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Britain in Europe: A (Further) Response to John Redwood

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ANAND MENON, APR 20 2008

This article is the fourth piece in a debate which has taken place between John Redwood and Anand Menon on e-International Relations. Mr Redwood's original editorial, Britain in Europe in 2008: Big World, Bad Europe, Ugly Consequences was published in February 2008. Professor Anand Menon's response, Britain in Europe: A Response to John Redwood followed in early March. John Redwood replied later in the month. This editorial represents Professor Menon's second response to John Redwood's argument.

Let me commence with an apology. I did not, in replying to John Redwood's piece, intend to cause personal offence or to launch any kind of personal attack. If that is how my response came across, I apologize unreservedly.

Turning to the substance, the European achievements Mr Redwood refers to include far more than simply buildings and music. Indeed, a centrepiece of them is the EU itself. Initially a revolutionary, far-sighted and sophisticated response to the need to enshrine peace in Western Europe. Then a tool to entrench democracy in former dictatorships. More recently a means of dealing with the fall of the Berlin Wall and overcoming the division of Europe. Unique in the history of international politics, its member states cooperate more closely on more issues than any group of states ever has. They obey – more often than not – laws with which they may have disagreed, allowing them all to participate in a unique market that is in some areas more single – and hence more efficient – even than its US equivalent.

And the strength of this market (the GDP of which is greater than that of the US) is precisely what will allow us to meet the challenges posed by a changing world. Think GSM. Because Europe adopted the standard, and Europe has a large market, others followed suit, providing European phone manufacturers with a tremendous advantage they have gone on to exploit to the full. A similar logic will underpin European attempts to drag global partners towards a more responsible attitude towards the environment.

Is the single market over-regulated, as Mr. Redwood believes? Well, that depends. Certainly the Union has promulgated regulations we would be better off not having. Equally, however, it has been stymied in its attempts to pass others which I believe would benefit us. I have never, for instance, thought that granting certain basic rights to temporary workers would herald the end of civilisation as we know it. The point is that it is difficult to generalise.

Insofar as there is excessive EU regulation, this is a result of the way member states dominate the Union. So, we English insist on chocolate being defined in such a way as to not imply the presence of too much coca. The Portuguese want carrots defined as fruit in order to allow for the existence of carrot jam. Silly? Doubtless. But indicative of the desperation of member states to have their particularities represented on the EU statute book and not of an overweening Brussels bureaucracy.

Ensuring an effective market does not require a common Government. Mr. Redwood is quite right about this (though disingenuous in implying that I claim as much). Rather, what is required are strong political authorities capable of ensuring the rule of law. So, member states must know they will face action from the Commission and the Court if they prevent trade across frontiers. And the Commission must be a strong and fully independent competition policy

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authority. A market, I repeat, needs strong, limited, institutions. Better regulation does not simply mean less regulation; it also means regulation better and more evenly applied.

Moving onto the broader points that Mr Redwood makes. Why do I sniff at the idea of a referendum? Well, for two reasons really. First, parties use them for reasons of political tactic not constitutional principle. They call popular votes when these are likely to hurt their opponents. I sniffed equally at Tony Blair's decision to call a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.

Quite apart from the rank hypocrisy involved in discussions of referenda, there is also the fact that they are notoriously bad at providing answers to the question actually asked. Why should Bertie Ahern's resignation have lessened the chances of a 'no' vote in Ireland? Because had he stayed, the electorate might have used the vote to protest against him rather than to express their opinions on the Treaty. And, let's face it (no politician, of course, could say this) most people don't have an opinion on the Treaty. Most people haven't read it (though rest assured, Mr Redwood, I, sadly, have). And because it is an amending treaty, even if they did it would make no sense as they would have to read all the other treaties too in order to figure it out. People I know have neither the time nor the inclination to do this. Therefore, they would vote either according to their view of the Union as a whole, or to make a point about something else entirely.

For the record, I agree that the way the French and Dutch populations have been treated is shameful. But I am not surprised at the sight of politicians treating their populations shamefully. What I do not accept is that some out of touch 'EU elite' is responsible for this. The decisions on the Treaty – all of them – were taken by national political leaders acting, not as some fanciful euro-cabal, but, rather, as national politicians. That they proved out of touch with their own populations does not surprise me massively either.

If Mr. Redwood feels EU debates are too dominated by protectionism and power seeking (I personally believe they are far less so than they were, say, twenty years ago), then one solution would be for people like him to engage in the debates more actively. Rather than forever turning discussions of the EU into battles over superstates and the like, why not lobby consistently and vigorously for better policies?

The paradox about Conservative positions on Europe is that the EU of today is an almost perfect example of what Margaret Thatcher called for in Bruges in 1998. Let us recall the major elements of that wonderful speech: the countries of Central and Eastern Europe should be brought into the fold. The EU should do a little more for itself in terms of security. And it should focus on creating a market, one that is largely liberal rather than over-regulated. Mission accomplished. The Tories have won. Why can't they accept the fact graciously?

Let me be clear about a couple of things. I do not want a country called Europe. I find the idea frankly absurd. I want national governments to control what the Union does (with space for some autonomy when it comes to regulating the market). Indeed, I have more problems with federalist arguments than I do with those of Mr Redwood and his political allies. At least the latter group is merely misinterpreting the present. The former are actively working towards an undesirable and unrealisable future.

Personally, I oppose UK membership of the euro, anything but a minimal common foreign and security policy aimed at complementing, not replacing member state policies, and any moves to make the EU more state like by, say, electing the Commission President (the one element of the Treaty with which I passionately disagree). I am not, in other words, a foaming Europhile. Quite the contrary.

I do, however, believe in appreciating the EU for what it is: a uniquely well developed form of interstate cooperation focussed around a single market. Britain and its politicians (when it comes to substance, nothing of note divides the Tories and Labour on economic policy) have more reason to like the EU now than ever before. If the Tory party were willing to recognize this, a united British political class could lobby openly and actively to strengthen precisely the kind of liberal European market unencumbered by federalist pretensions that Mr Redwood talks about and I support. Europe could be made to suit us still better. Surely it is time we began to address this task, rather than playing on people's fears of a power hungry EU that is the stuff of fiction?

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Written by Anand Menon

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