New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12208

Comment: *Brexit*?

Elderly Catholics in the British Isles may be excused if they find the approaching referendum on whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union a baffling issue. Whatever their reservations about 'Brussels', they regard themselves as 'Europeans'. For many of them the very idea of British exit — 'Brexit' — is unthinkable. They remember why, and how, the movement towards European unity began in the first place. After all, Catholics played key roles in creating what eventually became the EU, while anyone old enough to remember hearing stories and seeing pictures of the devastation of Europe as World War II ended fears that nothing less than political unification on something like the EU model would head off the possibility that such conflict could ever break out again.

In 1950 the European Coal and Steel Community was proposed by the French foreign minister Robert Schuman, precisely to help prevent another war between France and Germany. The aim, as he said, was to 'make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible'. Formally established in 1951 the original members of the ECSC were Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, as well as France and West Germany. The common market for coal and steel served to neutralize competition between the member states over natural resources, particularly in the Ruhr. The EU, now an economic and political partnership involving 28 European countries, thus began in the pragmatic belief that countries that trade together are more likely not to go to war with each other. The original project was as basic as that. It has grown to become a 'single market', allowing goods and people to move around, basically as if the member states were one country. It has its own currency, the euro, which is used by 19 of the member countries; it has its own parliament and related institutions; and it sets rules in a wide range of areas, including on the environment, transport, consumer rights and even things like mobile phone charges (though not the shape of bananas, as many British people reportedly think). It seems unimaginable that conflict of interests among member states could now ever lead to full-scale warfare. (Some old folks, thinking of the Srebrenica massacre in 1975, might not be so confident.)

As far as the Catholic input went, nobody's role was more significant than that of Robert Schuman, a devout Catholic, celibate, deeply marked by his study of Thomas Aquinas. Notoriously, the EU was fiercely denounced by the late Dr Ian Paisley, the voice of

© 2016 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2016, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12208 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Protestant Ulster and himself an MEP, deriding it as part of a plot to create a Roman Catholic super state controlled by the Vatican, with the Pope as Antichrist. Others, perhaps rather more deeply immersed in the study of European history, hailed the EU as the rebirth of the Holy Roman Empire. This was not all completely ridiculous. For one thing, at the time, back in 1950, the population of the signatory countries was predominantly Catholic. Then, besides Schuman, some of the other founders of what was to become the EU, such as Konrad Adenauer, the West German chancellor, and Jean Monnet, the economist who drafted Schuman's proposal, and perhaps the key figure in the whole story, were also committed Catholics (Monnet's marriage problem was eventually resolved).

For a decade, Britain stood aloof, in the belief that, as the Commonwealth, the British Empire would survive, so that Britain would remain a world power, independent of Europe. By 1960, however, this dream was fading away, as the Conservative administration acknowledged, though it was only in 1973, after Charles de Gaulle's departure from power, that the UK's bid to join the EU was finally granted, again under Conservative auspices as it happened.

Things change. At the UK general election in May 2015 the Conservatives renewed their promise to hold an in/out referendum. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish Nationalists have never wanted such a referendum, unless about EU plans to transfer more powers from member states to Brussels. According to polls, voters in Britain are evenly split on the issue, with the outcome too close to call. British, Irish and Commonwealth citizens over 18 who are resident in the UK, along with UK nationals who have lived overseas for less than 15 years, will be entitled to vote. Members of the House of Lords and Commonwealth citizens in Gibraltar will also be eligible, unlike in general elections. On the other hand, citizens from EU countries resident in Britain — apart from Ireland, Malta and Cyprus (the last two as Commonwealth countries) — will not get a vote, however settled they are here.

The four key changes that the Prime Minister insists on are: Allowing Britain to opt out from the EU's declared ambition to forge an 'ever closer union' of the peoples of Europe; restricting access to in-work and out-of-work benefits to EU migrants until they have been resident for four years; giving greater powers to national parliaments to block EU legislation; and securing explicit recognition that the euro is not the only currency of the European Union, to ensure the City of London is never materially disadvantaged.

If the idea of 'ever closer union' supposedly undermines British national identity, one need spend only a weekend in France or Belgium or the Netherlands to see that, however the slogan sounds, none of these countries is heading towards loss of distinctive identity any time soon. Anyway, as regards being drawn into some future

© 2016 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12208 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'United States of Europe', as Europhobes often warn, we need to remember that, with the United States of America as presumably the feared model, no federation could be more heterogeneous (Texas and California are more different from one another than Scotland and England). If the four-year ban on UK benefits troubles the rest of the EU, the massive influx of refugees from the Middle East is likely to bring them also to introduce some mechanism to limit the number of immigrants that would overwhelm public services.

How game changing are these proposed 'reforms'? If the majority of the English vote to leave, while the Scots mostly favour remaining in the EU, will that not provoke another referendum in Scotland which, this time, would lead inexorably to the break-up of the United Kingdom?

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2016 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12208 Published online by Cambridge University Press