

Book Review

***Britain and Europe in a Troubled World.* Vernon Bogdanor.** Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780300245615, 176 pp.

A nation's past can reveal a great deal about its present and future. That is the underlying premise of *Britain and Europe in a Troubled World*. This timely book reworks a series of Stimson Lectures delivered at Yale University in April 2019. The four chapters chronologically narrate the UK-EU relationship, from Britain's decision not to join the European Coal and Steel Community, through its troubled accession to the European Community (EC), to its subsequent position as a piece that did not quite fit the EU puzzle, and its eventual departure.

Although the history of Britain and Europe has been rewritten many times over, Bogdanor's work is distinctive in framing the UK-EU relationship through the lens of the British national psyche. Drawing on memoirs, diaries, and speeches, Bogdanor illuminates the personal turmoil of successive British prime ministers as they struggle to balance the nation's sense of self-importance with its declining global authority. This individual conflict mirrors national self-perception, as Britain tries to establish its role in a world of shifting influences. Though the book contains little more than 150 pages, it provides a detailed and nuanced record of the critical junctures in UK-EU interaction. Bogdanor explains that his aim in writing the text is not only to elucidate the trajectory of the UK's entry into and departure from the EU, but also to grapple with

the grand themes of modern politics as he sees them: nationalism and internationalism, sovereignty and identity, and the role of the past in shaping a nation's self-perception. He certainly succeeds in his goal.

Chapter one, named after Disraeli's claim that England should approach Europe with a 'policy of reserve, but proud reserve' (27), details the conception of European unity as an 'attempt to constrain the force of nationalism' (7). In this section, Bogdanor succinctly demystifies Britain's absence from the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community and, later, the European Communities. He explains that the original Community did not align neatly with the contemporary Labour government's economic policies and officials feared Britons would not look favourably upon pooled sovereignty. British politicians, and some of their European counterparts, felt that the island nation was too distinct historically, economically, and psychologically to fit in. These misgivings, Bogdanor contends, contributed to an 'instinctive hostility' (16) towards joining a European federation, an enmity which would endure long enough to underpin arguments against Britain's continued membership of the EU in 2016.

Bogdanor goes on to explore the effects of Britain's decision not to join the European Community until fifteen years after it was formed. He maintains that the nation lost the chance to influence policies in its favour. By the time Britain joined the EC, rules were established which naturally benefitted the founding members: France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries. The interests of these countries did not map directly onto Britain's, but if the nation wanted to join, it would have no choice but to accept them. Bogdanor couches these explanations in a narrative of declining British self-confidence and international standing; he envisions a gradual development from a post-imperial nation that emerged favourably from the Second World War to a country that struggled to determine where it could be most influential. His chapter is well-balanced: it acknowledges the beliefs of international leaders that Britain was missing out on the opportunity to lead in Europe, while simultaneously legitimising Britain's concerns about EC membership having deleterious effects on the UK economy.

Chapter two frames the issue of Europe as a long-standing challenge

for British political parties, recalling that it has lost six of the past seven Conservative leaders their premiership. Bogdanor positions the Suez Crisis of 1956 as the turning point in British politicians' attitudes towards the EU, from distrust to active courtship. The Suez Crisis, he argues, triggered a 'steady loss of British self-confidence' (51), which showed that the nation was not as powerful as it once thought and depended more on the United States than it realised. At this point, Bogdanor asserts, it became clear that the Commonwealth was not a substitute for European unity; the EC emerged as the geopolitical solution to Britain's increasing sense of isolation. Bogdanor demonstrates that the problems Britain foresaw in joining the EC did not disappear when it finally became a member. The UK's relationship with the Commonwealth, fears about sovereignty, and concerns about Britain's payments to the EC continued to plague politicians. The chapter reinforces what has often been claimed about the UK-EU relationship: Britain's role in the EU has never been straightforward for either side. However, Bogdanor makes an important additional point: he reveals that the politician-public relationship in the UK changed markedly between the 1975 and 2016 referendums on Britain's EU membership, provoked by the financial crisis in 2008 and the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009. The trust that the public once placed in the expert instincts of political officials to guide Britain's relationship with the EU has dissipated substantially in recent years.

Chapter three covers the run-up to the 2016 membership referendum, situating the event in the context of growing nationalism and 'mass immigration from central and eastern Europe following the enlargement of the European Union after 2004' (97). Mass immigration, Bogdanor engagingly argues, fuelled a disconnect between the so-called elite and the public, who increasingly felt that neither Labour nor the Conservatives could address the so-called immigration issue. Where this chapter has the most resonance is in Bogdanor's prediction that although the referendum was 'a cry of rage by those who saw themselves as the victims of globalisation' (111), Brexit is more likely to strengthen globalist forces than weaken them. After all, right-wing Conservatives see potential in the neoliberal opportunities of Brexit. Although this trajectory will likely intensify the discontent among those who voted to

leave, Bogdanor concludes that Brexit will not shake the foundations of the British political system: Britain will remain a strong and stable democracy.

In the final chapter, Bogdanor considers the future of the EU without Britain. He argues persuasively that scepticism towards the EU is not a British anomaly but prevails across the continent. To redress the increase in Euroscepticism, the EU must deal with its democratic deficit – the perception that it is remote and unaccountable. For Bogdanor, this involves bringing the European Commission under the control of the European Council. The Council, unlike the Commission, represents the governments of the member states and is thus considered more democratic. Bogdanor further contends that the EU must take care that its rhetoric does not stretch too far beyond the realities and possibilities of “ever closer union” in a continent that is increasingly Eurosceptic.

Whether the EU will heed Bogdanor’s conclusions is uncertain. What is clear, however, is that Bogdanor’s book provides a concise, convincing, and novel perspective on the UK-EU relationship. His admirable interweaving of the personal writings of political officials into the historical overview humanises an often opaque narrative. Bogdanor reminds readers that the effects of international relationships extend beyond imagined national communities: policies, decisions, and political rhetoric reach individuals from both political and public circles, as Brexit continues to attest. He illustrates that Britain’s history continues to shape its self-perception and will likely influence the role that it carves out for itself in the world after Brexit. Bogdanor’s findings will undoubtedly shape future research into the new UK-EU relationship, but his writing is equally intelligible for a non-academic audience.

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