

Britain in Europe: A Response to John Redwood

Written by Anand Menon

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ANAND MENON, MAR 4 2008

This editorial is a response to an earlier piece written for e-IR by John Redwood: Britain in Europe in 2008: Big World, Bad Europe, Ugly Consequences

In addressing John Redwood's claims about the European Union and the process of ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, I will not dwell on the rank hypocrisy that characterizes much, if not most, British political debate on the latter issue. Suffice to say that it suffuses all three major parties. Each chooses its approach on the basis of short-term political expediency rather than constitutional principle. Tony Blair called a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty because of fear lest the European issue cost him local and European elections. The Liberal Democrats support an 'in or out' referendum because they promised one on the treaty, feared it would be lost, but don't want to be seen to be going back on their word. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are acting disingenuously in claiming that the Lisbon Treaty differs significantly from its predecessor. Meanwhile, the Tories are equally wrong to argue that it requires more than parliamentary ratification. Do they really foresee public debates on the benefits or otherwise of the limitations to be applied to the rotating Presidency of the Council?

Moving on to what passes for the substance of Redwood's critique, we are confronted with a bewildering *mélange* of half truth and innuendo. I simply do not understand how national debates over ratification reveal 'just how undemocratic a construct the EU project has become.' The EU, and EC before it, have always had their founding treaties approved by individual member states, and usually by their parliaments. Indeed, insofar as the current struggles over ratification illustrate anything, surely it is the democratic shortcomings *within* these states, shortcomings that contribute to growing popular disaffection with *national* politics. The Union itself has said nothing about how the new Treaty should be ratified. Those decisions are left to national politicians. And they, as we have seen, are not overly principled when it comes to making such decisions (as their populations are starting to realize).

Redwood in fact makes something of a habit of confusing the European and the national. Thus, we learn that the 'political class of the EU' decided that the Dutch got the answer wrong in their referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Which EU political class is this? The Commission? I think not. Perhaps the European Parliament? No. It was Dutch political leaders who decided against holding a second vote, just as it was the French President who chose not to hold a second popular poll in France. The EU was an idle spectator on both occasions.

There is in fact no such thing as an EU political class. It exists only within the febrile imaginations of eurosceptics, part of their superstate fantasy. Indeed, rather than the Lisbon treaty representing an 'unprecedented round of transfers of power' it is indicative of a trend towards the reassertion of national political power within the EU. Both of its major institutional innovations – the more visible leadership of the Council and the facility for national parliaments to block Commission proposals – are intended precisely to reinforce control by these national politicians, be they members of the executive or legislators.

Meanwhile, and in stark contrast to Redwood's claim that EU regulations are hastening Europe's economic decline, the present European Commission has battled hard to prevent excessive regulation. If only member states were inclined to do the same. It is, after all, British law that permits one to kill or give away a bullfinch, but not sell or barter it. It was member state governments that were responsible for the dilution of the core principles of the services directive, not a European Commission that is far more sympathetic to Redwood's liberalizing instincts than he seems

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to realize.

Not – and I hope the reader will here forgive a brief detour – that regulation is necessarily the evil Redwood implies it to be. In our post-Northern Rock, credit crunch world, his obvious allergy to any kind of regulation of the financial services industry is little short of breathtaking. Maybe such regulation is not the Union's responsibility – that will be for member states to decide. Yet surely it is about time someone sought to regulate financial institutions whose recent high profile failings have impacted so severely on ordinary people the world over? Redwood's approach is redolent of the attitude of a British government too craven in its attitude towards the City to attempt to impose any form of regulatory control.

To return – with apologies for the interruption – to the main point of this essay, let us consider for a moment the notion implicit in Redwood's article that, rather than submitting to the 'centralization' and 'excessive regulation' of 'Brussels, Britain would be better off under a looser arrangement, possibly with different partners. It is curious how, so often, those most in favour of the market are those who understand it the least. The EU is in the process of attempting to construct a single market between 27 mixed economies. Yet absent strong institutions like the Court and the Commission, there would be no such market. For all their stated commitments to it, the member states frequently balk at the painful adjustments market creation implies for them. Left free to act as they will, states and businesses would simply ignore EU rules. So, the Union provides us with institutions that enjoy significant authority when it comes to market making and highly limited powers in all other areas.

The flipside of market making is the international influence that market provides the Union with. Here we come to perhaps the most curious claims in Redwood's piece. We should, apparently, work 'with likeminded countries to ensure sensible style and levels of regulation for the new global industries and corporations.' Yet surely this is precisely what we are doing?

We are currently members of a club of 27 like-minded countries who work together precisely in order to influence international regulatory regimes. Working closely with our most important trading partners allows us to agree to do things together that we would hesitate to do alone. Take the environment. By acting within an EU framework, we can be certain that the steps we are taking are also being taken by our closest trading partners who will not, therefore, gain a comparative advantage as a consequence of our environmental activism.

As importantly, the Union enhances the power of member states in global politics. EU GDP is now higher than the US equivalent. As a consequence, European negotiators enjoy significant leverage in international trade. The fact that European states decided to create a single European standard for mobile phones – GSM – led to its adoption by some fifty non-European countries, creating a massive market that European manufacturers have come to dominate. Similarly, stringent environmental standards adopted in the EU are less damaging to European industries than they might otherwise be precisely because other states, anxious to retain access to the single market, adopt them as well. Certain EU automobile standards are already applied in countries as diverse as Japan, India, South Africa, Australia and China.

In sum, I recognize Redwood's characterization neither of the Union nor of its new Treaty. Sanctimonious rhetoric about democratic accountability notwithstanding, such analyses are not merely misleading but also misguided. Today's European Union is an essential element of any European attempt to remain competitive in the twenty first century. Redwood and his ilk should look beyond their narrow anti-European prejudices and applaud a collaborative undertaking that helps produce precisely the outcomes they claim to desire.

John Redwood has replied to this article in his piece Britain in Europe: A Response to Anand Menon

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