

Britain in Europe in 2008: Big World, Bad Europe, Ugly Consequences

Written by John Redwood

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JOHN REDWOOD, FEB 14 2008

The whole process of the Lisbon Treaty's ratification over recent weeks, both here and abroad, has revealed just how undemocratic a construct the EU project has become.

In France the Treaty has now been rushed through without another referendum, despite clearly expressed hostility towards the Constitution, in order to avoid triggering one in the UK where the project would be voted down judging by polls and the views of the public.

It also seems likely that the Dutch will not be allowed another referendum, because they too got the answer wrong last time as far as the political class of the EU are concerned.

Here the electorate has been denied the opportunity to vote on what is an unprecedented round of transfers of power. The final check on this surrendering was supposed to be Parliament, but the Government has also broken its promise to allow line by line scrutiny of the Treaty. Parliament has been given a mere fourteen days to debate all the complexities of the EU proposals. This time allowance includes the Bill's second reading. This Treaty sacrifices more vetoes than any previous Treaty, though the government would not willingly volunteer information this for an informed debate.

The ability to probe and examine amendments on every part of the Treaty and Bill has transposed into just one and a half hours to tackle amendments tacked on to the end of themed debates. This is very far from the usual scrutiny procedure. Normally MPs can table and debate a wide range of amendments on each Bill, with time in committee to consider each amendment and each clause on a line by line basis.

As it is, reams of tabled amendments on critical issues such as police, criminal justice, energy and human rights have already been left undebated because of the limited time allowances scheduled by the Government. The whole pretence of 'debating' the Lisbon treaty is but another example of the Government's undemocratic approach to the EU project.

The marginalisation of Parliamentary democracy in this way, and for this purpose, only compounds the problem of dislocation between central government and people in this country. All too often now the UK government pretends to want something which it has to do under EU law and is then forced to display inflexibility and deafness in the face of public disagreement, because it has already agreed the law in Brussels and has to drive it through the UK Parliament regardless of objections at home.

The Government claims to see great benefits of European integration yet it does not risk putting the matter to the people. This implies they think their case is poor, or they do not believe they can persuade electors. We are living in a rapidly globalising world, and Britain is facing considerable economic uncertainty. The current and proposed arrangements for the UK's EU involvement do not serve Britain's interests regarding either of these enormous challenges. The last thing we need at this juncture is more centralised power in the Brussels machine, and more legislation and regulation adding to the costs and complexities of doing business.

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Of profound concern is the impact of the EU involvement on Britain's great success story – the financial services industry. The crisis of recent months surrounding Northern Rock and the credit crunch make it paramount that the EU MAD Directive is amended to allow the Bank of England to organise rescues for ailing financial institutions in private and rapidly if needed. More generally, the quantity of new EU regulation relating to financial services is potentially very damaging. There are many new regulations that have not yet bedded down, and a period of reflection and implementation is needed to see how they will work. Some will need amendment or repeal, as they are too proscriptive and will drive business offshore from the EU. New York was damaged on several occasions in previous decades by over zealous legislation, which gave London an advantage. It will be a shame if the EU drives that hard won business away from our continent altogether.

I find the notion that we need to belong to a larger bloc in the world to have more power to stand up for our interests in the changing global economy, thoroughly misguided. The regional (Euro) bloc is too small and too inward looking to regulate or tackle the problems of the global market – international banking requires world wide standards and surveillance, not regional regulation. The EU is short of energy, so the solutions to its energy problems lie outside its borders. The EU is in long-term decline (its own forecasts say it will decline from 18% of world output in 2000 to 10% in 2050 and that is optimistic). The UK's future will be based on the global market, and on working with like minded countries to ensure sensible styles and levels of regulation for the new global industries and corporations that characterise this phase of globalisation.

We need to work with other like minded countries to influence and improve the global regulatory framework for big business, which is too big to be contained by the EU. Indeed, I am not a "little Englander" but a "big worlder". I want to trade and be friends with our partners in the EU, but I do not want more laws and regulations from them. If the government was serious about standing up for Britain's interests it would never have signed this Treaty which gives away much power to the centralising EU state. If the EU had had the wellbeing and prosperity of European people at its heart, it would never have proposed so much centralising power in the first place. Far from "coming our way" towards greater freedom and more prosperity, the EU is going in the wrong direction. It will not help us compete with mighty Asia, but will hasten Europe's relative economic decline.

A response to this editorial has been written by Professor Anand Menon: Britain in Europe: A Response to John Redwood

John Redwood is a visiting professor at Middlesex Business School and Member of Parliament for Wokingham. In the mid-1980s he was Chief Policy Advisor to Margaret Thatcher where he was a staunch advocate of her privatisation programmes. He has held numerous Cabinet positions and twice ran for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1995 and 1997