

Ramblings! for "Britain stronger in Europe."

- The tone of "Europe and You" is probably the right one. It needs to appeal to people who've been subjected to relentless negativity from the U.K's so-called newspapers — and this for over thirty years. Few papers in other parts of the E.U. descend as low as England's, and the public have got used to reading, or even just seeing, negative headlines in Sun, Star, Mail, Express, Times and Telegraph — where all the bigotry and misinformation that a "True Brit" could desire is displayed. So your tone is, basically, "This is what's in it for us!"
- But the picture is really much bigger.
- Just before the last European Elections I was in Germany and France. The positive feel to displays put on by ^{voluntary} groups promoting the values of the E.U. was in sharp contrast to the negativity and "Vote against it all" atmosphere in England.
- Citizens of other E.U. member states that I've met in Leeds, often complain about the usual view here of the personal and financial advantage "we" can squeeze out of it!
- Here, I'd better say that I've been around a long time — at the same address in Beeston, Leeds. I was born in 1937, and remember the two air raids from the Luftwaffe when bombs fell on the city one night in 1941 and another in 1942. As a result 77 people died. Probably the lowest toll in any U.K. town or city that was targeted.
- On BBC Radio bulletins — always short and positively to the point — without commentators telling you what to think — I learned about the RAF's destruction of German cities, the surrender, the discovery of the horrors of the Concentration Camps. Newsreels in Cinemas showed this too, and the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons forced to leave because national frontiers had been redrawn.
- There was a feeling of "Never, ever again, all that!" — even in the U.K. To mention that these days results in "dropped jaw", yet on French radio, and amongst people I know in France "Plus jamais tout ça" is still heard.
- In October 2012 when it was announced that the Nobel Peace Prize had been awarded to the E.U. I was in Nantes. At breakfast copies of "Durst-France" displayed a big picture of the European flag, and some very enthusiastic words. I was moved to tears, too. Then I thought and, yes, it was sad to read, "as you might expect, this news was received in London with a sneer!". On "Any Questions" one panellist even went as far as to say it was ridiculous. "The prize wasn't intended to be used like that". Well, I suspect that those people in Scandinavia who manage the funds, etc. know what they're doing!

— Maybe there's a question to ask. Why does 'England' think so negatively about the E.U. How was it, that by 1980, the E.U. of cooperation and solidarity was presented as 'us' versus the other eight. Why is this perpetuated? Now Cameron presents himself as "sticking up for Britain against the other 27." Would he prefer sanctions, or maybe bombs for them?

→ During my autumn 2012 tour in France I visited Orléans, and popped in to see the cousin (then aged 83) of a friend. This conversation took place, in French. "So 'England' wants to leave the E.U.?" "Possibly" "Your Cameron is going to see all the other heads of state to persuade them to change things for all of us so that the people of Britain might feel 'comfortable' with us?" "Yes" "And when he's persuaded us to change, he'll hold a referendum?" "Yes" "And England might vote to leave?" "It's possible" "So we'll have all changed for no reason at all! Do they think they're above everybody else?" "Yes, I'm sorry to have to say that they do" (Marie-Thérèse knows me well enough to say "they" and not "you".)

→ Another thing pro-Europeans might do is to ask our fellow citizens to look at a globe or a world-map all to the same scale. Note how small Europe is. It fits comfortably into the USA and into Canada. It almost fits into Australia, India and Brazil. And several times into Russia and China. Look closely at all the tiny countries, coloured differently. Surely in this day and age they need to be working together and have many common ideals. Long live Schengen! A return to sealed frontiers would be a grave backward step.

→ And, with the UK "out" of Europe, what about the land border? What happens to the agreement with the Irish Republic? Chaos?

→ Back to the period 1948-1958. BBC and Newsreels. I learn about the founding fathers. Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak are always in the news. Benelux. Coal and Steel Agreement involving six countries. Treaty of Rome (1957). The teenager that I was, is all for this!! Working together. Eventually helping the disadvantaged Portugal and Spain (Dictators), Greece (Colonels), Ireland (years of neglect when part of UK). If everybody's doing well, no need to look over frontiers and seas and be jealous and go to war. At university, after the Treaty of Rome, we're given an essay. "Les États-Unis d'Europe".

— 1951-1952 - In an exchange organised by the Labour Party in Levers I spend August with a family in ^{#2}Germany. (I'm still in contact!). Cities are still ruined but everybody is positive [I didn't fully think of the air raids until last March when Pforzheim remembered how the RAF had destroyed their city 70 yrs earlier. After a raid of 22 mins, 18,000 people had been burnt alive. No bitterness in the report. Just a "never, ever again."]
In 1952, in Solingen, Kurt's mother was hoping for no more wars in a "United States of Europe". She was convinced it was possible. There's been internal stuff (ex Yugoslavia, U.K. (Ireland)) but so far she was right...

- Ask people why the EU exists, they've really no idea. To me it's a matter of working together to create ^{and maintain} a reasonably level "playing field" so that harmony ensues in our tiny states - most of them much smaller than the states which make up Australia, the U.S.A and probably Brazil and India.

We've a Parliament and a Commission - they deal with things which touch all member states. Could any state develop into something so horrible as National Socialist Germany?

- In May 2002 I revisited the "Album" artspace in the Rue des Chartreux / Kartuizenstraat in Brussels. To coincide with the Treaty of Nice they had an excellently well-documented display on the E.U. (Previously I'd seen exhibitions on Hergé's Tintin/Kuifje and the history of Brussels) As is required, information was in Dutch and French. And also in English. Some of these English versions had been defaced. Let's not forget that on 22nd January, 1972, when Edward Heath went to sign up to the EEC in the Palais d'Égmont, a disgruntled Brit. threw ink onto the back of his jacket. In "Album" there was an extract from a speech made by Victor Hugo at a Peace Congress in Paris in August 1849 - it was framed and hanging on the wall, alongside a Dutch translation. The young Frenchman in charge told me he'd not displayed an English version, because his English visitors had been largely hostile. Very sad!

I was moved by the extract: it looked forward to a time when nations/states stopped warring and that there'd be created the United States of America and the United States of Europe trading across the Atlantic. Well it took a Civil War to create one, and 1870, 1914, 1940 to make a move towards creating the other. My young Frenchman took it from the wall and made me a copy. I enclose one for you.

Peace Congress? After which war? I was puzzled. Then I remembered a footnote I'd seen when rereading Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South", written in 1854, where she mentions the Peace Movement. This was organised by Elihu Burritt of Connecticut. There had been huge demonstrations for world peace in Europe and the East of North America. One such had been in Manchester. With this info. I was able to secure the complete French text via a friend's internet (I'm not connected!). The report describes the enthusiastic responses of the audience. I felt very emotional after the first reading - and it still moves me. Why had I to wait until I was sixty-five before I found it?

- From October 1959 to June 1960, prior to teaching French in Leeds at the school where Alan Bennett had been a pupil until eight years before, (By the way, have you got him on board? He has written adversely about the way the UK media treat Europe) I worked in Armentières in a big technical high school, giving English Conversation Classes, and accompanying the Senior English Teacher. Armentières had been in the thick of all three invasions, but this was not dwelt upon. The future was more important, but "never again, all that!"

Anyway having studied a passage from the "Forsythe Saga", one young man wanted to make sure that M^r. Smith knew about a similar French family tale - "Les Thibaults!"

I went to a big second-hand bookshop in Lille and bought all five paper-back volumes. It was written largely in the 1920s. Three of the volumes are the section "Summer 1914". What a revelation! One of the Thibault sons has abandoned his family roots in Paris and is deep into International Socialism in Lausanne and Geneva. At long last I learn of the complicated series of events leading to the outbreak of the war which was preparing itself.

As we move through July 1914 there are huge peace rallies organised in cities throughout Europe. In Manchester and Glasgow (if I remember correctly) and also in Paris, Brussels, Vienna, Frankfurt, Hamburg ... The theme? If war is declared the workers of Europe will go on strike! This is not fiction.

The fictional Jacques Thibault takes us to hear speeches by the well-known Socialist leaders of the day. Neither they, nor their speeches are invented.

Jean Jaurès is a leading light, and one feels that the movement cannot fail - but, of course, he is assassinated in the Croissant Café in Paris.

The Nationalist press and governments - along with the Arms Manufacturers are determined to go to war. ... I had a thought last year. The famous Christmas truce and football matches of 1914 happened in several places on the battle line ... Could it be that some of the men concerned had been on Peace Marches in their home city?

— Date I say that there are three things in "Europe and You" ^{out of} which the U.K. has opted which I want. I want the Euro (last year I spent 53 nights in France/Belgium/Germany) - I don't spend much, but it cost me £230, paid to the money changers) Many people in the Eurozone take a real interest in the coins and can tell you what other countries have chosen for their National Symbols. I want Schengen. I'm sick of the controls at Paris Gare du Nord and Bruxelles Midi + Lille-Europe + Calais-Frethun when I use Eurostar. I'm uneasy at the way Blair fussed about the Red Cross refuge at Sangatte and insisted on moving the UK border to the Zone Portuaire in Calais, washing Britain's hands of the nasty business of having to deal with asylum seekers.

In Brussels for the Fête Nationale (21 July) last year the E.U. flag was just as much in evidence as the Belgian 'Three Colours', people carrying both. The EU tent was very popular (I tell folks here about this. They start sneering, and when it dawns on them that I'm enthusiastic - they're embarrassed!) With King Philippe and Queen Mathilde on the balcony the European Anthem is played, followed by la Brabançonne. (Belgian National anthem)

— In Leeds in 2014 for the Grand Départ du Tour de France there wasn't a single tele-feeder to be seen. A few French tricolores, yes, but "what on earth is French Television doing here?"

← So, of course I'll vote "Yes" to our E.U. - but with Cameron intent on watering things down I feel a bit disenfranchised - but not as much as an old University friend who's lived in Karlsruhe since the early Seventies. Thatcher took away her vote, and she is a bit worried about becoming stateless!

Eric Smith 23rd January 2016