruments associated with the United Nations and other treaties – the Convention on Refugees of 1951¹ for example. Acting as what is currently called a “good global citizen” plays well with the British electorate for many reasons, some of which we shall mention later, but it plays especially well with politicians, for whom signing up to abstract principles looks statesmanlike. Statesmen are irresistibly charmed by the fact that any embarrassing consequences of these acts are only likely to become evident after they have retired from office. In other words, signing up to blue sky virtues has become a respectable way of striking grand postures in political life without the fear that embarrassing consequences might follow. Such an erosion of democratic accountability is one way of formulating my fundamental criticism of what is happening to us.

A second layer of management was created in Britain by the New Labour government of 1997, in the form of devolved legislatures with extensive powers which were set up to allow a certain amount of autonomy for Scotland and Wales. The attempt to create elected regional assemblies in England has so far failed, but all of this constitutional fussing has had its effects on English politics, and many people think the solution would be to create even more layers of management, so that we may have the wisdom of additional elected representatives (serving on Regional Assemblies in England) to help in ordering our lives.²

The third and most comprehensive layer of management over us is of course that of the European Union. It has a bureaucracy, and a kind of parliament, but its powers could not for a moment be understood as democratically responsive. Its directives and regulations are recognised as taking precedence over Parliamentary legislation in Britain, and any appeal against them must be heard in its own European Court, in which the literal meaning of the words of an EU law is subordinated to their consonance with the basic purpose of the Union. The Commission is a fecund creator of regulations affecting many things in our everyday life, ranging from land-fill disposal of waste to the design of buses on our streets. There is, I think, no satisfactory way to quantify how much of our national life is determined by this body, and estimates vary from ten percent to eighty. It is certainly true that while in

1 The text of this and many other such declarations may be found in Ian Brownlie (ed.) *Basic Documents on Human Rights*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1971.

2 The most recent proposal in Britain (*The Daily Telegraph* 21 March 2008) is to substitute an elected chamber (to be called a Senate) for the current House of Lords. This new layer of representatives, we may guess, would be a great deal more active and interfering than the House of Lords we have inherited from past times. The name will assimilate our English eccentricity to practices elsewhere. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) identified “imitation of neighbour nations” in Ch. 29 as being one danger to constitutional stability.



principle the House of Commons should be monitoring this avalanche of legislation, much of it goes through “on the nod”, if even that. We shall return to this point. In addition, where doubt arises about how far a directive should reach, the instinct of the British civil service is to make them far more restrictive than the way they commonly operate on the Continent. This is a process known as “gold plating.”

We are thus managed as we have never been managed before, and these increases in layers of masters over us have not at all been matched by any corresponding diminution in the numbers of those below.³ Managing us is a growth industry, part of an expanding public sector. But when, to ask the naïve question, did anyone ever say: “We need more managers to regulate our lives? They will bring us a great access of wisdom and order”? We have somehow drifted into this most remarkable situation, and to bring out how remarkable it is, let us indulge in what scientists call a “thought experiment”.

Imagine if we had found ourselves in precisely this situation in 1939 when the fate of the world depended on Britain’s readiness to take a stand. Hitler dominated Germany, Mussolini Italy, Franco was ruler of Spain and France was deeply split. We need not mention the political alignments of Hungary, Romania and the rest. It is clear that in such a situation, we would have had no alternative – at least no legal alternative – but to become a pawn of the Axis powers.

Ah! comes the familiar rejoinder: but that is just the point! The creation of the European Union is a process precisely designed to prevent any such threat to European civilisation ever happening again. By locking Germany and other European countries that have been vulnerable to political folly into a liberal free-trade federation, we are preventing any of those cultures from again going off the rails of decency.

This is the moment when we cannot but observe that our naïve question has merely revealed the naivety of the reply. The essence of this simple faith is the error of constitutional fundamentalism: namely, the belief that a constitutional structure will guarantee a political outcome. We may grant, of course, that Europe is unlikely again to be troubled by the march of jackboots. History does not repeat itself in that way – but insidious repetitions of earlier follies certainly do happen. We cannot

3 Nor indeed, any decline in the cost of these managers. Peter Lilley made the essential point in a brilliant speech in June 2008. He was introducing in the House of Commons a bill to require the Senior Salaries Review Body to take into account the transfers of powers between Parliament and EU institutions when making recommendations on MPs pay. Arguing that as most of the legislative work in governing Britain is now done in Brussels why should British MPs still get paid the same when their work load was vastly less? Our MPs would, he added, “prefer to claim paternity [of these laws] rather than admit impotence – the fate of the cuckold across the ages.”



know what strange passions will shake other European states – or even indeed our own country – in the times to come. We have, one way or another, certainly solved yesterday's problem; but the real concern is with tomorrow's, or the day after tomorrow's. The present generation looks safe enough from the threat of violent war arising from within Europe itself, but to be confident of the longer future is folly. Abandoning our independence and self-determination for the promise of a collective wisdom embedded in a heterogeneous collection of bureaucrats is certainly a case of selling one's heritage for a mess of pottage. Aspiration is substituted for reality.

Our situation thus provokes us to ask two central questions. The first is why these new managers and their backers are making a "power grab" to regulate our lives. The history of that power grab can be read in the nomenclatural changes in the names of the developing stages of the Treaty of Rome. The EEC became the EC and then the EU. At each stage, the power of Brussels to manage us increased.

The second question is why we have allowed it to happen. By and large, free peoples do not like subjecting themselves to additional rulers and masters, especially those whom they have no realistic way of making accountable. A supplementary question here is why the lower levels of power – our Westminster parliament – should have yielded such power. Rulers usually don't like doing that.

There is a sense in which the first question answers itself: the EU keeps on acquiring power because power is the kind of stuff that people like acquiring. But then we run into an interesting fact about both the EU Parliament and that of Westminster. Their powers are vast, but in an important way, they are curiously impotent. Modern societies are remarkably complex and not easily ruled. There is a strange kind of unreality about both Westminster and Brussels/Strasbourg in our time, and it can easily be sensed by wandering around the buildings in which these activities are housed. The paradox is that all this power grabbing has turned out to be self-defeating, leading merely to a vast increase in the work of lawyers, courts and tribunals. Our lives are certainly affected by all this busyness, but it does not produce the clear facilitation of our freedoms that even the legislators would want.

This paradoxical impotence of civil management, as growing more futile the more it covers, lies at the heart of much that is happening today. These flies on the axle wheel of history, unlike Aesop's, know all too well that the dust raised is not the result of their work. Statesmen dealing with serious issues transcend their personal ambitions. Politicians involved in make-believe changes in society soon lose their contact with reality and go in for expenses manipulation and general nest-



feathering. One looks in vain to our political managers at all levels for some sign of the quality of statesmanship so evident in, for example, the 1935 Commons that took Britain into the Second World War. The vast expansion of political management that we have endured has had the consequence that most political deliberation in these assemblies has the character of pointless churning. At the same time, the quality of the politico-managerial class has declined to that of merely manipulative political experts in public relations. Looking at the standard of parliamentarians at both Brussels and Westminster, one can hardly resist the view that futility breeds corruption.

The point can be made in terms both of money and of power. It is a basic principle of human life that any large stock of money attracts corruption the way manure attracts flies. Charitable bequests need careful watching lest the money be misappropriated. Vast amounts of aid have been funnelled to the Third World since 1945, but relatively little of it has reached the ground. In high taxing democracies, politicians find themselves disposing of vast quantities of money and it is hardly surprising that corruption follows, even in Britain, which has a history of relative probity in its public life. Most people can be foolish with their own money on occasion, but public money is dispensed by people whose accountability cannot be easily fixed at all. In modern welfare states, employment law ensures that little short of overt criminality can separate a bureaucrat, indeed any employee, from his or her office. Waste and incompetence have become very hard to control.

Turning to the issue of political power, we must concern ourselves with what had better be called a “bureaucratic dynamic”. Law as traditionally understood in Britain during modern times signified legislating a framework within which individuals could pursue their own projects, and the result was a society that was imitated the world over. In our generation, however, governments seldom pass “laws” in the strict sense. Rather they send “messages”, mandate targets, attempt to change cultures by fiscal policy, seek to “solve the problems of ordinary people” and in other ways try to micromanage their subjects. Identifying an evil (child abuse, professional misconduct and suchlike things) provokes regulations that impose sanctions upon malefactors. But regulation drives out the self-monitoring integrity that previously governed the conduct of self-governing professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. Parents are similarly corrupted. Codification of the rules of decency in any area turns those newly subject to such powers into employees. When professional life is governed by integrity, individuals may often mistake their selfish desires for a higher calling, but the idea that external regulation with sanctions prevents, or even much reduces, evil is false. It merely leads to casuistry and teaches evil how to exploit the arts of evasion.



The standard political diagnosis of regulation-failure is always that the regulations did not go far enough, and the solution is to take further powers to control the newly revealed imperfections. The bureaucracy issues new regulations, which in turn suffer the same fate as before. In many cases, this follow up regulation is needed to withdraw the bad effects of many of the earlier reforms. We have here, then, a feedback loop in which political meddling merely increases its reach without achieving its ambition. This is the bureaucratic dynamic of contemporary micromanagement, and it is demeaning for the masters no less than it is for those subject to it.

2. Sources of Servility

That we in Britain should be subject to this multiplying managerialism suggests to me that Britons are becoming a servile people, eager to accept the yoke. I think that such feebleness is part of the spirit of the age in which we live, a readiness to surrender independence in exchange for subsidy and help in living our lives. But to recognise this development as the servility it actually is would be painful to many people. Moral degeneration must be presented in more palatable ways by those who intend to profit by it. In what way has it been made palatable?

The answer is that submission to more and more authority comes dressed as virtue. From about 1918 onwards, high-toned Western politicians have often made speeches arguing that “national sovereignty” was an outmoded and possibly dangerous idea. The great thing was international regulation of inter-state relations, the emerging system that has come to be euphemistically called “global governance”. This euphemism is designed to suggest (quite falsely) that the regulations constituting the “governance” have been untouched by any human concerns with interest or with power. They have merely emerged, as it were, from the necessities of bringing justice out of anarchy. Between the wars, the League of Nations was the vehicle of these illusions, and after the Second World War, it was the United Nations.

Rejection of national sovereignty and the vogue for treating the United Nations as a legal and moral rather than merely a political body was part of a more general movement suggesting that the authority of international bureaucrats was less tainted by national partiality (and thus more rational) than the decisions of nation states. The plausibility of this argument depends partly on a philosophical mistake, which is to identify nationalism with the national interest.



“Nationalism” here is wrongly used to cover everything from separatist movements such as those of the Basques and the Irish Republicans to aggressive national policies such as those of Hitler and Mussolini. But neither of these latter figures was a nationalist. Hitler believed in race, which is quite different from nation, and Mussolini was a socialist who invented a solidarist doctrine he called “totalitarianism”, and also “fascism”. The national interest of countries such as Britain and France, by contrast, rests upon quite distinct and non-ideological considerations. It incorporates, or at least can and often does incorporate, a wider concern for the interests of other states. Neither of these political calculations – nationalism, or the national interest - is necessarily bad, or indeed good either, but misunderstood in this way, both serve to generate what we may call “the internationalist illusion”, which is the belief that international politicians and bureaucrats are wiser than those of (for example) European national states. Anyone who actually believes this should look upon the UN and the EU, and despair.

Yet even those who do look at the record of these remarkable organisations, and despair, will often support them, partly because they think that in so doing they are behaving like good global citizens and thus being models that may, so it is hoped, influence the unregenerate brutes ruling countries in which human rights are not taken seriously. The idea is that internationality is the wisdom of the future, and that even if the current record of international organisation is hardly to be admired, this is where the future lies. Such ideas are often sustained by pseudo-philosophical forms of collective self-hatred directed at the whole history of our civilisation. We shall return to this theme in sections (5) and (6).

3. Complexity and Accountability

Let us return to our basic question: why is it that we should be subject to so many layers of managerial regulation? Why, particularly, given that we look at these political managers and often curl our lips in derision, have we found ourselves at their mercy? Our derision turns out to be no protection against being staked out, like Gulliver, by all these meddling Liliputions.

A common answer is that the modern world has become so complex that it requires increasing quantities of central direction. We get new layers of management because we need them. Everywhere in the modern world we look (so ‘tis said) we find what economists call “externalities”. These are incidental evils created by legitimate activities, and they are things that require to be regulated in the name of justice. Noise, the disposal of waste, the capitalist weakness for colluding with



competitors over price, the caprice of employers, the emergence of monopolies, the protection of workers from unfair competition – a regulator’s work is never done! Such central direction, however, was a thesis tested to destruction in the Soviet Union and other communist states, and then further tested in the welfare managerialism of the 1970s. In both of these cases, governments responding to the complexity of society made a great mess of their tasks, and began to destroy the prosperity on which their power depended.

There is a contrary argument which free market liberals advance against this passion to have our troubles resolved by regulation. It advances the opposite case - that the more complex a society becomes, the less need there is to regulate it. A club, or a household, or a firm may be regulated minutely if the responsible people choose because the members all share, or seem to share, a single interest in the success of the enterprise. The point of “society” as a whole, however, is that it does not have a single enterprise, or common interest, except, perhaps, the formal interest free peoples have in being governed by law rather than command. Hence the more complex societies become, the less regulation they will need – so long, that is to say, as we assume that the individual members of society are competent to manage their own lives.

And that assumption, of course, is the central issue. The justification for a welfare state taking over so many of the functions that in earlier times were done by individuals themselves – health, education, security etc. – was that some people were poor, or underprivileged, or not educated enough to manage their own lives, and the state had to do it for them. In time, women, and ethnic minorities, and homosexuals and others found it advantageous to enrol themselves in these “victim classes” of the vulnerable, in need of state agencies to support and protect them. It has become a major change in British life. Can it now be that most of the British population has been persuaded to recognise that it has lost the competence necessary to manage its own lives, a competence its parents certainly had? Can this be the fundamental belief on which the current apathy and sheep-like quality of the British depends? Is this the real source of our readiness to put ourselves under the regulation of unaccountable international bodies? This becomes the central question to be considered in this argument.

Perhaps sheer lack of nerve is part of it. But another part is the political use of complexity as a tool of bafflement in persuading some people that these matters are too difficult for them to understand. Complexity is of immense value to politicians and bureaucrats who are kind enough to take off our hands the irksome business of trying to understand – for example! – the real meaning of the Lisbon



Treaty. That the people would not understand its significance has been advanced as a reason for not holding a referendum on the Treaty. The Liberal Democrats who held this remarkable opinion did think that there might be a case for holding a referendum on the much more general question of whether Britain ought to stay in the European Union or secede from it. One can easily follow the rat-like cunning of such a move, but it has so many deceitful aspects that criticism would hardly know where to start. Is the grand issue of secession really less complex than the question of a current change in the terms of the Union? It is a deadly point in EU polemic that the American constitution is a few pages of limpid prose while European constitutional arrangements are humanly impenetrable. This is, I think, the decisive proof that the complexity ploy has been a standard tool of deception used by European integrators.

We are throughout dealing, it will be obvious, with fraud, which consists of separating people from some valuable property they own. In this case, the property is our national autonomy and independence. The basic way of defrauding people is to persuade them that the issue is the one the fraudster is explaining to them, whereas in fact the real point of the exercise lies out of sight. In the case of the European Union, the explicit concern is with ideals – unity, harmonisation, guaranteeing peace in Europe – but the real issue is power. By focussing on ideals, and flattering as virtuous and realistic those who support them, the rising international managerial class advances in the world.

There is a rather simple variant of fraud that used to happen on street corners, known as the “three-thimble trick”. The fraudster has a pea and moves the three thimbles around very fast, inviting the punter to bet on the thimble containing the pea. The trick may not be sophisticated, but it’s a living. The Brussels version of the three-thimble trick is to conceal power under a changing variety of names. In what sense if any, is the European project the same thing as the British seemed to approve in the 1975 referendum? Is it merely an association of like-minded states for limited purposes, or is it the creation of a new state in the world – having, as the Lisbon Treaty makes clear, its own President and its own Foreign Minister? The deception consists in switching these possibilities according to political convenience, and the only sure fact is that many of the answers to these questions are lies.⁴

4 A thoughtful and impressive treatment of this general theme may be found in Peter Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying*, The Free Press: London, 2005. For a detailed history of deception in relations with the EU, the basic text is, of course, Christopher Booker and Richard North, *The Great Deception: A Secret History of the European Union*, Continuum: London, 2003.



And it is necessary to be clear on these points, because the history of deception stretches back to the beginning of Britain's involvement with the European Union. Politicians in Britain insisted in 1975 that it was merely a device for freeing trade between European states – only, after the referendum, did many of them (led by Edward Heath) pour scorn on this idea because “everybody always knew” that it involved wider ambitions – though it took some time before “ever closer union” became recognised in Britain as the interestingly limitless aim of the association.

The complexity issue brings us back to that of democracy. In a democracy, politicians are accountable for the decisions they take, but in modern highly regulated welfare states, governmental initiatives and policies come so thick and fast that it is extraordinarily difficult to pin responsibility on anyone. We are, as the poet Eliot put it, “distracted by distraction from distraction”. It has become the custom in the House of Commons for Ministers presiding over a disaster to say (as for example Charles Clarke said when the Home Office lost sight of 1,000 foreign criminals who ought to have been deported at the end of their prison sentences) “I take full responsibility for this”. But full responsibility would have meant resignation, and he seemed to think, as so many others have in recent administrations, that one can declare oneself responsible and then – as Clarke himself wanted to do – remain in power to clean up the problem. But in the end, what actually happened to those lost thugs? I do not know. New stories took our attention. The point of the thing called “spin” is to conceal these embarrassments from public concern – or, as was said on a famous occasion, “to bury them”.

Prime Minister Blair responded to Britain's revolving presidency of the EU by giving up part of the rebate in our contribution to the Common Agricultural Policy that Margaret Thatcher had achieved at Fontainebleau in 1984. He did it in exchange for a French promise to “review” the working of the CAP. A promise, however, is an empty thing unless it has consequences. Blair is gone, but we in Britain certainly pay out as a consequence of his riskless generosity. Quinquennial elections have in our time turned out to be useless in making our rulers accountable to us. Let me suggest, then, that British democracy needs a new principle of accountability, a principle that would respond to the fact that so many worthless declarations are made by modern politicians in their justifications of expensive follies.

My proposal is: that any decision whose point depends upon a prediction of its outcome should be clarified so that the politician making the decision can be held to account. A Commission might well be needed to agree and specify the conditions of the political decision. And by “held to account” I mean that the failure of the decision to generate the consequences predicted should lead to his (or



her) immediate fall from office and from parliament. In many cases no doubt, the consequences might not become evident until the relevant officeholder had retired, or had died. In that case, such figures would be subject to an appropriate form of denigration and obloquy. The reason so much of our politics is light-minded is that lying to us is a costless exercise, and the media, aggressive as they often are, are not very good in their role as keepers of memory.

4. The Lisbon Treaty

The collapse of democratic accountability in contemporary states is partly explained, of course, by the level of deceit on which contemporary politics depends. Gordon Brown as Prime Minister is, as we earlier remarked, indelibly stained by the cowardly and evasive manner in which he has tried to get round the implications of Labour's Manifesto commitment to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. That the Treaty is merely the rejected constitution re-described is almost universally accepted on the Continent, and thus passing it into law after democratic referenda in France and the Netherlands had rejected it is merely one further instance of the Union's familiar tactic of overriding democratic inconveniences by wearing opposition down. The Brussels oligarchy has a remarkable capacity to make the process move only in the direction of increasing its own power.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the premier of Luxembourg, put the essence of the matter quite crisply, "of course there will be transfers of sovereignty", he remarked, but added that he would not want to draw the attention of the British public to this fact.

"There is", he went on to remark about the Treaty, "a single legal personality for the EU, the primacy of European law, a new architecture for foreign and security policy, there is an enormous extension in the fields of the EU's powers, there is the Charter of Fundamental Rights..."⁵ British politicians, however, lie to us in claiming more solidity than they can sustain for the "red lines" exempting Britain from a variety of Treaty commitments. The Commission merely waits patiently for more pliable politicians who can be quietly persuaded to modify and eventually abandon any such limitations. And there is no real accountability for the likely collapse of these reservations when the European Court of Justice gets to work on the Treaty.

Sometimes the deceptions are contained in absurd formulations so rhetorically confused that they seem to turn a negative into a positive. The idea of "pooling

5 *The Daily Telegraph*, July 3, 2007.



sovereignty” for example, suggests positive harmony and cooperation but what it actually means is that Britain gives up its sovereignty on the issues in question, and agrees to be bound by a new sovereign in the form of EU machinery in which it has but a part, and in a 27 member association, a rather small part. If this machinery produces a decision we do not like, we have lost our independence and can do nothing about it.

The issues are complex, and are detailed in a 63,000 word document presented as a series of amendments to the existing treaties, and before I broach the central cultural question, I want to make two observations. The first is to point to one notable example of constitutional betrayal, and the other is to highlight the fundamental cultural difference between Britain and the Continent.

The constitutional betrayal relates to individual liberty. In 2007, a deal was proposed to send back to their countries of origin the 2,000 EU prisoners in British jails, in exchange for allowing the 800 British subjects said to be in Continental jails to finish their sentences in Britain. This would help Britain in dealing with its major crisis with prison provision in Britain. However the Parliamentary European Scrutiny Committee wrote to Joan Ryan, then the relevant Home Office Minister, to point out that a British subject (such as David Irving who had been jailed for Holocaust Denial in Austria) could then be transferred to a British prison to serve time for something that was not a crime in Britain. Such a problem might have been met by a principle of dual criminality, but the UK had earlier abandoned that principle for thirty-two offences when it had agreed the European arrest warrant three years earlier. The Parliamentary Committee thought this issue important enough to warrant a parliamentary debate and placed a “scrutiny reserve” on the proposed agreement. The point of such a scrutiny reserve is that a proposed directive should be debated in Parliament itself before Britain would agree to it. Later in 2007, however, a deal was struck at the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting attended by Ms. Ryan. Like other spineless British ministers, she took no notice of the scrutiny reserve, and went along with the majority supporting, with no concern for safeguards, the proposal for exchanging the prisoners. Her boss, the Home Secretary at the time John Reid approved the deal as good for Britain, and the Scrutiny Committee was revealed as unable to protect our liberties from the overwhelming power of a united EU bureaucracy.⁶

6 I am indebted to a brilliant account of this process by Philip Johnston in *The Daily Telegraph* 7 April, 2007. . The point obviously does not involve anything as absurd as defending David Irving and Holocaust Denial. As Johnston points out, had such a law been operational in Britain, Prince Harry would have been in trouble over his swastika kit for a fancy dress party.



There would, of course, be one way in which this kind of conflict might be avoided. It would be for Britain to fall into line with some other European states by making Holocaust Denial a crime in Britain, and dear ingenious Angel Merkel actually did make this helpful suggestion. In doing so, she was exhibiting the deep Continental instinct for solving problems by “harmonisation.” And that brings me to the second point.

It is that Britain is in its constitutional life and culture a major exception to many Continental practices. This is why Continental countries since the eighteenth century have recognised her as a model of a free society, by contrast with the Napoleonic and Prussian traditions of the Rechtsstaat in most of Europe. European states are certainly free, but they are also responsive to the demands of an intrusive bureaucracy in a way that the British used not to be. These states contain, of course, immensely powerful antipathies that must be accommodated by the conventions of a debate between Government and Opposition, conventions that have been adapted from British practice, but their ideal is one of national harmony in which subjects accept the basic structure of the state and all pull together. The jury system is not at home in such a world and the natural mode of understanding the place of the individual is in terms of rights. The English tradition of freedom, by contrast, long resisted the assimilation of its tradition of freedom to the codification of rights.

John Locke had, of course, talked of natural rights, using the idea as a casual philosophical way of formulating English freedom, but his ideas were turned to another purpose by Continental followers. A schedule of rights adumbrates a correct ordering of society, whereas English freedom contains built in limitations to freedom, and facilitates a changing cultural character responsive in each generation to the changing tastes and ideas of the people. English life, in other words is based upon a conflict model of society whose stability results not from a process of “harmonisation” but from a tension between balanced desirabilities in an ambivalent world: between competing business firms, for example, political parties, prosecution and defence in trials, versions of faiths and so on.

The basic British objection to the way in which the European project accommodates Britain is that British life has become subject to an alien tradition. The conflict between metric and imperial measures is merely a dramatic symbol of this conflict, but versions of it will be found at all levels of our involvement with Europe, and its essence lies in the European passion to harmonise us into little Europeans. The rest – the hideous costs, the destruction of our fishing waters, the corruption of the



Brussels bureaucracy, the waste of the CAP – these things are important, but they are not the heart of the matter.

5. Folie á Deux

Analysing some of the processes and the deceptions that have brought us to our present enfeebled condition is a depressing business. A great nation making its way in the world has, over the last half century, abandoned its own unique integrity because it feared isolation and fell into cultural confusion. Given its cultural vitality and its global reach, Britain was perhaps the last country in the world that might find itself “isolated”. It has a Commonwealth and a special relationship with an Anglosphere, for a start. Australia in one way, Singapore in another and Canada in yet another are examples of countries that have prospered economically without losing their nerve and therefore having to compromise their political independence. Yet one of the world’s top five or six economies sold itself into alien management because fools had persuaded it that only the big battalions could survive in the emerging world of the twenty first century. It finds itself locked into an association marked by timid protectionism and demographic decline. A whole political class has been found wanting, and as a result of failing the test of courage, that class has fallen into the trivialities of corruption and self-seeking.

Unfortunately it must be said that we get the rulers that we deserve. “We” – meaning a large section of the electorate – have been told that “our” dependence on the state is the proper response to a world of unequal advantages, and “we” have believed what “we” were told. To make every transaction pass some test of justice seemed to have entailed dependence on a regulating state. The result has been that many Britons have acquired the notion that the income they earn is pocket money to be spent on the satisfaction of their current wants, rather than resources to be managed in terms of present and future contingencies. Similarly, when they worry about “the work-life balance”, they are dreaming that the week might be turned into an interminable weekend. There are always richer “others” whose taxes can pay for all those things the state provides, and in our time, the state has ranged so far into the enterprises of civil society that virtually nothing has not become in some degree subsidised, and therefore, in a little time, controlled by the state.

At the same time, “we” have also learned that pains can mostly be abolished, “pains” here signifying anything ranging from punishment in schools to losing one’s job as a result of incompetence. We have come to think, as PJ O’Rourke put it,



that we may “vote ourselves rich”. And the result is that we expect politicians to bribe us. Issues that are situated beyond this immediate concern with “the things that affect people’s lives” are of little concern for a large part of the electorate. The importance of our national independence happens to be one of them. And, of course, it is by far the most important.

We critics might well despise our political class as corrupt and mediocre, but the vital point is that we must recognise that the situation is one of folie à deux. A population persuaded by the rhetoric that generates its dependent condition has become, by the device of the focus group, the yardstick of what politicians ought to be doing. They may talk (God help us!) of “visions”, but their minds are largely circumscribed by the thought of the next election. They think they should be offering what the demos wants, or (not at all the same thing) what it says it wants. In no political party these days do we have more than a handful of politicians prepared to challenge the remarkable mind-set of our time in the name of reality. And until a class of politicians ready to do this emerges to save us (if it ever does), we shall be forever drifting in the political pidgin talk that constitutes the relationship between Westminster and its electors.

6. Conceptualising the Collapse

Let me end by sketching out a schema that might be one possible way of exploring how the people of Britain have fallen into this sad condition. Some theologians used to talk about “spilt religion”, but I think we should look at “spilt idealism”.

Idealism is a form of moral energy that we invest in some way of life, in our moral admirations and in our sense, for example, of the kind of conduct that is “below us”. Most Europeans, indeed probably most collective groups, invest a good deal of their idealism in their own national identity, believing that the nation stands for many admirable things. Occasionally they invest it in other nations, as some Britons did, for example, who came to have a remarkable admiration for Wilhelmine Germany in the late nineteenth century – Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Winifred Wagner, for example. In the ideological passions of the twentieth century, a lot of British idealism was invested in the Soviet Union, and some in Fascism and Nazism.

Mostly however, idealism stays home. Milton talked about “God’s Englishmen” while many Edwardians thought that being born British was to have won first prize in the lottery of life. These are marvellous exhibitions of a kind of national arrogance, and today we are more likely to follow the lead of Uriah Heep and say,



with heads decently bowed: “we’re no better than they are”. Some of these very ‘umble Britons actually think we are much worse than other peoples. And this kind of posturing humility is one aspect of the collapse of idealism in Britain, because although arrogance may be a fault, it is also the indispensable source of a number of interesting and indispensable virtues.

It stands behind the belief, for example, that being English/British is a form of responsibility requiring self-control in the presence of foreigners. “Remember you’re British” has now degenerated into a joke expression, but a generation or two back, it represented an element in the moral core of British people. In those happier times, the image of the Englishman abroad was that of the gentleman. Edith Piaf even wrote a marvellous song about it. Such an image was sustained in times past by the sense of patriotic self-regard very common among Britons travelling abroad. There is much less patriotism around today, with the result that young British people have been liberated from any sense of national responsibility, and with their drunken and vomiting ways, are currently feared and despised in places as distant as Ibiza and Prague.

What seems to have happened, then, is a withdrawal of British investment of idealism in being British. That investment in the past would be signalled by pride in anything from Shakespeare and Nelson to a propensity for queuing or the reputation of the BBC. People can be proud of a whole range of things, both national and individual, for any number of reasons good or bad, and any serious form of pride carries responsibility with it. This withdrawal of pride in being British has several significant aspects. One of them is that admiration for our achievements has been replaced by a schedule of shames, from indulgence in the slave trade before 1807 to the Crusades, the Irish famine, or whatever other set of events the critic might choose.

Another aspect is that many people have simply switched their admirations away from a British identity to some narrower focus in which admiration is entangled with a sense of grievance. Society in this way has been atomised. Feminists, for example, replace admiration for being British by disdain for what are taken to be the patriarchal power structures thought to characterise earlier times. Again, some members of ethnic groups in Britain have demanded that their own particular glories ought to be celebrated as part of a multicultural mosaic. A whole underworld of grievances is cultivated in this area, but it is relatively marginal compared to something much more fundamental.

Many who reject Britain interpret any sense of national superiority as involving aggression and xenophobia. These people think that if Britons could be persuaded



to abandon pride in Britishness and adopt a more realistic humility, they would as a result be more internationally peaceful. Whether the British have a notable addiction to being aggressive is no doubt an arguable matter, but the charge of xenophobia has no basis at all in reality. On the contrary, Britons have exhibited interest in and sympathy for most of the peoples of the world. In European politics, the claims of the kings of England to be also kings of France were a notable source of warlike aggression, but those follies ended in the sixteenth century, after which national policy was never purely and unambiguously aggressive. Like all other Europeans, the British are ambivalent in their attitudes to Germans, French, Dutch and the rest but the notion that they would be nicer if the history books were rewritten so that Agincourt and Trafalgar were cast out of the national memory is evidently absurd. I say these elementary things merely to clear away some of the modish nonsense of the time, and it brings me to the basic point.

British idealism has been withdrawn from the British tradition itself and invested in an abstract ideal world whose most conspicuous reality (to the extent that it is real at all) is to be found in international organisations such as the UN and the EU, along with declarations of human rights, rights of women, children, pets and any other possible set of vulnerable figures. This is a safe if somewhat feeble option, because these organisations seldom have to take any decisive action, as nation states must do, and they limit their activities to taking up virtuous postures. Who could be embarrassed by a virtuous posture? Nation states, by contrast, must often act, and sometimes do so inadvisedly, as the British did over Suez in 1956, and many would add, over Iraq in 2003. This asymmetry between real centres of power and aspirational moral entities helps to sustain the idea that codifications of rights and international organisations represent a wisdom not available to national states which are subject to the distorting partialities of the national interest.

The intellectual source of this curious distortion of idealism as a moral investment is to be found in the world of pedagogy. Universities, in the twentieth century especially, took up the idea that their academic essence was to be critical, and this plausible but misleading abstraction led many to think that serious seekers after truth must detach themselves from local political and religious beliefs in order to locate themselves in an innocent and guiltless “nowhere”. These people became, as it were, the patriots of Geneva, the Hague or the New York of the UN. This is a stance supplying the agreeably self-congratulatory option of thinking oneself “above” the vulgar prejudices of patriots and ordinary people. Schoolteachers are another notable source of this moral disinvestment of idealism in Britain. Many explicitly regard patriotism as vulgar, and “criticism” means reading the past with hindsight through the lens of current moral fashions. The result is to



discover that our ancestors were, unfortunately, not up to our standards. The old British arrogance, rejected when based upon our national tradition reappears as pedagogic self-congratulation about a kind of unreal moral superiority. It is a posture depending upon the belief that we in our time, or perhaps merely these critical believers themselves, have attained a perfection of moral understanding. The simplicity of mind sometimes to be found in contemporary pedagogy is quite remarkable.

A sketch can barely touch the complexity of this long development, but one may mention one or two of its better-known aspects. One of them is the ethical relativism widely current in the early twentieth century. These were doctrines that fed into a more general pseudo-philosophical scepticism which has often been combined with a straightforward dogmatism about current moral opinions, on rights, equality and justice for example. Another component is the post-modernist belief that truth is the handmaiden of power, and hence that truth and objectivity are not to be known (if, indeed, they are not merely tools of masculinist ideology). Multiculturalism in this context despises the common beliefs of the Western tradition (Christianity, progress, the value of technology, for example) but reveres the practices of other cultures as a necessary correction of European arrogance in past times. Truth in much of this world is replaced by discourse analysis and literature is often treated merely as a revelation of the unjust power structures of earlier times.

Human beliefs are usually sustained by some degree of self-congratulation. The Uriah Heeps of the world pride themselves on their freedom from arrogance, and those who have withdrawn their investment of idealism in Britain and taken up internationality on the one hand, and a mechanical scepticism/dogmatism on the other, congratulate themselves on not being prejudiced as others are. They have been liberated from the cage of convention into the broad pastures of reason. Part of the public relations of this set of notionally critical beliefs is that the believers have triumphed by hard struggle over the overpowering conventions of a repressive Christian and capitalist civilisation. Here, then, we have one of the many famous ways in which peoples are victimised by illusion. They may be the merest sheep picking up fashionable doctrines, but they imagine themselves as lions who have triumphed over an imprisoning mind set. This is, of course, a new version of an old indoctrination. Hitler turned the German population into sheep by explaining to them that, merely by virtue of their race, they were lions.

My suggestion is, then, that the sheep-like indifference of much of the articulate element of the British population to the loss of its historical autonomy may be



explained in terms of split idealism: specifically, the transfer of admiration from our national traditions to that of a guiltless internationality. The consequences of this curious mistake are no doubt a good deal less serious than was the case with those who in the last century invested idealism in appalling ideologies, but this internationalist enthusiasm has itself a special problem. International organisations and declarations of rights are unreal repositories of admiration. As unreal entities, international organisations lack concrete particularity. They are a kind of phantom or substitute commitment, and the consequences of this are by no means unfamiliar to both psychologists and political scientists. Commitment to a guiltless perfection lacks the discipline inseparable from a real moral investment.

The result is a curious split in the moral life. Psychoanalysts have often been preoccupied with a split in the love life of neurotic men whose idealism about women can recognise in the feminine nothing except the figures of the mother and the whore. Such a split turns reality into fantasy. Again, the ideal intentions of ideological rulers impelled them to behave in the most deceitful and ruthless ways, good purposes being taken to justify any murderousness deemed necessary to the cause.

Similarly, the investment of idealism in such unreal phantoms as international organisations leads to a parallel split, in this case a split between high toned postures on the one hand, and a drifting avoidance of real commitment on the other. The very image of this kind of split may be found in the famous concert in 2007 designed to help “make poverty history” in the Third World, but especially in Africa. This is a posture of remarkable ambition – the transformation of the condition of millions of people. Yet at the same time, if we look to the social composition of many of those present, we shall find that very large numbers of them were drifting through life unable even to rise to the ordinary commitments of family life. These Britons, mostly young, have ambitions about transforming the world that are little short of megalomania. Their claim on virtue consists in passionate support for development aid to the needy, an end to war, a banning of land mines, a reduction of carbon emissions and the rest of the current causes of our time, but in their private lives their capacity to defer gratification, control their impulses, resist drugs and debt, recognise duties and stick to commitments is often remarkably defective. And the connection between these two attitudes is that the sense of virtue attached to the idealistic posturing seems to licence a certain insouciance in lesser matters of personal life. Many of these people live in a kind of perpetual childhood, and once they have lost the security of the parental home, many of them live alone because solitude least interferes with the uncluttered life devoted to satisfying impulses.

If I am right about the consequences of an idealism that has been invested in a riskless and therefore unreal perfection, then the widespread indifference among Britons to the dangers of Britain abandoning democracy in favour of submission to a benevolent oligarchy in Brussels would cease to be mysterious. The mediocrity of our politics, and of our political class, would result from the fact that a large component of the British population, especially among the educated, can only recognise two concerns. One is the grand and slightly mad project of perfecting the world, and the other is the search for personal happiness and satisfaction. The real world of politics, however, is about grander issues of national interest in the here and now and many of our contemporaries are so lost in posturing unrealities of global perfectionism on the one hand, and the demands of immediate personal satisfaction on the other, that they lack even the capacity to recognise much less to respond to the political realities that are shaping Britain's future.

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The Bruges Group is an independent all-party think tank. Set up in February 1989, its aim was to promote the idea of a less centralised European structure than that emerging in Brussels. Its inspiration was Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech in September 1988, in which she remarked that "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level...". The Bruges Group has had a major effect on public opinion and forged links with Members of Parliament as well as with similarly minded groups in other countries. The Bruges Group spearheads the intellectual battle against the notion of "ever-closer Union" in Europe. Through its ground-breaking publications and wide-ranging discussions it will continue its fight against further integration and, above all, against British involvement in a single European state.

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