

Brexit now and we will only have to Bretturn

Niall Ferguson | Harvard University | 27 April 2016

European negotiations were once glamorous. Five centuries ago, when Henry VIII met the French king Francis I near Calais, there was so much Tudor bling that the venue became known as the Field of Cloth of Gold. There was feasting, dancing and a great deal of lavish dressing-up. The English king even brought along a pair of monkeys covered in gold leaf. All in all, it was more like the Grammy awards than a modern-day European summit.

European leaders in those days took their time. The royal rendezvous of 1520 lasted close to two and a half weeks. Yet Tudor diplomacy was also a contact sport. The French king's nose was broken in a joust. He then got his own back by beating his English counterpart at wrestling. Nothing of any substance was actually agreed, but everyone went home cheerful.

Contrast all this pomp and ceremony with the grimy ordeal David Cameron and his fellow European leaders had to endure [in February] as they hammered out the terms of Britain's new "special" status in the European Union. A more dowdy and dishevelled group of people it would be hard to imagine than the leaders of the EU's 28 member states by the end of the week.

During the Greek debt crisis, Britain's continental neighbours unwisely got into the habit of negotiating into the wee small hours, not realising that this is something at which the British prime minister excels, like anyone who has spent three years at Oxford, where all-night "essay crises" are the norm. The sight of a haggard Angela Merkel with a bag of chips brought back memories of the kebab vans of Carfax. She looked on the brink of cancelling her morning tutorial. Cameron, by contrast, got his essay done.

Viewed from the other side of the Atlantic, to be sure, the essay question did not seem especially taxing. I have had difficulty explaining to my colleagues that Britain's future could hinge on the number of years that a Polish plumber will not be entitled to claim UK benefits. They are baffled when I explain that this is an argument about the status of legal immigrants.

But that is not the real issue, even if it was the one that kept Cameron up all that Thursday night. The real issue is whether or not we have learnt anything from approximately five centuries of history. Half a millennium ago, Henry VIII could still dream of asserting his claim to the French crown. But Cardinal Wolsey understood rather better that the monarchs of Christendom should join forces against the ambitions of the Ottomans. That was one reason Wolsey brought Henry and Francis together on the Field of Cloth of Gold.

Wolsey's analysis was correct. While Europe proceeded to tear itself apart over the Reformation, the Sultan's armies besieged Vienna twice in the space of two centuries, in 1529 and 1683. Later, a second and mightier threat from the east arose in the form of tsarist Russia.

After the restoration of peace at Westphalia in 1648, Europe entered the era we associate with the balance of power – the emergence of the great German historian von Ranke's "pentarchy" of five great powers: Austria, Britain, France, Prussia and Russia. The geopolitical reality was an escalating overseas contest between the Dutch, the British and the French for the spoils of empire, and an unending "Eastern Question" that pitted Russia against Turkey in war after war.

For a time, Britain's imperial success gave rise to the illusion that it could detach itself from the continent. But "splendid isolation" was an ironical phrase.

First Napoleon, then the Kaiser, then Hitler taught us – or should have taught us – otherwise. The continental commitment never went away.

All Britain has got to choose today is the form of its commitment. We can declare "fog in the Channel – continent cut off" by voting for Brexit in this summer's referendum. But the idea that we can thereby separate ourselves from Europe is an illusion. For the future of Europe without us would be one of escalating instability.

Germany, after a period of predominance between around 1989 and 2015, now faces a descent into weakness as a result of today's revived threats from the East – the Völkerwanderung unleashed by the Syrian civil war and the increasingly reckless flailing of Vladimir Putin's Russian petrostate.

Merkel's rash decision last summer to throw open the German borders was like Brünnhilde's immolation scene in Wagner's Ring. At a stroke, German mastery over Europe came crashing down. Cameron, who had once thought he would deal with Berlin, found himself haggling in 27 different capitals, from Paris to Prague.

Why did he succeed? Because Britain's fellow Europeans realised how disastrous it would be if we left.

One need have no illusions about Brussels to believe that Britain must remain in the EU. I certainly have none. But one does need to have illusions – fantasies about a largely imaginary "Anglosphere" or some Tory version of "Ourselves Alone" – to believe that Britain can somehow exit Europe, pull up an imaginary drawbridge and resuscitate a 19th-century ideal of parliamentary sovereignty.

Some of my best friends have succumbed to this delusion. I read their romantic calls for Brexit with amazement. And as I do so, I realise that scepticism has shifted from one side of the debate to the other.

In the 1990s, the utopians were the pro-Europeans – the "federasts," as Noel Malcolm memorably called them. They genuinely believed that a borderless Europe with a single currency would magically evolve into a United States of Europe, transcending the wicked nationalism of the past. The sceptics then were those of us who pointed out that monetary union without fiscal union was a recipe for disaster, even if all internal barriers to mobility were removed. We were right, and the proponents of "ever closer union" have had one hell of a lesson in the past few years.

Today, by contrast, it is the proponents of Brexit who are the utopians. Far from being Eurosceptics, they are Anglooonies. The true sceptics now are those who point out that to opt out of the EU is not only to relinquish all influence over the terms of our future relationship with our main trading partners and to jeopardise London's future as a financial centre, but also – much more importantly – to undermine the security of Europe itself (to say nothing of the union with Scotland, which my fellow Scot Michael Gove seems to have forgotten about).

To us Anglosceptics, the lesson of history is that British isolationism is itself a trigger for continental disintegration. Vote for Brexit this year and we shall "Breturn", sooner or later, to sort out the ensuing mess, but in much the same appalling, costly way as we had to in 1808, 1914 and 1939 – and with much less strength than we then enjoyed as the world's biggest empire.

In the days before empire, Henry VIII's version of Brexit was to renounce Roman Catholicism and divorce Catherine of Aragon. A true sceptic in those days would have advised him to Bremain – and unite against the Turk.



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