

inimical to any to be found in the European Union? Could there imaginably, for instance, be an EU-wide referendum on, say, the continuance of the Union?

The EU does not pass the first test of *political* entity. Europe neither has nor can have the kind of common consciousness that makes politics possible. There can be no EU public opinion; Europe is too diverse. The debates in the EU “Parliament” have to be instantly translated into many languages. There are no European “media” in television, radio or the press. Social media are not particularly European and are much more likely (in our case) to extend to the U.S.A. than Slovenia. In a political context there are a number of possibly true answers to the question “Who are we?” I think “We are European” as the first answer would be forced.

Bear in mind that *we* includes *I*. Nationality is part of my identity. So too is being European but, I think, by way of my nation. If I were Japanese I would be a different person, or even if I were French.

Communication is a necessary condition of community, but not in itself what holds communities together. That can only be love. It may still be possible to love one’s country, but to love the EU? And what do I mean by love? There is no point in quoting the dictionary. That is not the way the great words are learned. But if attachment to the country, or to the EU, is the hope of yet more riches it is not the love I mean. “If riches increase, set not your heart upon them.”\*

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I discussed all these matters in my *Untied Kingdom*, and wondered whether to bring out an updated edition. I decided not to, because though it is now eight years old and discusses a referendum that never happened, the book needs no changes to apply easily to the present. The same is almost as true of the little book David Sims and I published the year before the *last* referendum, *The Decline and Fall of Mr Heath*. (Read *Cameron* for *Heath*.) Both are still available.

A copy of this column will, however, be tipped in to all copies of either sold before 23 June 2016.

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\* Psalm lxii.10/2

## *Referendum 2016*

With the power to decide in-or-out of the EU conferred on the British electorate, it is important that we should all have a sound idea of what the decision means, and what understanding of politics, nations and supranational bodies it appeals to.

The situation has been brought about by the Conservative Party and in particular by the Prime Minister. Winston Churchill would hardly have recognised our present mode of national government. During his first spell as First Lord of the Admiralty important decisions had to be made by the Cabinet. Now, on the one hand we have a hint of elective dictatorship, in which, according to the media, all the negotiations about revised terms for British membership—complete with the usual all-night sessions, possibilities of success or failure “too close to call” and so on—have been conducted by the Prime Minister in person, not by any of the cabinet ministers who appear to have responsibility for our relations with the European Union. On the other hand collective cabinet responsibility is abandoned, and on the most important constitutional question for forty years cabinet ministers will be campaigning against one another—without, we are told, the prospect of any rift in the Conservative Party. Then, the decision itself is not to be made by Parliament but by the electorate. All this can only mean that the party in power thinks it not of the first importance. The statements of prominent Conservatives confirm this—in my opinion though not theirs.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, a likely successor to Mr Cameron, is reported as saying, “This is about people’s jobs and their livelihoods and their living standards, and in my judgement as chancellor leaving the EU would represent a profound economic shock for our country, for all of us and I’m going to do everything I can to prevent that happening.”\* The certain way of preventing that happening would have been not to have a referendum. The Conservative Party alone is responsible for calling the referendum. Mr Osborne, as one of the most powerful men in the cabinet, and the one responsible for the economy, should explain how he can continue in office after confessing that his party, with himself as Chancellor of the Exchequer, has deliberately led the nation into the risk of a profound economic shock. Is such a party fit to try to control the national economy?

\* BBC website report accessed 26 February 2016

Mr Cameron, who has a unique responsibility for the renegotiations about British terms of membership, though his responsibility is not immediately for the economy, is strongly in favour of “Yes” on the same grounds as the Chancellor. He used as an argument against the “No” campaign that they were not deterred by the risk of “losing jobs”. They would want to leave the EU even if unemployment for some is a consequence:

David Cameron has accused Leave campaigners of seeing lost jobs and businesses as “a price worth paying” for getting out of the EU.

He is thought to be referring to comments by Boris Johnson and others although he does not name them.

Mr Cameron also criticised opponents who he claims are willing to sacrifice economic prosperity for wider political goals. “For those who advocate leaving, lost jobs and a dented economy might be collateral damage, or a price worth paying. For me, they’re not. They never are.”\*

Mr Cameron thinks, and the Conservative establishment with him (and the Labour Party and the remains of the Liberal Democrats) that to leave the EU would be to enter uncharted waters with many risks including a “dented economy”. If so, Mr Cameron’s position too is untenable. Good government cannot extend to leading the nation into unnecessary danger.

Even if they win the referendum the Conservatives will have emphasised a division in the nation that will not be healed by the referendum result. If the “No” side has a good showing UKIP will only need to change its policy (as I have long advocated) to getting a Parliamentary majority for leaving the EU, and will present an increased threat to the Conservative vote.

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The “No” campaign responded to the Prime Minister’s warning about the dented economy with indignant denials. “His remarks have angered Leave campaigners who have described them as unworthy of a prime minister.”†

“Jobs” are agreed by both sides to be the overriding consideration. Mr Cameron’s opinion, from which his opponents are not reported to have dissented, is clearly that “economic prosperity” is an absolute, indistinguishable from what used to be called “the common good”.‡

\* BBC website report accessed 14 March 2016 † *Ibid.*

‡ Whether the result of “Brexit” would be “a dented economy” is an open question, on which Mr Cameron has no great authority. Cf. for instance a series of publications by the distinguished economist Tim Congdon, and the House of Commons Library document *The Economic Impact of EU Membership on the UK*, SN/EP/6730, 17 September 2013

The “Brexit” side should have gladly accepted the charge that possible unemployment is a price worth paying for the much more important prize of national independence.

The failure to do so confirms one’s impression that neither side within the Cabinet or in the In/Out campaign in the country sees the referendum as of much importance, if only because their sense of what is important in politics, and of politics itself, is inadequate. I think the decision whether or not to remain in the EU is an important matter, and I shall only comment on it as such. Therefore I shall not mention the terms of Mr Cameron’s “deal” after renegotiation, which do not go to the heart of the matter. Nor shall I discuss the question how much sovereignty has been handed over to the EU. (The old idea of “shared sovereignty” is again heard, but no sense has ever been made of the phrase.) All I want to say is that there are indeed more important matters in politics (“wider political goals”) than “jobs”. The common good, as it used to be called, will include prosperity and abundance, but not as the be-all-and-end-all. More important than lost jobs is the integrity of the realm (or whatever political unit succeeds the realm) and the right to make war. Wars are only lawfully conducted by sovereign states; war is a more serious matter than the economy. So is education. So is the maintenance of justice and the enforcement of just laws. So is religion (whether by way of infinite freedom or of an established Church). So, I believe, is politics. Where politics exists, politics includes management of the economy (God help us!) not vice versa.

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How could politics not exist? Politics is reasoning about the actions and passions of states, not just the actions and passions themselves. This brings politics into the subject matter of history in Collingwood’s sense of history. Political history (which used just to be known as history) is not just what states do or suffer, but is the record of actions as answers given to public questions by those in power: that is, the narrative not only of events but of how politicians understood and tried to control events. A referendum is not a good political instrument; it has nothing like the chamber of the House of Commons to give a context for debate and, it may be hoped, to concentrate the mind. A referendum is nevertheless political, asking the electorate to consider and decide. If the decision were to be made without discussion (say by the drawing of lots) it would not be within politics.

Who are we? In political terms, what comes naturally to anybody as “we” is the political reality, the context for our own politics. We become politically active when we join in political discourse, even if only by voting. The forthcoming referendum is, as well as an exercise in pure politics, about political reality. Has the nation a political reality greater than and