

FEDERALISMS - EAST AND WEST

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After dinner remarks, 28 September 2010, 20.00,

Michael Palliser¹

You are probably all as bewildered as I am by the decision of the Organizers of this interesting conference to invite an old dinosaur like me to speak to you on this first evening. How out of date can you be?! But on the principle of never refusing an invitation to hold forth, I accepted and then had to decide what to say. Paul Flather encouraged me to give you a very personal look at the past, including my hopes for the European Project, and to reflect on how they have been realised. So I shall try to do two things: First, describe "my journey", to coin a phrase: and then to take a brief and speculative look at the future.

My journey began when I was very young, but those childhood years were formative, as I suppose they are for all of us. Between 1928, when I was six, and the late thirties, I was living mainly with my grandparents, the result of having a naval officer father who was often away. During these years, I had a series of what I call "travels with my uncle" on the continent of Europe which laid the foundation for a lifelong interest in Europe that the 2nd World War accentuated and enhanced, as I shall explain.

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My uncle was an army officer in the Rifle Brigade, in his thirties, very bright intellectually, an interpreter in French and German and with spells at the War Office in military intelligence. On several occasions he used his long summer leave to take my grandmother and me on motoring trips to the Continent, initially in his bull-nosed Morris Oxford, subsequently in a sleek, long Armstrong-Siddeley. I still remember vividly Weimar Republic Berlin in 1928 (when I was six!) with street riots that scared me stiff. And we drove through East Prussia, Danzig, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria. On another occasion it was France and the Great War battlefields. On another through Southern Germany and Austria into Italy under Mussolini. Shall I ever forget, aged 14, supper, the three of us, on an island in the River Main at Frankfurt, when a 'plane, propeller-driven, of course, clearly visible with all lights lit flew overhead and the word somehow spread that it was carrying the Führer – and the entire Bier Keller, about 80 people, leaped to their feet with gaze upward and right arms outstretched and sang the Horst Wessel Lied, as the plane slowly disappeared. Very remarkable and very frightening. Travels with my uncle were formative indeed. .

I had a short, happy spell at the beginning of the war at Merton, where I managed to acquire an undistinguished war degree that enables me to put an equally spurious MA after my name! From Merton, in 1942 into the Coldstream Guards: and then began the four-year period which was for me and for so many of my generation of young men and women the definitively formative experience in our lives.

Between 1942 and the end of 1946, when I left the army, I formed two convictions that have guided me for the next 60 years, have been so to speak the lodestars of my professional diplomatic career and remain with me in retirement to this day. They are, first, that the closest possible ties across the Atlantic between the United States and Canada with Europe, including naturally the United Kingdom, are and will remain vital to our respective futures: and, secondly, that in Europe, a continent for centuries torn to shreds by warfare, peace and security, vital to us but also to the world as a whole, require the closest possible integration of action and purpose by the States of Europe, including of course the United Kingdom. The world around us is changing at bewildering speed; but I believe these principles do not change. They will remain wholly relevant in the 21st century. Let me add that these convictions of mine have been buttressed down the years by an ever-growing affection for North America and Americans and Canadians, on the one hand, and for so many other European countries and friends on the other.

It is difficult for a present generation to imagine what parts of France, Belgium, Holland and above all Germany were like at the end of the war and in the early post-war period. Nowadays, we would see it all on TV. That was not the case in the '40s. But the devastation, material and human, in Germany and some of its neighbours at that time was greater than most of what one can imagine nowadays. Tens of thousands of refugees, ex-prisoners of war, forced labourers, members of separated and bereaved families, were desperately criss-crossing the country, where every major city and industry lay destroyed. Berlin, the capital, where I spent three months of garrison in 1946, was largely in ruins. The Tiergarten, now once again

a beautiful wooded park in the city centre, was then a lunar landscape, every tree cut down for firewood or bombed or shelled to destruction. And every day grey, impassive human beings emerged from cellars amid the ruins and wandered off one knew not where. And of course, contemplating a destroyed Germany we did not forget the ruins and destruction in London and British cities as well. And all this resulted in a determined conviction: "Never again. This must never happen again on the European continent".

For me and, I think, for many others this meant a conviction that the states of Western Europe should come and work together so closely as to make the thought of a future war unthinkable, not least because we had all, including the UK, suffered and lost so much as a result of the war. There is a school of thought which contends that it is in some way unpatriotic or even treacherous to talk about the decline of the United Kingdom in those years, rather than extolling the continuing extent of our influence and strength across the world. I see these two approaches as complementary not contradictory. I reckon that I spent much of my career, especially when serving in various jobs in London, trying to help manage decline, seeking to mask its effect and indeed sometimes to turn it to such advantage as one could. The fact that, in spite of its manifestly reduced circumstances since before World War II, the UK is still a major player in world politics, with all that entails economically, politically and militarily is, in my view, evidence not just of the quality of this country and its people, but also of the skill and occasional good luck with which decline has been managed over the past 60-odd years. But decline it has been; and it was well illustrated in the first of my overseas postings, to Athens from 1949 to '51. When my wife and I arrived, the Greek civil war was just ending and the United States, in execution of the Truman Doctrine for Greece and Turkey, had for some time been taking over from Britain the protection of Greece from a communist takeover. Substantial British military and air force missions were replaced by even larger American ones, the British NAAFI was dwarfed by a huge PX and, most notable of all, the British Ambassador's Daimler with its CD 1 number plate, dating from the immediate post-war period, was now heavily outgunned by US Ambassador Peurifoy's Cadillac, CD 100. The takeover was courteous and friendly, but unmistakable.

I have been complimentary about our management of decline. But, of course, it was not without its foreign policy mistakes. I shall not speak of Suez. But for me - and for others of my generation - the most monumental error was the mismanagement in the early 1950s of Britain's relations with the countries of continental Europe; and the consequent failure to play the leading role in the development of our own continent to which our dominant position in post-war Europe entitled us.

As I have said, my own views had already-been conditioned by my wartime and post-war experiences. So, as a young diplomat in the German department of the Foreign office at that time, I remember reading with something approaching despair the minutes of my eminent superiors about what was happening amongst our six western European neighbours. The tone was patronizing, the substance critical, if not hostile. Whether commenting on the

proposed European coal and steel community, or later on the failed European Defence community, or the nascent European Economic Community, the conclusion was always the same, over a period of years. It might be politic not openly to oppose the efforts of the Six (though in the case of the EEC we did our level but unsuccessful best to sabotage it); but these efforts were almost certainly doomed to failure and, even if they did not fail, they were not for us, victors in war and specially related to the United States - this, I would add, in spite of attempts by every successive American administration, concerned rightly with American interests, to persuade us to throw in our lot with the continentals.

Much as I have always regretted this British government attitude, I nonetheless find it difficult to be too critical of those senior people, officials and politicians alike, for the attitude they took at that time to European integration. Britain, even in the 1950s, was still to a large extent in imperial and war-time mode. This country, in its island fortress, had courageously stood out alone against Hitler, while our continental allies collapsed before him; and with the Americans, when they were brought into the war, (to say nothing of the Soviet Union) we had brought about the defeat of Hitler and Nazi Germany. These men had lived the crucial years of their professional lives in the closest partnership with the United States and had witnessed the crumbling of the continental Europeans. Why should we change our ways and tie our future to these defeated continentals? Wholly understandable and sadly wrong.

Wrong because these errors, however understandable, cost the country dear. By the time we had realized in the later fifties that the European Community of the Six was not only not going to collapse but was an undeniable success, and that we needed in our own interest to join it, the European tide had turned against us.

General De Gaulle had returned to power in France in 1958 and, much as he disliked the EEC, he accepted it was here to stay; but he remained determined to restore France's diminished prestige in the world and to ensure her dominance of the European Community. He knew that this would be much more difficult if he agreed to Britain joining the EEC, and he was convinced that we would, with our transatlantic affinities, strengthen the American influence over Europe that he was determined to resist. So in 1963 he vetoed our membership of the European Community and, adding insult to injury, signed with Chancellor Adenauer the Franco-German Treaty, that consolidated the base on which the Community had been founded and for the next six years until his retirement he continued to refuse to countenance our membership of the European Community. Serving for three of those years, from 1966 to 1969, as the Foreign Office Private Secretary to Prime Minister Harold Wilson, I witnessed one of Wilson's political achievements and one failure: first, managing against difficult odds to preserve the Anglo-American relationship, despite also resisting sustained American pressure to commit British troops to the Vietnam war and incurring the fury of President Johnson in the process. Secondly, realizing, like his Conservative predecessors, that British interests required us to join the EEC and persuading the bulk of a recalcitrant Labour party to accept this. But, as I saw while interpreting for his conversations with General de Gaulle, totally failing to remove that roadblock. With the election of President Pompidou, we were at

last able to join the European community - but by then it was a Community with policies and methods that were, in many ways, ill-adapted to British needs. They would have been very different if we had been involved in the process from the outset, as I believe we should have been. This legacy of uncertainty in the British attitude to Europe was not laid to rest by the Labour Government's 1975 referendum and, as we know, it persists to this day.

In the changed, ever more globalised world of the post-cold war era, the notion of a Britain outside the EU, acting independently and on its own, attractive to some of our compatriots, in reality seems ever more fanciful. Equally, a much larger and more diverse EU, including this country, has to achieve a greater degree of political and economic integration if it is both to compete and also to co-operate not just with the countries of the American continent but also with the huge, rising Asian powers, China and India, to say nothing of Japan.

I have long been an internationalist not a nationalist. That does not mean any lack of affection or respect for my own country. I have spent 40 years of my life, whether as a soldier or a diplomat, trying to defend it and doing my best to advance its interests. But it does mean recognizing that my country is no longer dominant in the way it was in the 19th century nor even the imperial power it still was in the first half of the 20th century. Two world wars settled that; but some people in Britain don't seem to have realized the fact. There is still a degree of complacent jingoism, which disguises itself as patriotism, in parts of British society, which makes more difficult the conduct of a foreign policy that really reflects British interests. We are advancing into the 21st century with a radically different world from that of the 20th. It will probably no longer be the American century in the way the 20th undoubtedly was; and it may well not be the Chinese or Asian century that many are prophesying. We can make forecasts and projections and do so endlessly. But the fact is that we simply don't know: there are too many imponderables, especially in such matters as energy sources, climate change, the effects of aging populations, of religious fundamentalism, of global economics and trade - to say nothing of natural disasters, disease, drought, famine or flood.

I said at the outset that I would try to take a speculative look at the future: and I have explained why I find this so difficult. It is not only the imponderables I just mentioned that imply uncertainty and insecurity. But there are more immediate and clearly defined problems which confront us, Western and Asian powers alike. We are all affected by the war in Afghanistan and that country's neighbours more than most. We observe with a kind of weary pessimism the talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders: we take alarm from the possibilities of an Iranian nuclear weapons capacity. Indeed, there are those who believe the whole idea of nuclear non-proliferation is moribund if not dead. Pervading the economic atmosphere as a whole is the fallout from the global financial crisis on the one hand and the problem of acute poverty in much of the Developing world on the other (if "Developing" is indeed the right word).

So what should we do about it? Not to my surprise, I agree almost entirely with Peter Sutherland's brilliant analysis earlier this evening. I have not tried to address the questions

of federalism, which is the theme of this conference. But if this country as a member of the EU wants both to exert its own influence on events within an effective EU influence (which is the only way the UK can really affect world events) then we and the EU as a whole need to pull ourselves together in a federal-type advance, with agreed policies and the leadership needed to achieve these. Can we do this? At present, the omens do not look very favourable. The Lisbon Treaty, whatever view may be taken of it, gave us the necessary instruments. But our so-called leaders are not showing much readiness to use them. In that case, however powerful, or at least influential, the EU may seem in principle, in practice it too will decline and with it European influence on the way the 21st Century develops. I hope we can avoid this and I hope too we shall endeavour to keep a close, though not too subordinate relationship with the United States. We tend to think of the US as becoming less interested in Europe and more so in Asia, especially China. There is much truth in that, of course, but we tend to forget how closely linked Europe and the US still are by their economic ties, mutual interest and financial relationship. And, above all, by values.

What have to remain unchanged in all this turmoil are values. To preserve unchanged our fundamental values will be a prime task for us in Europe and for our friends in America. Because we should recognize that, despite our frequent differences and disagreements, Europe and America share values which are different in many ways from those of other continents and which are - or so I believe - worth defending and advancing. That for me is why we have to stick together. Union is strength: divided we shall fail.

I leave you with this final thought. This is a great country and I am proud to have served it. But as a nation, we need to avoid hubris, complacency and misplaced nationalism. We shall do best by Britain in the 21st century, if we work as closely as we can with others, in Europe and across the Atlantic, and do not cherish the illusion that in the new and changing world of the 21st century, we can or should contemplate going it alone. That way lies only further decline.