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The Breakaway

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IT IS NOW a year since Britain left the EU, and less than a month since the terms of its separation were sealed, on Christmas Eve. What explains its departure from the Union half a century after joining it, and what light does this cast on the future of Europe itself? An answer to either of these questions requires a longer view than the vote on Brexit and the brief period since. In 1950, convinced of the superiority of its own economy and the strength of its ties with the US, the UK showed scant interest in the Schuman Plan, and little more in the preparations for the Treaty of Rome at Messina five years later. The future of the world, so it believed, lay in Anglo-American hegemony. It was not until after the shock of American desertion at Suez and the re-election in 1959 of a Conservative government under Harold Macmillan that this stance changed. By 1960, the poor performance of the British economy compared with those of the six countries that had created the European Economic Community (EEC) was plain and, strongly encouraged by the Kennedy administration in Washington, which saw Britain as a useful bridgehead into the Community, Macmillan applied for membership in 1962. Explaining that Britain would be little better than a Trojan horse for American domination of Europe, de Gaulle vetoed the application in January 1963.

The following year, Labour came to power in London. Before his death, Hugh Gaitskell had rallied the party to vigorous opposition to British entry into the EEC, arguing that it would mean the end of a thousand years as an independent nation. Harold Wilson could not make a speedy break with this position, but by 1967 British economic decline was so pronounced that he was able to renew an application for events with all-party support, in a motion carried in the Commons by 487 to 26 votes – a high-water mark of enthusiasm for Europe. No dice: six months later de Gaulle reissued his *fin de non recevoir*. It would take two events to alter the situation. In the summer of 1969, de Gaulle was succeeded by his prime minister, Georges Pompidou, who had played no role in the Resistance and made a postwar career in Rothschilds before rising through the ranks of the Gaullist administration. A year later, Edward Heath succeeded Wilson, heading a Conservative government in a time of decolonisation. Unlike any other British prime minister of the postwar epoch, Heath was overwhelmingly oriented to Europe, where he had fought during the Second World War, rather than to America. It did not, on the other hand, take him long to hit it off with Pompidou, who did not share Gaullist reservations about the US, to which he paid an official visit in 1970.

Pressing Britain's application for entry to the Common Market as soon as he was in Downing Street, Heath took eighteen months to negotiate terms that were satisfactory to him and to Pompidou, a period probably extended by the need for Ireland and Denmark to do the same (Norway having opted out). The arithmetic in the Commons was not unfavourable. The Tories had 330 MPs to 288 Labour, six Liberals and six others. But although at least forty Conservative MPs were against joining the EEC, 69 Labour MPs led by Roy Jenkins were in favour. There was thus

never any real risk of the government being defeated on the issue. When the decisive third reading of the European Communities Bill came in July 1972, it passed by 301 to 284 votes. Britain had finally made it into Europe. But there was a substantial catch. While still in opposition, Heath had promised that he would not take the country into the EEC without ‘the full-hearted consent’ of the Parliament and people of Britain. That was never tested. He flatly rejected any question of a referendum to ascertain the popular will, though there was little risk of him losing one. More important, the government systematically avoided the fact that its terms of entry instituted the supremacy of European law over British law – that they meant, in short, a derogation of national sovereignty. Not a single minister candidly admitted what the documents they were urging into law meant constitutionally. For Heath, Europe would be a substitute for empire, and that was sufficient; likewise his colleagues. As the journalist Hugo Young put it, ‘the deep, existential meaning, for Britain, of getting into “Europe” was not considered.’ No serious thought was given to the implications of accession. In his judgment, ‘ministers did not lie, but they avoided telling the full truth,’ leaving subsequent Conservatives to feel that ‘British entry was originally approved on false, even fraudulent pretences.’ To get the country into the Common Market, the government opted for obfuscation rather than openness.

From the opposition benches, Wilson had been obliged to denounce the treaty, while ensuring that Jenkins and others suffered no penalty for ensuring its passage. Restored to government in 1974, Labour went through the motions of renegotiating the terms Heath had secured from Pompidou, then staging a referendum on the revision. Wilson allowed his ministers to take whatever side they preferred in the ensuing campaign, in which Tony Benn from Labour and Enoch Powell from the opposition – he had by then left the Tories and joined the Ulster Unionists – campaigned for a No vote. In June 1975, on a turnout of 64 per cent, two-thirds of those who voted – 67 per cent – approved the deal Wilson had obtained. British membership of the Common Market looked rock solid. When Thatcher took over four years later, and promptly abolished exchange controls, releasing the City for further European deals, it strengthened again. By the mid-1980s, the British economy was outperforming its counterparts on the Continent, even as the long general downturn of the period cut growth rates across the world capitalist economy. In confident mood, Thatcher recovered two-thirds of the UK’s (disproportionately high) net contribution to the EEC budget, before helping to propel the next major stage of market integration – the Single European Act of 1987 under the president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors – from which she expected British financial services in particular to benefit.

It was not long before any such linear prospect was in trouble. At the Treasury, Nigel Lawson had pressed for British entry into the Community’s Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1985, and when Thatcher vetoed this, shadowed it nonetheless. By 1989 the economy – pumped up by Lawson to secure Thatcher’s third electoral victory in 1987 – was visibly overheating, with a record balance of payments deficit, rising inflation and higher interest rates. For her part, Thatcher, sensing the direction in which Delors was heading with his committee on monetary union, dug in her heels over demands from her colleagues that she follow Brussels and Frankfurt, which were visibly gearing up for a single currency. By the end of 1989 Lawson was gone, and within a year Thatcher had followed him, toppled by her deputy, Geoffrey Howe, on account of her growing hostility to the Community. She was still strong enough to ensure that her favoured successor, John Major, took over, but it soon became clear that he had no more intention than Lawson or Howe of hewing to her vision of Europe. With scarcely over a year in office behind him, Major signed the Treaty of Maastricht, after negotiating an opt-out from the single currency. On his return to London, the government press release crowed that the upshot of the conference in the Netherlands was ‘game, set and match’ to Britain.

In the wake of this ostensible triumph, Major called an election in April 1992 and won it easily. Less than two months later, the Danes voted on the package their government had brought back

from Maastricht, and rejected it. The Danish revolt sparked a British one, with dissident Tories and Liberal Democrats demanding a referendum on the treaty, the *Telegraph*, *Sun* and *Spectator* backing them, and polls showing public support for one. From the wings, Thatcher had become an increasingly vocal critic of Brussels. Just at this point, British membership of the ERM – which the country had entered in 1990 at too high an exchange rate – collapsed, destroying the credibility of the government. Limping through successive divisions over Maastricht without ever recovering politically, Major finally got ratification through in May 1993, a couple of days after the Danes were forced into holding a second referendum. At the Treasury, Kenneth Clarke presided over a return to growth, but it was of no electoral avail. The Conservatives were comprehensively thrashed in the elections of May 1997, leaving Tony Blair with the largest Commons majority of any government since 1945.

Dramatic though the overthrow of Major proved to be, it did not substantially alter the position of Britain in Europe. Once he was gone, however, the Euroscepticism he had just managed to keep in check broke loose, electing three Conservative leaders in succession – Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard – who were sworn opponents of Maastricht, none with any hope of winning an election. In government, Blair's initial doubts about the single currency, prompted by the hostility to the euro of the Murdoch press that had helped elect him, soon faded. But Gordon Brown's firm refusal to abandon sterling, made from his position of strength at the Exchequer, maintained the status quo bequeathed by Major. London would sign up to the Social Chapter that Major had sidestepped, but despite increasingly frantic pressure from Blair, the UK would respect the rest of the package negotiated at Maastricht, retaining its opt-out from the single currency. Brown was emboldened in this course by the continuing success, as it appeared, of Britain's splendid isolation from the Eurozone. Here is Blair, addressing the Labour Party Conference at Brighton as prime minister in 1997:

We are one of the great innovative peoples. From the Magna Carta to the first Parliament to the industrial revolution to an empire that covered the world, most of the great inventions of modern times have Britain stamped on them: the telephone; the television; the computer; penicillin; the hovercraft; radar. Change is in the blood and bones of the British – we are by our nature and tradition innovators, adventurers, pioneers. As our great poet of renewal and recovery, John Milton, put it, we are 'a nation not slow or dull, but of quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point that human capacity can soar to'. Even today, we lead the world in design, pharmaceuticals, financial services, telecommunications. We have the world's first language. Britain today is an exciting, inspiring place to be.

Captivated by the 'rare brilliance' of Blair's speech to the National Assembly in Paris the following year, and the 'effortless aplomb' of his handling of questions about Europe, Young saluted his skill in leading the country out of the 'darkness' of the past, even if he was 'not yet ready to name the day or the hour when the old world would end'. In the view of the real architect at Maastricht, the Dutch prime minister Ruud Lubbers, the pro-European British elite had been unable to represent the realities of integration to their compatriots. 'It was if as the makers did not dare to tell the truth.' Blair was braver, Young believed: it was plainly his intention to call a referendum on British entry into the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) before it came into effect in January 2002. He was 'unlikely to miss his opportunity to reposition the national mind' on Europe: 'now there was a prime minister prepared to align the island with the natural hinterland beyond.'

No such luck. Young, starstruck by Blair in 1997, was cruelly disappointed by the time of his death in autumn 2003, when the consequences not only of the war on Iraq, against which he had warned, but of the rift between Blair and Brown on Europe, were already plain.¹ Blair lacked the courage to tackle the issue until he had won re-election in 2001, when he began pressing for entry to the

EMU. Brown, however, master of the briefs the Treasury had produced for him, dug his heels in, and when the two clashed head-on in spring 2003 had no difficulty prevailing. Britain was star performer in the G8, with no reason to truckle to the wishes of others. In the autumn, Brown told the party that

While America and Japan have been in recession – while half of Europe is still in recession, Britain with a Labour government pursuing Labour policies has achieved economic growth in every year, indeed in every quarter of every year, for the whole six and a half years of this Labour government . . . Britain can be more than a bridge between Europe and America: our British values – what we say and do marrying enterprise and fairness, and about public services and the need to relieve poverty – can and should in time make Britain a model, a beacon for Europe, America and the rest of the world.

Brown's relationship with Blair, as he would later report, never recovered from the rebuff he dealt his premier. So long as he stayed chancellor, his own political reputation remained intact. No sooner did he become prime minister in 2007, however, than the wheels fell off the triumphal chariot he thought he was riding. By the summer subprime mortgages in the US were in trouble, and were soon taking down with them the British banks that had plunged recklessly into the American housing market. By the autumn of 2008, the Royal Bank of Scotland – at the beginning of the year the flushiest in the world, with nominal assets of £2.3 trillion, larger than Britain's GDP – was effectively bankrupt, saved only by a last-minute government takeover. Amid the ruins of its braggadocio, New Labour was left with the worst fiscal deficit of the G7. Few were surprised when it was trounced at the polls in 2010.

THREE YEARS before the financial crisis, David Cameron had been elected to lead the Conservatives, promising to make them a more appealing alternative to Labour after the serial fiascos of his predecessors. Unlike them, he was not a Eurosceptic and made sure he got into office without damaging commitments of the kind that had helped sink them. But the party he led had shifted steadily further away from the positions of Heath and Howe. To the small group of bone-dry sceptics of 1972-75 were now added those who had broken with the party leadership over Maastricht, and yet more recently those who saw nothing positive in the arrangements of the Treaty of Lisbon, which succeeded it. All were on their guard against further concessions to Brussels, and in early 2011 forced the European Union Act through Parliament, making a referendum obligatory in the event that any further treaty revision was proposed. They were fortified in their position by the strength that Ukip had revealed in the European elections of 2009, when it came second with 16 per cent of the vote, behind the Tories with 27.4 per cent, but ahead of Labour with 15.2 per cent.

Helping Cameron, on the other hand, were the Liberal Democrats, who had taken nearly a quarter of the vote in 2010, and provided the coalition with enough seats for a comfortable majority of 76 in the Commons. Under Nick Clegg, who promptly scuttled his party's pledge to scrap tuition fees for higher education, the Lib Dems were at one with the Tories in forcing harsh austerity on the country, but as a party remained unconditionally pro-European. The first test of the coalition's mettle came when Angela Merkel decided, shortly before the 2010 British election, that it was essential the EU revise its treaties, adding a Fiscal Compact that would bind every government to rigid budgetary discipline, to check the danger of the Union unravelling amid tensions over the fallout of the Wall Street crisis. By November 2011, the regimes in Dublin, Lisbon, Athens, Rome and Madrid had all been toppled, helped along not infrequently by the demands of Berlin and Frankfurt. In December the European Council met in Brussels to vote on the German package to save the euro. Cameron vetoed its adoption, whereupon Merkel pushed it through as an inter-governmental treaty outside the framework of the Union. The compact was sealed early in 2012, making clear how ineffectual British opposition proved in practice to be.

Undaunted, Cameron called an election in May 2015. By now, Clegg's role as a parliamentary footstool for the Tories had discredited the Lib Dems, and the party's vote collapsed by nearly two-thirds, giving Cameron a small but workable Tory majority in the Commons. Buoyed by victory in the Scottish independence referendum a few months earlier, when warning of the economic dangers of a break with England had yielded comfortable support for the status quo, Cameron announced a referendum on membership of the EU the following spring, expecting that with leeway from the Union on migration, which had become a running source of complaint in domestic politics, he could carry the day without much difficulty. His insouciance was wrong. The footling concessions he secured in Europe won him no friends at home, and the timing and terms of the referendum were set, not by him nor his cabinet, but by the astute and clear-sighted strategists of the European Research Group (ERG) in the Commons, implacable adversaries of what the EU had become. Once the campaign began, two of his leading cabinet ministers – Michael Gove the slyest and Boris Johnson the most popular of his colleagues, neither of them close to the ERG, both actuated by career rather than conviction – declared themselves for Leave.

In parliamentary terms, Remain still had a winning hand, since Labour, the Lib Dems, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens were all theoretically with Cameron, who also retained the support of 53 per cent of the Tory delegation in the Commons, giving him the backing of 73 per cent of the House. Such proportions, however, were detached from the politics of the time. When Ed Miliband resigned as Labour leader after defeat in the 2015 general election, the first leadership poll in the party's history to be decided on a simple one-person-one-vote basis, rather than by the block union and parliamentary quotas of the past, produced a landslide victory for Jeremy Corbyn, an outsider from the left. Corbyn soon made it clear he did not intend to repeat Miliband's performance in the Scottish referendum – he had lined up with Cameron – but would argue for British retention of EU membership on his own terms, giving no support to the Tory government. Nor did the parliamentary statistics reflect the balance of opinion in the country, as would shortly become clear.

After a referendum campaign of ten weeks, 58 per cent of Tory, 37 per cent of Labour and 96 per cent of Ukip voters opted for Leave, yielding an overall majority of 52 per cent for Brexit, rising to 64 per cent in the poorest three categories of the population, C2DE. The only socioeconomic group where a majority voted to Remain was the most affluent stratum of the population, composed of members of categories A and B. All others preferred Leave. But if voters were divided not by income but by age and education, the result looked very different. Of those between 18 and 24 who voted, 73 per cent chose Remain; between 25 and 34, 62 per cent; between 35 and 44, 52 per cent; the majority of those over 44 voted for Leave. Similarly, 57 per cent of those with university degrees opted to Remain, 64 per cent with higher degrees, and 81 per cent in full-time education. Geographically, in England it was in university towns alone that Remain won handsomely.

Politically, the two camps were divided by contrasting perceptions of what was at stake in the referendum. The Remainers consisted essentially of two groups, those who were moved principally by cultural issues and those principally by economic issues. For the first group, composed of the young and most of the well-educated, the driving force was overwhelmingly a hostility to chauvinism – a rejection of the blind xenophobia and racism that threatened, they believed, to make Britain a suffocating prison of reaction. For the second group, leaving the EU threatened living standards, which were bound to drop cruelly on exit. Leavers were also divided into two groups. For the first, overwhelmingly located in the plebeian categories C2DE, the key issue was control over their own, and the country's, destiny, something that could only be secured by departure from the EU. For the second, it was recovery of the independence that had been the basis of Britain's prowess in the past. To these more general considerations, control of

immigration and borders came second. Close to three-quarters of Remainers thought Britain a better country than thirty years earlier; nearly three-fifths of Leavers thought it worse.

Behind the clash of arguments and identities in June 2016 lay two critical legacies of New Labour. The first derived from Blair's decision in 2004 to reward his Eastern European allies for their staunch role in the Iraq War. Poland, which had taken part in the US-UK led invasion and hosted a CIA torture chamber, received pride of place in the reception of immigrants to UK. Some 700,000 Poles eventually came, many more than Blair had bargained for. No other European country knew an influx of comparable size and speed so early on. By 2017, 400,000 Romanians and Bulgarians had joined them. The Cameron government, though acutely aware of the potential danger this cumulative influx represented to Tory stability, could do nothing to halt or mitigate it. When the referendum came, Ukip under Farage and Banks pulled no punches in the nativist operation it ran independently of Dominic Cummings's Vote Leave, along a parallel track but at some distance from it.

The second legacy of New Labour, unlike the first, attracted virtually no public attention, but was probably more decisive. Had Blair pushed through accession to the EMU after 2001, or even after 2005, the outcome of the referendum would have been very different. It was his failure to override Brown, and lock Britain into the single currency when the economic going was still good for the country, that handed victory to Leave. For one lesson of the Monetary Union is crystal clear. *Ceteris paribus*, once a country is inside it, fear of the consequences of departure trumps all else if the issue is tested at the polls. The nearest a people came to leaving the single currency despite this was the Greek rejection of the Troika's terms for a bailout in the referendum of 2015. That vote, however, was a simple negative: 'Ochi'. The referendum lacked any positive proposal, and as soon as the Syriza government led by Alexis Tsipras capitulated, resistance to the worse terms he accepted dissolved virtually overnight. The reason was the one that had made Matteo Salvini of the Lega Nord in Italy and Marine Le Pen of the renamed Rassemblement National in France ultimately back away from any talk of exit from the EMU. Once the single currency was in force, people's savings were held in euros. To leave the Monetary Union when this was an accomplished fact was to destroy their value. No party with a popular base dared risk such a prospect.

It was the complete absence of this danger which secured the victory of Leave in Britain. The masses who voted for Brexit believed they were striking a blow at Brussels and the neoliberalism under which they had suffered for a quarter of a century. In reality, that neoliberalism – harsher than anything on the Continent – was British in origin, and could be overthrown without any of the instant penalties that would have been incurred if the UK had been a loyal member of the EMU. As for those who voted against Brexit, their warnings of disaster were for all immediate purposes irrelevant. In the longer run, Claus Offe's verdict – though imposition of the single currency was a huge mistake for Europe, unwinding it risks even greater harm to ordinary citizens – might hold good. But in 2016, such a risk was an abstraction. In their different ways, the two sides in the referendum battle shared the same illusion: in the world at large, defeat for their position would mean a loss of standing for Britain that was bound to be fatal to its prosperity. Neither of them paid the slightest attention to the obvious fact that (if we exclude toy-states like Liechtenstein, Monaco or Luxembourg) the two richest countries in Europe, with the most advanced welfare systems, do not belong to the EU: Switzerland and Norway. Both societies rejected integration with the Union in popular referendums and have flourished since doing so. In Britain, the cry from both camps says enough about their common motivation: what, be reduced to the rank of the Swiss or the Norwegians! Suppressed or blurted, nostalgia for Great Power status united the combatants in the referendum, compulsively grappling with each other in the dark.

ON the morning after the vote, Cameron announced his resignation as prime minister, and was succeeded by Theresa May, his home secretary, who had also been a Remainer, if a more cautious one. Anger at the result of the referendum in the Parliamentary Labour Party was such that – even before May was installed as premier – it voted by 172 to 40 to evict Corbyn, who was held responsible for Remain's defeat. In September a second leadership election returned him with an even larger majority. Buoyed by her success in local elections the following spring, and enjoying a large lead in the opinion polls, May called a snap election in June 2017, counting on a much enlarged majority. It did not materialise. Though she increased the Tory vote by just over two million, raising its share from 37 to 42 per cent – its highest level since Thatcher – and did significantly better than her predecessor in Scotland, the total number of seats she won fell, whereas Labour increased its vote by double the Tory margin, hitting 40 per cent of the total for the first time since 2001. With just 317 seats, May put together a minority government dependent on the ten Democratic Unionist MPs from Ulster.

May soldiered on in the hope of a Chequers deal with the EU, trading concessions over Northern Ireland, where opinion was overwhelmingly against a hard border with the South, for an otherwise smooth path to withdrawal from the Union. Small chance. In the summer of 2018, Johnson, her foreign secretary, resigned from the cabinet over the proposed arrangement, followed in the autumn by the Brexit secretary, Dominic Raab. Successive attempts to get Chequers-lite arrangements through the Commons floundered in the face of opposition from the ERG, which could muster up to eighty votes. The Tory ranks looked in complete disarray. Worse, however, had overtaken Labour. As May struggled to persuade her own party to support her, the Labour right, which had always commanded a huge majority in the PLP, regrouped behind the broad front for a 'People's Vote' that took shape in the spring of 2018, campaigning for a second referendum to reverse the result of the first along standard EU lines, as pulled off in Denmark and Ireland. Recovering its spirits, the *Guardian* was soon baying in support. The campaign was internally divided, with formal ownership of the assets of Open Britain, the original impetus behind People's Vote, resting with the millionaire public relations tycoon Roland Rudd, while most of the organisational work came from Blair's former aide Alastair Campbell and other veterans of New Labour, who unlike Rudd were chary of committing the campaign to cancelling the result of the referendum, preferring the pretence of simply asking voters what they now thought. Tensions between the two wings boiled over in the autumn of 2019, when Rudd staged a coup, dismissing the Blairite operatives from their common offices in Millbank.

Distinct from these shenanigans, but within their general *mouvance*, the youthful cadres of Momentum that had formed the shock troops of Corbynism shifted to an increasingly militant pro-Europeanism. This development, however, made clear a substantial gap between aspirations and abilities. That a passionate internationalism moved the new recruits to the idea of a second referendum was clear. But what kind of internationalism was it? Under New Labour, foreign languages ceased to be compulsory in schools after the age of 14, with command of any foreign language among 14 and 15-year-olds soon falling to less than a quarter of the EU average. A decade later, the number of pupils taking German at GCSE had plummeted by half, those taking French by two-fifths. At A level, where drop-out rates are very high, the number taking French had by 2019 fallen to a third of that in 1996, and Spanish – chosen by just 1.1 per cent of candidates, about two-thirds of them female – had overtaken French as the most popular language. At university level, fewer than 5 per cent of undergraduates now study a foreign language, a decline of a fifth since 2015. Among the young, an internationalism that is so largely sentimental yields solidarity with other Anglophones, of Commonwealth or other backgrounds. But in any wider or more lasting sense, sympathies without skills lack depth and staying power.

In the background, the LRB entered the fray, from February 2016 onwards, publishing 210 pieces invoking Brexit in 114 issues of the paper, with a further 55 letters and 167 items on its blog. In these conditions, under pressure from the PLP, the *Guardian*, the BBC and its own youth, the Labour leadership drifted towards a generic obstructionism in the Commons, as May's base in the Conservative Party disintegrated. When she finally threw in her hand, and Johnson romped home in the contest to succeed her, then quickly reached agreement with Dublin and Brussels on withdrawal terms, Labour was caught off guard, and bounced by the Lib Dems and the SNP into accepting the Tory demand for an early election, for which it had long clamoured but now had every reason to fear. Taking full advantage of popular exasperation at three years of political deadlock, and campaigning on a relentless refrain of 'Get Brexit Done', Johnson swept to an easy victory, coming close to Thatcher's electoral score in 1979 and comfortably exceeding her majority in the Commons. Labour collapsed by nearly eight points, to a level only just ahead of its debacle of 1987. When Corbyn stood down, Keir Starmer secured a majority among the party membership virtually as large as Corbyn's had been, and wasted no time in purging the shadow cabinet and NEC of holdovers from the previous regime, restoring the traditional status quo of a right-wing Labourism indistinguishable from the good sense of a mainstream establishment.

Leaving Blair's initial fumbling over Europe well behind (campaigning in 1983 against membership of the EEC, rallying to it in 1987) in a somersault of scarcely a year between passionate calls for a second referendum and resolute enforcement of submission to the pact clinching Brexit, Starmer would show a clean pair of heels to New Labour itself. The EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement was bundled through the Commons on 30 December in four hours, amid a *bien pensant* consensus that while far from desirable – it multiplies red tape on goods and excludes the financial services at which Britain excels – it's at least better than no deal. If the cost will be a 4 per cent, rather than a 6 per cent loss of GDP, what else could be expected, given the disparity – the EU more than six times the size of the UK in output and population – in the bargaining power of the two sides?

Macroeconomic predictions extending over a period of years are rarely foolproof; deviations cannot be discounted in either direction. In this case, perhaps more significant is what such predictions generally overlook. The Lisbon Treaty, copied from the draft constitution of the EU that was thwarted by French and Dutch voters, proclaims the commitment of the Union to a 'highly competitive market economy', if naturally a 'social' one, not to speak of 'peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and respect among peoples, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights'. Among these worthy objectives comes 'free and fair trade'. Why the first adjective requires the second, or how exactly it consorts with it, is not explained. But that the first is coaxed by the second, in much the same way that the addition of 'social' soothes 'market', is clear. The drafters' delicate sense of words does not end there. Whereas the Union 'shall establish' a highly competitive economy, it will merely 'contribute' to free trade. The reality so nicely captured in this distinction is that, not unlike the US or China, the EU is a mercantilist bloc, replete with subsidies (think only of the Common Agricultural Policy) and protections (think only of services) of many kinds, aimed at barricading outsiders from the privileges afforded insiders. That its neoliberal admirers in Britain should burn so much incense in honour of its internationalist calling is not the least irony of the hour, only underlined by the contrast between its practices and the purer free trade dispositions, proceeding to unilateral abolition of tariffs, of mid-Victorian Britain.

THE HONEYMOON enjoyed by the Johnson government after its triumph at the polls was brief. Elected on 12 December 2019, it celebrated the British exit from the EU on 31 January 2020. By then Covid-19 was already circulating in the country. But it was not until 23 March that the government ordered a lockdown. Criticism of its performance, bungling by any measure, came from all sides, not least from papers like the *Guardian* and the *Mirror*. But as organs of the Labour establishment, these could be discounted. More telling attacks came from writers once close to the Tories. Three stood out as authors of far the most effective critiques of recent British developments; all had a past at the *Spectator*: Ferdinand Mount, former aide to Thatcher, whose *The New Few* had appeared in 2012; Peter Osborne, whose *Triumph of the Political Class* was published five years earlier; and Geoffrey Wheatcroft, whose *Yo, Blair!* came out in 2007. The first looked at the structure of wealth that had emerged in the new century, the second at the character of its ruling elite, the third at the role played by the architect of New Labour in the decline of the traditional political order.

In this trio, Mount was in some ways a figure apart, having transferred his allegiance from Thatcher to Blair by the time of the wars on Yugoslavia and Iraq, adventures that he supported. In *Mind the Gap* (2004), he could write with unalloyed admiration of ‘progressive reformers’ like the New Labour politicians Mandelson, Milburn and Byers, and of late has made a robust defence of the ‘constitutional and administrative reforms of the Blair years’. In a similar mood, he would greet the ‘thrilling’ early episodes of the Cameron-Clegg coalition with enthusiasm. But when he came to write *The New Few*, an assault on Britain’s fall into the grip of self-seeking oligarchies of one kind or another, he made it clear that the EU was a still more extreme case of the same disease, in a chapter entitled ‘Stuck on the Eurostar’. These European symptoms didn’t leave Britain unaffected. ‘Belonging to the EU brings us under a system of law that is new to us, both in kind and in degree. It is far more abundant, much less responsive to public opinion, more or less irreversible, and within its spheres of competence, unlimited,’ Mount wrote. The Union, advancing with a vast and virtually untouchable *acquis*, and a decreasing connection to public feeling, was expanding its powers at the expense of national parliaments. The truth was that ‘the EU began as an oligarchy, it continues oligarchic, and the oligarchs see no reason to alter their practices or their ambitions. No previous empire I can think of, certainly not that of the Romans or the British, not even the French, carried centralisation quite so far’; and no project revealed its nature so starkly as the single currency. The euro was ‘the oligarch project to end all oligarch projects’, a design careless in its hubris and heedless of its casualties, from which countries like Portugal, Greece and Italy would do well to exit. Though Mount had always supported British membership of the EU, in the hope that ‘over the years the EU would gradually cast off its elitist oligarchic origins and engage with the people, I have to confess that no such casting-off or engaging has been observable to date.’

That was in 2012. Since 2016, he has adopted a very different note in a series of impassioned philippics against Brexit. Britain is now said to be in the grip of an unpleasant and unscrupulous regime, populated by venomous paranoids determined to obstruct decent relations with Europe, whose vainglorious *Duce* has not only scrapped Thatcher’s commitment to the free market and deregulation, but tolerates no equals. To denounce the misgovernment of Johnson is not, Mount writes, ‘to defend the ramshackle and blatantly imperfect institutions of the EU’. But what has Europe ever had to do with our domestic problems? Virtually all the changes which have occurred in the UK since it entered Europe were locally derived, with the partial exception of immigration. Had Britain joined the Eurozone, its sovereignty would have been impaired, but since it did not, we had never lost control of our destiny. Under Johnson, Edward Luttwak’s prediction that in conditions of massive middle-class job loss capitalism could generate a soft variant of fascism, now seemed far-sighted.² There was indeed a new puzzlement at the workings of capitalism, Mount confessed. But timely measures to help farmers, small businesses, human rights and

ordinary families, and a revival of our links with European institutions were perfectly capable of resolving it. In this threnody, forgotten or repressed are the charges once laid against not only the character of the Union, but its impact on this country – here too Remainer passion obliterating the Europe of its attachment.

Osborne, unlike Mount, welcomed the referendum on Europe and voted for Brexit. But looking back in the spring of 2019, after May had signalled that she was stepping down but before her successor was chosen, he was seized with regret. ‘Part of me, therefore, still feels proud of Brexit. Well done Britain for challenging remote oligarchs based in Brussels,’ he wrote. But nearly three years of angry and bitter debate had cut him in two. It was clear that Nissan, Sony and Panasonic were shifting their investments to the Continent, and Japanese financial firms might well follow, while even the Brexiteer James Dyson was moving his vacuum-cleaner manufacture to Singapore. Nor was there any widespread support for Brexit in Northern Ireland or Scotland, risking the unity of Great Britain. He had changed his mind, and urged others to do the same. But where, he asked, is ‘the ringing declaration of love for the European Union? We have seen the passionate beliefs of the Brexiteers. Where’s your own positivity? Where your matching passion for Remain?’ To which he could only reply: ‘I have none. Only a deep, gnawing worry that we are making a significant mistake: a worry that is growing by the hour. Call that negative, if you like, but precaution is negative – yet it is part of our kit for survival.’ In December 2019, Osborne announced that to stop Johnson he would vote Labour.

Describing himself as ‘a somewhat tepid or critical Remainer’, who had long viewed the notion of a United States of Europe as misguided and foredoomed, Wheatcroft attacked the 2016 referendum just before it took place as a demagogic distraction. Maastricht had combined two mistakes, premature enlargement of the EU to the East before it had achieved sufficient economic convergence with Western Europe and imposition of a disastrously misjudged single currency on Southern Europe. The Union needed drastic reform if it was to survive. But Brexiteers offered none. Later, when Cameron produced an apologia after losing the referendum, Wheatcroft compared it to ‘Blair’s gruesome memoir, *A Journey*’, as ‘one more apology that doesn’t apologise’. Cameron was refusing to admit that the referendum could never have had a good outcome, although ‘by trying to appease the unappeasable, he was on a hiding to nothing: if the Europhobes had lost, they would simply have come back another time.’ It was as if Cameron had told the Spaniards in the summer of 1936: ‘We are a sadly divided nation. Let us clear the air and bring the country together, by fighting a Civil War.’ As for the foreign policy of those who won the referendum, the Tories, defiant of the EU and subservient to the White House, had become ‘résistants towards Brussels, but pétainistes towards Washington’. Johnson, aptly depicted by Mount as ‘a seedy, treacherous character’, was both ruthlessly ambitious and totally unprincipled. For Wheatcroft, as a writer for the *Spectator* when Johnson was its editor, ‘our dealings were perfectly cordial, but then I’ve dealt with plenty of affable rascals in my time.’

Vengeful, remorseful, critical: such was the gamut of these one-time Tories’ reflections on Brexit. Striking in every case is the weakness of the eventual stance adopted. Although all three writers are well versed in European matters, none pays any sustained attention to the institutions of the EU, or the direction they have been taking in the decades since Maastricht. Europe is scarcely even a sideshow. What matters is what has happened in Blighty. Mount’s lone proviso – if Britain had entered the Eurozone, the issue wouldn’t be the same – scarcely affects the upshot. Central to these positions and their wistful retellings of the downfall of the UK is the same contradiction. Europe matters to the prosperity and liberty of Britain, without which it would have withered in isolation: Europe is marginal to the life of the country, which has never submitted to the Caudine Forks of Frankfurt. The reality, of course, is that the country and these patriots cannot have it both ways. If Britain has never joined the single currency or the Fiscal Compact, and in the most intense heat of the battle over the referendum, no one any longer dared – as they might have done

a decade earlier – suggest that it should do so, it is pointless to imagine that the UK could ever play a significant role in the construction of a more integrated Union. Insularity is always in the eye of the other. Without any referendum, Britain long ago locked itself out of the arena where such questions are decided.

THE ANTIDOTE to anguished Remainer ruminations lay close at hand, all but universally ignored. The world's two leading authorities on Thomas Hobbes, the foremost modern theorist of sovereignty, are at different ends of the political spectrum: Noel Malcolm of All Souls, editor of *Leviathan* for Oxford, on the right; Richard Tuck of Harvard, author of the finest contextualisation of Hobbes's thought, on the left. Differing in outlook in so many ways, their convergence on Brexit is all the more arresting. For Malcolm, who intervened in 1991 before the Treaty of Maastricht was signed, sovereignty was being systematically confused with power by those, from Heath onward, who hoped to consign it to an irrelevant past. In fact, sovereignty was a question of authority, not of power, and could be described as a set of rules – in Britain, statutes passed by Parliament – for the legitimate exercise of government. Such authority could not be delegated, though its exercise might for limited purposes be devolved (for example, collective defence by Nato). But it could be abolished, as British sovereignty would be if its attributes were transferred upwards to a federal Europe, reducing Westminster to a mere regional assembly.

Returning to the charge four years later – Maastricht was now in force, and there was a question whether Britain should enter the EMU – Malcolm identified the project of Europe as the creation of just such a federal union. Could it yield any economic advantages to a state participating in it? The fate of the CAP and its costs was clear: it could not. Nor would the EMU be any better, acceptance of its exchange rate rigidity spelling economic regression – either collapse of industries under competitive pressure, or mass migration of the labour force to lands with less depressed wages. It was an illusion to think that the nation-state was obsolete: the most successful economic models of the time were all classic nation-states – the US, Japan, West Germany. What the European Union stood for was the decaffeinated ideal of a Eurocratic class, bent on extricating politics from the management of economic affairs in a fashion incompatible with both inevitable national divergences of situation and interest, and popular politics of any kind. What the EU offered instead was a prospect of log-rolling by the Council of Ministers behind closed doors, elite corruption – witness the then recent prosecution, flight or suicide of premiers in Italy, Greece and France – and popular impotence. Such a combination was bound to boil over in outbursts of aggressive nationalism.

Two decades later, Tuck broke his silence on Europe as Britain prepared to vote on Brexit. Facing the referendum of 2016, the left risked throwing away democracy, the one instrument for popular sovereignty available to it rather than to global capitalism and managerial power. In considering the options before the country, he argued, it should never forget the lesson of the National Health Service, when Labour had been able to override all medical and sectional opposition to the nationalisation without compensation of private 'charity' hospitals because it had the authority of Parliament, an action inconceivable in today's EU, whose rules forbid any such expropriation. In stark contrast, the EU was an essentially technocratic construct, designed much like central banks or constitutional courts to give immense power to select bodies whose prejudices were inevitably those of the class from which they were recruited. Varoufakis was proposing sweeping institutional changes to the EU, which were nowhere on the agenda, while Labour risked quietus because of its decline in Scotland, whose independence could only be halted if Brexit prevailed. Rapidly rising immigration was a symptom of a more general loss of power by the masses, and could only be controlled by its recovery. The left was in disarray, if not despair, believing that Britain was a country of such ingrained conservatism that Europe could act as a safeguard against it, despite the EU's lack of democracy and bias towards capitalism. Belief that it was too late to change any of this was an advance rationalisation of defeat.

A year later, in the wake of Leave's unexpected victory, Tuck adopted a more theoretical position. In the 18th century, theorists – most conspicuously, Rousseau – established a critical distinction between government and sovereignty. The former could be exercised by a small group of persons, whereas the latter was inherently a prerogative of the people. Identification of the two, still to be found in Bodin and Hobbes, was indefensible. The European Union, he argued, is not a superstate, but a set of states that enacted a constitutional order between themselves which cannot be amended in the same way it was introduced, by conventional – that is to say, governmental – legislation. Only a process subject to veto, issuing virtually *per impossibile* in inter-governmental unanimity, could alter this constitutional structure. As such, the idea of an unamendable constitution was new in Europe, even if the German *Grundgesetz* comes closest to it. The British left would do well to reflect that even Bernie Sanders's three basic demands – reject or modify Nafta and the TPP; raise taxes on Wall Street; free university tuition – would be out of reach if the country were in the EU. From its own point of view correctly, the Labour right had always supported membership of the Community as a prophylactic against proposals of this kind. Were the Labour left to be tempted to join it in blocking May's attempts to implement the referendum, Tuck went on, the result would only be the restoration of a Blairite or Macronesque neoliberal regime in Britain. Brexit was the greatest prize for Labour in two generations; among other things, he repeated, it made Scottish independence less, not more, likely. The left should not let go of it.

Finally, joining forces with Christopher Bickerton, Tuck warned against any reversal or suspension of Brexit as hardening the pathological divisions in British society and convincing millions that democracy in the UK was a sham. Having been told there was nothing they could do about immigration because of the EU, the masses had demonstrated that they no longer wanted to play a secondary role, but to become sovereign once again and put government back where it belonged – this was, he held, not a quixotic or esoteric position to take. The old left was in irreversible decline in Europe, and neither Syriza nor Podemos could revive it, since the EU did not represent an attack on the old nation-states of Europe in the name of a new one, but an assault by capitalism on politics as such. The European treaties radically diminished the power of national legislatures while expanding the power of national executives. The British, as the only people whose legislature was the sole source of authority in their country, were not used to this kind of arrangement. The left viewed the constitution and Supreme Court in America as formidable barriers to political democracy, without realising that the EU was far worse in this respect – a judgment of the European Court of Justice being for all practical purposes unalterable. The 52 per cent who voted for Brexit still lacked any common identity or coherent will, as the British political class intended they should. But they ought not to be intimidated by threats of violence in Northern Ireland or job losses in England if Brexit was ratified. The first had raged after Britain joined the Common Market, the second had jumped after 9/11. What was holding back the implementation of Brexit was something else – the lack of a political vision capable of giving effect to the popular longing to regain control of society.

To proceed from Mount, Osborne and Wheatcroft to Malcolm and Tuck is to move from surface to substance – from emotional reaction to critical reflection on the gulf that had opened up between Britain and the EU by 2016. But, addressing essentially the same audience, the two sets of responses share a negative premise that is unspoken. Which is? Essentially, avoidance of any direct comparison between the political structures of Westminster and the complex of institutions centred in Brussels, with its flanks in Luxembourg and Frankfurt, as two patently different systems of representation. Neither, it should go without saying, is remotely matter for idealisation: the vices of each are without number. But that a stark contrast exists between them is plain. It can be put most simply like this. In design, Westminster is a pre-modern construction

that has survived long past its due date; Brussels is a post-modern fabrication that is determined to outlive every alternative to it.

MUCH OF the anger aroused by Brexit in once Tory circles comes from an acute sense of the anachronism of leading advocates of departure, the ostentatious fogginess of Rees-Mogg, Bone, Baker and others, defenders of the indefensible in the age of climate change, crowd-sourcing and correct speech. What is the order they uphold? A first-past-the-post electoral system dating back to the 16th century, before most constituencies were even contested, which regularly produces results that bear no resemblance to the divisions of opinion in the country; an unelected upper chamber crammed with flunkies and friends of the two dominant parties; an honours system devised to reward bagmen and sycophants; a Parliament that can be bundled into a poll at a day's notice; a judiciary capable of covering any administrative enormity. Little wonder its admirers quote Latin statutes from the time of Richard II or Henry VIII in praise of its workings.

Yet through all this, the fact remains that British governments can only survive if they enjoy a majority in the Commons – something that can be eroded by dissension within a party, as in 1940, or defection of an ally, as in 1979, or sheer attrition at by-elections, as in 1996 – and if they fall, elections to replace them must ensue. In the EU, by contrast, executives are appointed by governments, not put in office by the votes of citizens; legislative elections yield neither a government nor an opposition; proceedings at every institutional level, including the judicial and financial arms, are shrouded in secrecy; decisions of the supreme court are immutable. In postmodern style, all this is presented as the last word in an up-to-date polity: in practice, it is the simulacrum of a sentient democracy. It may grate that, for all its woeful shortcomings – think only, beyond England, of the place of Scotland or Northern Ireland in the composite realm – Westminster is vastly superior to this lacquered synarchy. The difference can be regarded as a historical fluke. But it is the indisputable bedrock of the quarrel between London and Brussels.

The European Union, as it has come to take shape, speaks continuously of democracy and the rule of law, even as it negates them. No ill intention need be ascribed to it. What it has become was inscribed in the minds of those who took possession of the project: a unification of the Continent from above, by stealth where possible, by diktat where necessary. Europe was ultimately too large and too various for the results to be otherwise. With a population of 446 million, the third largest polity on the planet, the EU is divided by some 24 official languages (another five lie waiting with the 17.5 million people queuing to join in the Balkans), more than India (22) or China (one), each vastly bigger in population. Of the 27 countries currently comprising the Union, none has a continuous parliamentary history comparable to the record in England, which with the exception of the eleven years of Charles I's personal rule avoided the absolutism that snuffed out representative assemblies across most of the Continent from the 16th century onwards. For quite a few of them, indeed, their modern experience of constitutional politics dates no further back than a quarter of a century. In these conditions, the extension of internally representative political systems into a quasi-confederation of continental dimensions was virtually bound to produce a structure of power fundamentally oligarchic in nature, whose only lingua franca is that of the country that has abandoned it. 'The most hopeful sustained trend in Europe today,' writes Philippe Von Parijs, a commentator on the left of the political spectrum, 'is the rapid spread of English as the lingua franca of its younger generation,' which promises a wider 'linguistic justice' to come. That there is nothing specific to Europe about such second-order Anglicisation, in a continent where half the population knows only its own native language, is no objection in the view of the champions of a global transnational democracy in which nostalgic attachments to national linguistic diversity wither away.

For the foreseeable future, however, the layer of the population that is fluent in two or three of the official languages of the EU, or even in its unofficial lingua franca, is necessarily restricted. Those from the EU actually living and working outside their country of birth in the Union form a number smaller still, less than 4 per cent of its total population in 2015, of whom the large majority were manual labourers of one kind or another. As late as 2008, they made up less than 2 per cent of the population of Western Europe. Such expatriates, however, include what can be described as the European political class *stricto sensu*, executives and professionals from the centre-right-to-centre-left continuum of parties comfortable in the institutions of the EU and accustomed to running its affairs. It would be a mistake either to demonise or to idealise this stratum.

That its top ranks have long been corrupted by immunity in their occupance of power is plain. It is enough to make a roll-call of its leading ornaments. Christine Lagarde, current president of the European Central Bank: suspected of complicity in fraud and malversation of public funds in covering for the crook Bernard Tapie, improperly paid €404 million by Crédit Lyonnais in 2008, when she was minister of the economy in France; in 2016 discharged by the state for ‘negligence’ with no penalty, in view of her ‘personality’ and (no doubt especially) her ‘international reputation’. By that time she was head of the IMF – where her predecessor, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, had had to resign on charges of sexual assault and attempted rape and his predecessor, Rodrigo Rato, had been imprisoned on charges of embezzlement. Ursula von der Leyen, current president of the European Commission: charged in 2015 with plagiarism on 43 per cent of the pages of her 1990 doctorate at Hannover Medical School; the university commission that absolved her, headed by an old acquaintance from the alumni association at the institution, was heavily criticised in the media, but after the fall of two previous ministers in Merkel’s government, both on charges of plagiarism, exhaustion had set in and she was allowed to keep her doctorate.

Von der Leyen’s predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg: survived repeated exposure of his involvement in the tax avoidance and policies facilitating money-laundering for which his country is famous. Her vice-president and high representative for foreign affairs and security, the Spaniard Josep Borrell: forced to resign as president of the European University Institute in Florence for concealing the annual salary of €300,000 he had been receiving from a Spanish energy company. Michel Barnier, EU commissioner in charge of Brexit negotiations with Britain: showered with ‘donations’ amounting to more than 300,000 francs – more than seven times the total received by his seven rivals – when running as a Gaullist candidate for Haute-Savoie in the legislative elections of 1993. Olaf Scholz, finance minister and vice-chancellor of Germany, hoping to succeed Merkel next year: caught in the media headlights after appointing – a first in the country – the co-chief executive of Goldman Sachs in Germany and Austria, Jörg Kukies, as his deputy for financial market and European policy, only to have to admit that he knew Kukies had been on intimate terms with Markus Braun, fraudster boss of the now bankrupt Wirecard company (assets once valued at \$28 billion), the largest financial scandal in the history of Germany. Scholz’s chances of surviving parliamentary investigation intact: slim.

Tawdry episodes of this kind, routine at the top levels of the EU establishment, should not be generalised to the whole European political class, let alone to expatriates without official positions.³ What unites this layer is not so much the prebends its representatives extract from office as the interests and passions invested by it in the European project. In the UK, the mass demonstrations and media outcry over Brexit – in scale more impressive than any counterpart on the Continent, not out of a greater depth of conviction, but of greater proximity to danger – are a good gauge of this class’s degree of commitment to the development of a united Europe. Identification with the cause of the Union need involve no immediate material stake, even if in the case, say, of university lecturers, employers may be dependent on Brussels for research funding.

Where Europe is concerned, there is rarely a contradiction between self-interest and genuine idealism.

Of necessity, the premise of both is the passivity of the population below the political class and its adherents. Has the course of events since the global financial crisis of 2008 seriously shaken this? With the exception of Britain, it would be difficult to hold that it has had any sustained or consequential effect. Of the populist revolts in Southern Europe, Syriza – a fully establishment party once Tsipras signed up to the conditions of the Troika – gained less than a quarter of the vote in the European elections of 2019, before being routed at the national election in Greece shortly afterwards. In Italy, M5S scored just 17 per cent in the European elections, before joining its hitherto execrated adversary the Democratic Party in a coalition in Rome. In Spain, Podemos took 10 per cent in the European polls, before joining the Socialist Party in an unsteady minority government in Madrid. Of the populist revolts on the right, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National achieved less than a quarter of the vote in those European elections, Salvini's Lega Nord just over a third. To the east, the parties led by Kaczyński and Orbán are still in a class by themselves, capturing respectively 45 and 53 per cent of votes in the Euro-elections, though each lost the mayoralty of his capital city to a mainstream liberal opponent, Law and Justice also falling short of a majority in the upper chamber of the Sejm, but narrowly retaining the Polish presidency.

Viewed soberly: nowhere do prospects look particularly favourable to populist forces in Europe, of whatever complexion. Where they remain outsiders in the political system, the risk they represent to it tends to strengthen the status quo. Where they enter the political system, as supports or partners of the establishment, they tend to become assimilated to the dominant consensus. The fears on which they play, while often radical in form, easily become conservative in effect where issues of identity or immigration arise. Overarching them is the reality that the centrist bloc of opinion encompassing moderate conservatives, temperate liberals, pragmatic social democrats and self-satisfied Greens – acronymically in Brussels, the EPP, RE, S&D and Greens/EFA – is much larger than its opponents on right or left, and remains overwhelmingly dominant in the Union. In the spreadeagled, distended space of today's Europe, control of the media landscape and lavish funding from the Commission make this force fully as capable, to use Michael Mann's phrasing, of outflanking symptoms of disgruntlement from below as its homologues in India, China or America. It would take another and altogether more seismic 2008 to shake these political coordinates.

AMID the pandemic, are we now living through something like this? Not according to today's Friedrich Gentz. Luuk Van Middelaar has consistently taken a dual view of the postwar history of Europe. On the one hand, each step forward has been the product of forces external to the Community and its successor. From the Schuman Plan to the victories in the ECJ of Robert Lecourt, integration was preceded and accompanied by the attentions, and often the initiatives, of the US. So too when Giscard founded the European Council, the impulse came from the breakdown of Bretton Woods and the diminution of American interest in the Old World during the 1970s. Maastricht and Monetary Union arrived as a reaction to the collapse of Soviet control of Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany. The global financial crisis of 2008 triggered the Fiscal Compact and the European Stability Mechanism. Now, the Covid blows of 2020 have forced through a 'Next Generation EU' package of €750 billion, to be raised by the Commission borrowing on the strength of mutualised bonds, something hitherto forbidden by Northern members of the Union, and hailed as a breakthrough by van Middelaar.⁴ At maturities extending to 2028, more than half of this – €390 billion – is to be distributed as grants rather than loans to member states in need. Given the scale of the likely economic contraction in the Eurozone – 7 per cent of its GDP in 2020 or in the region of €1.3 trillion – the support the package offers is modest enough. Under pressure, it can no doubt be increased. Plain, however, is that once again the momentum behind 'ever closer union' is not self-generated, but exogenous.

Does that matter? For both admirers and adversaries of the direction of Union politics since Maastricht, the answer appears essentially negative. In surveying the scene, it is striking that such disparate figures as the complaisant van Middelaar and critical Bickerton, the sceptical Giandomenico Majone and starry-eyed Sergio Fabbrini, converge in description and overlap in prescription. For this spectrum of writers, power has tended to pass from the supranational manifestations of the Union that nourished dreams of federalism to more inter-governmental examples, concentrated at the top in the European Council – where member states have proved perfectly capable of defending their national interests – and relayed below in variants of informal co-ordination and pursuit of consensus across areas like diplomacy, security or migration.

Common to this range of opinion is the rejection of the idea that the future of the Union lies in a federalist superstate, accompanied by the belief in a powerful forward motion that is still at work in the EU. The Covid package is not a prodrome of the United States of Europe to which Helmut Kohl looked forward on the morrow of Maastricht. Nor has it resolved the tensions and incongruities of the Union. For Majone, these require its conversion into a true confederation along Swiss lines, though one limited to foreign and security policy. For his compatriot Fabbrini, unlike him a paladin of the ‘European values’ proclaimed by Brussels, more is needed: division of the Union into a single economic community covering the whole of continental Europe, and a separate political union (not a state) of federal character, grouping only those countries prepared to accept a common currency, fiscal authority and budgetary policy, a common security and military system, border control and immigration policy, even if retaining domestic versions of some of these attributes. Majone admits his proposal is not currently feasible, while Fabbrini puts his hopes – shades of van Middelaar – in a ‘coup’, along the lines of that carried out by the American founders. Bickerton, by contrast, simply registers the paradox of further integration without significant supranational advance, while van Middelaar concedes that Macron’s announcement of France’s return to planning, which was followed by Germany, sets the course for a new European dirigisme to which even the Netherlands will have to adapt.

What these differing prospects – coming from writers convinced that the ideas of Monnet and Hallstein, Delors or Kohl are dead – overlook is the cumulative direction and impact of successive advances towards closer union, which are not in any simple way under the control of the powers steering the European Council. From the beginning there have always been significant forces with another agenda, committed to federal union, who have been entrenched in the Commission and the Court of Justice, and latterly too in the Central Bank and the Parliament. They have never achieved their goal. But nor, since the defeat of the European Defence Community in 1954, has incremental progress towards that end ever been stopped or reversed. Is it credible that it has now reached its limit?

It does not take a great deal of imagination to wonder how faithful Middelaar and others who have generally agreed with him – his teacher Frank Ankersmit might be a case in point – would remain to their traditional preferences if geopolitical conditions change. In 2018, observing the way the US and China were wrenching themselves away from the world order that took shape after the Cold War ended, van Middelaar asked himself what place Europe might occupy in the ensuing disorder. His answer was quite modest. ‘The EU is an experiment in multilateralism on a continental scale,’ he wrote, ‘born to break power politics, but not to make power politics.’ In that faint note of exogenous resignation, might there lie the germ of some endogenous adaptation to come, as steps towards yet closer union inch forward to meet mounting challenges from the superpowers of America and Asia? Or is the current formula of the EU – dilute sovereignty without meaningful democracy, compulsory unanimity without participant equality, cult of free markets without care of free trade – likely all the same to last indefinitely?

Footnotes

1 See his last seven columns, in one of which he called on Blair to resign, in the expanded posthumous edition of *Supping with the Devils: Political Writing from Thatcher to Blair* (2003). Yet he could still describe his lost hero as ‘a great tragic figure’ in the penultimate paragraph of the book: ‘Tony Blair had such potential. He was a strong leader, a visionary in his way, a figure surpassing all around him at home and on the continent. His rhetorical power was unsurpassed, as was the readiness of people to listen to him. He had their trust. He brought credibility back to the political art.’ The rest of the book destroys these sentimental illusions, typical of the British intelligentsia of the time.

2 LRB, 7 April 1994

3 For the best sociological study of the latter, based on a sample working in Amsterdam, Brussels and London, see Adrian Favell’s sympathetic, but clear-eyed study, *Eurostars and Eurocities*, which concludes: ‘Those who have really turned European mobility into a viable design for life remain the exception,’ in part because ‘the high tide of liberalism in the 1990s that swept a whole generation of free movers around Europe, in search of new opportunities and experiences against a European backdrop, has subsided,’ but also because ‘as soon as intra-EU mobility passes some threshold – which may be 5 per cent or lower – the value associated with being a pioneer drops sharply. If it’s no longer original, and people are crowding in as foreigners to the international cities, then host societies are very quickly going to react against it,’ making expatriate projects ‘a rather lonely path to take’.

4 Merkel ‘broke the last two taboos of German monetary thinking: collective debt and outright grants. For just this once. But in Paris and Berlin they know that whoever crosses this bridge once can do it more often: the precedent is set.’ For van Middelaar, in the pandemic the Union has gained the strength it failed to acquire in the euro crisis of 2012 (NRC Handelsblad, 21 August 2020).