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Britain and Germany in Europe: What prospects?

Response of David Marquand to David Hannay

Synopsis

I largely agree with Lord Hannay. Certainly agree that negotiations encumbered with British red lines would almost certainly fail; and that British secession from the Union would be a disaster for this country and indeed for the whole European project.

But don’t want to talk about the future of Europe seen as a collection of nation states. Want to focus on infinitely more complex questions that that conversation ignores. I studied history here almost 60 years ago; my tutor was the mischievous, coruscating, AJP Taylor. He taught me that the conventional language of diplomatic history that treats nation-states as though they are homogeneous chunks of political matter is fundamentally flawed. ‘Germany’, ‘Britain’, ‘Russia’, ‘France’ and so on are convenient shorthand, nothing more. To understand the Anglo-German relationship, to understand the forces that will shape Europe’s future, we must look at deeper factors that the shorthand can’t handle.

Begin with Britain – one of the two countries that this seminar is supposed to be about. Start with an assertion you may think preposterous: ‘Britain’ as conventionally understood no longer exists. What used to be called the ‘union state – the state created by the Tudor statutes that assimilated Wales into England in the 1530s, the Acts of Union that merged the Scottish and Anglo-Welsh parliaments in 1707 and the Treaty of 1921 that gave independence to southern Ireland and home rule to Northern Ireland – has been consigned to the dustbin of history. For the first time since the early eighteenth century an elected Scottish Parliament now sits in Edinburgh. For the first time ever an elected Assembly, whose Welsh name (‘Senedd’) actually means ‘Parliament’, sits in the vibrant Welsh capital of Cardiff, which happens to be my native city. The devolved administrations and parliaments in the the three non-English nations of the United Kingdom now enjoy considerable – and steadily increasing – autonomy. They are at least as autonomous as the German Länder, and may be more so.

In Scotland and Wales, both public policy and popular sentiment are diverging more and more from those of the preponderantly English United Kingdom. What Abraham Lincoln once called the ‘mystic chords of memory’ used to hold the nations of the United Kingdom together. Now, they are pulling them apart. As we speak, politicians north of the Border are preparing for a referendum on Scottish secession from the United Kingdom. The secessionists in the Scottish National Party may or may not win. Those who think they are bound to lose should remember that Alex Salmond, Scotland’s nationalist First Minister, is arguably the most charismatic, as well as one of the most guileful political leaders in the United Kingdom. And even if outright secession is defeated, the end result is almost certain to be ‘Devo Max’: a situation in which the Scottish Parliament and Government control all domestic policy areas, leaving only defence and foreign policy to the Westminster Government.

What has this got to do with the future of Europe and the relationship between Britain and Germany? The answer to that question lies in the evolving relationship between England and the non-English nations of the UK. The ‘Euro-scepticism’ that Lord Hannay excoriated – I think it is more accurately termed ‘Europobia’ – is an overwhelmingly English phenomenon. Polling evidence suggests that Scottish opinion is strongly in favour of
remaining in the EU, and Welsh opinion evenly divided. Much more important, Scots and Welsh people are unfazed by the notion of multiple identities that membership of the EU necessarily implies – and that seems to stick in English gullets. As Lord Hannay reminded us, EU membership does not mean that national identities have to be given up. But it does mean that an extra European identity has to be added to them. North of the Border and west of Offa’s Dyke, that presents no problems. For centuries, Scots and Welsh people have been both British and Scottish or Welsh. To be at one and the same time, Scottish (or Welsh) and British and European seems quite natural to them, just as it seems natural to Bavarians to be European and German and Bavarian.

It’s never wise to predict election results long in advance, but I would hazard the guess that if there is a UK-wide in-out referendum on EU membership, Scotland and Wales will vote to stay in. If pro-European majorities in Scotland and Wales were overwhelmed by an anti-European majority in much more populous England, our Union – the Union of the United Kingdom – would almost certainly break up. I don’t want that to happen. I would like to see a federal Britain in a federalising Europe. But if the English are determined to cut off their collective nose to spite their collective face, so be it.

That leads me to a more complex point. So far, I have spoken as if the rise of autonomist feeling in Wales and Scotland were a purely British phenomenon. It isn’t. For Wales and Scotland, read Brittany, Corsica, the Basque country, Catalonia, Galicia, Lombardy or Padania, Flanders, and Wallonia. And that is just in western Europe. If we throw in eastern and east/central Europe, the list is longer and more fraught: Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo spring to mind. About the only large country in western Europe which has not experienced autonomist pressures is Germany. And Germany is, of course, a federal state and has been one ever since it re-emerged a little timidly from the catastrophe of the Second World War. Germany apart, I believe that what we are seeing in western Europe is another kind of re-emergence: the re-emergence of the pre-modern palimpsest of bishoprics, city states, principalities, duchies and the like that were pushed into a historical deep-freeze by the rise of the modern state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A central theme of the cultural history of the post-modern Europe of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a kind of neo-medievalism: the return of the local, the familiar, the small-scale in the face of the homogenising pressures of global capitalism and the pretensions of the increasingly sclerotic nation-states which dowsed Europe in blood twice in the last century and which no longer embody the identities of a growing number of their peoples.

The great challenge now facing Europe – greater, I believe, than the familiar challenges of the Eurozone crisis and the need to remain competitive in the global market-place – is how to make a reality of what is sometimes called ‘glocalism’: how to combine the global and the local; how to transcend state sovereignty through supra-national integration on the European level while at the same time creating centres of power closer to home than the classical European nation state has ever been, or can ever be. This is where Germany – with its subtle symbiosis between central and local power – has most to teach the European Union of which she has been a cornerstone for sixty years. I only hope the rest of us have the wit and will to follow her example.