

If Britain Leaves the EU, Where Will It Turn?

Canadians should pay some attention to the tense and fierce campaign underway in the United Kingdom toward the June 23 vote on whether the country should leave the European Union or not. In fact, under the European treaty, a vote to leave – what is called the Brexit in this campaign – would lead to two years of negotiation. In practice, when the Euro-federalists lose a national referendum, which is not infrequently, they come back within a year with a new referendum on a slightly reformulated question, represented as a concession to the dissentients and backed by a more blood-curdling scare campaign.

In this campaign, it will be a good deal more complicated, because the Remainers, as they are called, are led by the incumbent Conservative Party leader and prime minister, David Cameron, and the Leavers are led, at least informally, by the just-retired mayor of London, and Conservative MP, Boris Johnson. If the Leavers win, Cameron is finished as party and government leader. Any follow-up referendum will be run by the anti-federalists and will call for serious concessions from the European Union government in Brussels, or a national demand for such concessions that Brussels will give the British what they want or cut the cord.

The importance of this to Canadians is that if the British do, in the end, leave the EU, the issue of “Whither Britain” could be of great potential interest to this country. There has been intensive bandying about in this campaign of the alleged supra-national preferences of Winston Churchill. Cameron and one of Sir Winston’s grandsons, Nicholas Soames, have claimed he would have been a Remainer, but eminent historian Andrew Roberts, and others who deserve a hearing on the subject, have pointed out that while Churchill was an advocate of French-

German rapprochement, and of a common market in Western Europe, he believed that Britain's relationship with the United States, which he had created in unforgettably charged circumstances with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and its position as head of the Commonwealth, ranked ahead of any European vocation. The second greatest British prime minister in 125 years (at least), Margaret Thatcher, left no one in any doubt of her view, though she did not share Churchill's confidence in the Commonwealth, which she regarded as a rag-tag of Third World despotisms trying to milk the original Commonwealth nations: the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. (She made exceptions for Singapore, and, in deference to its size and democracy, India.)

The British under Churchill and his immediate Conservative successors, Anthony Eden, Harold MacMillan, and Alec Douglas-Home, allowed unlimited access to Britain from the Commonwealth, which led to a surge in arrivals of non-Caucasians (this proved unpopular among the locals). The next Conservative prime minister, Edward Heath, was anti-American, uninterested in the Commonwealth, and threw Britain's lot in unreservedly with Europe (as well as with the Arabs in the Middle East and the People's Republic of China in the Far East).

He was deposed as leader and eventually replaced as prime minister by Margaret Thatcher who somewhat resurrected the glory days of Churchill and Roosevelt with Ronald Reagan and placed all Britain's bets on the Grand Alliance with the United States. It worked for a time, and led us to victory in the Cold War, with important contributions from St. John Paul II, German chancellor Helmut Kohl, Brian Mulroney, and others. It was even continued to a degree by John Major and Tony Blair with the Bushes and Bill Clinton, but came to a sandy grave in the second Iraq War. If Britain leaves the EU, the hour of the top tier of the Commonwealth will come again.

The United States under George W. Bush became a hip-shooting

interventionist country, trying to prop up democracy in places that had no history, appetite or capacity for it. Anti-democratic forces won democratic elections in the Palestinian territories, Gaza, and Egypt. Under Barack Obama, the foreign policy of the United States has been moderately anti-British (illustrated by the return to Britain on the president's orders, as he has finally admitted, of the bust of Winston Churchill that had been in the president's office).

Obama has generally invited America's traditional allies and enemies to trade roles and places. He dragooned David Cameron into beseeching U.S. senators to support their shameful delayed-endorsement of Iranian nuclear arms, and returned the favour by warning the British that if they did not vote to throw in with Europe once and for all, Britain could go "to the back of the queue" in trading relations with the U.S. Both interventions were outrageous, and Obama's moral suasion with the British seemed to net out at a drop of two points for the Remainers it was designed to help. It would be hazardous to predict what may happen with either a Clinton or Trump presidency, though either would almost certainly be less Quixotic than the younger Bush and less contra-historical and pacifistic than Obama, and less enamoured of America's most vocal and hyperactive enemies.

The polls in Britain are very close and move narrowly between the sides with never more than a slight advantage either way. Indicative of Cameron's state of nerves over potentially losing the vote, and his job, was his claim two weeks ago that a win for the Leavers would enhance the possibilities of European war. The bowdlerized and rather fatuous distortion of history he offered in support of this hare-brained argument was anything but a confidence-builder. His problem is that he promised "full-on treaty change" and came back with less than Chamberlain did from Munich: a tentative and heavily conditionalized promise by Europe to consider British applications to vary social benefits for migrants from Europe.

In desperation, Cameron and his chancellor, George Osborne, have themselves dragooned the supposedly independent governor of the Bank of England, Canadian Mark Carney, to become a vocal biweekly tout for the Remainers.

Given British disillusionment with Europe and the end of American reliability as we knew it from the time of Roosevelt to the arrival of Obama, Canada could play a role in leading the development of an alternative bloc, though one associated with both the European Union and the United States. The U.K., the old dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and Singapore and India, as an economic group, would be as great as China, and probably, with recent developments in China and the settling in of the Thatcherite Modi government in India, would grow as quickly. In foreign and strategic policy terms, it would have, or at least could soon have, the second greatest combined naval and air force of any state or grouping, after the U.S. The member-states could broadly cooperate to whatever extent the constituent member states could comfortably agree. It would be at least as unitary a force as the present Europe of 27 states from Bulgaria and Estonia to Portugal.

This must be the last chance for the Commonwealth. Despite the Queen's pride in it, as a consolation prize for the Empire which her father and his immediate ancestors ceremonially ruled, one need only look at the majority of the poor and misgoverned members, highlighted by the egregious Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. He is 92, and the once-formidable champion of the independence movement against White Rhodesia bows at portraits of himself and dozes off on public occasions, repeats speeches to the same audience when he turns up the starting page of his text, and shambles about in the midst of a rending struggle for the succession. The chief faction-heads in this contest are his voluminous wife and a disaffected female member of the regime leadership, of equivalent massive girth, whom the President's wife improbably accuses of

disporting herself in mini-skirts.

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