

Would Churchill Have Voted for Brexit?

Written by Alastair Stewart

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ALASTAIR STEWART, DEC 11 2017

Sir Winston Churchill is almost exclusively remembered for having saved Britain and Europe from Nazi Germany. This fact alone is claimed by both British nationalists and British Europhiles as evidence to support their own positions, but usually after a selective reading of the facts. The blame for this rests squarely at Churchill's feet. Sir Winston lived for 90 years and was a young man who took part in the British Empire's last cavalry charge and died when *The Beatles* topped the charts. Over a long life, his opinions on Europe ebbed and flowed. Churchill was a visionary, a realist and a romantic who was both anchored to circumstance while always fighting to forge a better future. So what did he really think, about Europe and how would he measure the European Union today?

The Many Churchills, the Many Europes

Before the war, Churchill had favoured an isolationist attitude towards continental Europe. In 1938, he wrote an article for *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The News of the World* under the heading 'Why Not 'The United States of Europe'?' where he considered it possible for unity on the continent but without Britain's involvement:

We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonality. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not compromised. We are interested and associated but not absorbed.

Compare this to what he said four years later in the middle of the Second World War. When the tide turned in favour of Britain after the battle of El Alamein, Churchill began thinking what a new Europe would look like after the war. He wrote to his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, on 21 October 1942:

Hard as it is to say now. I look forward to a United States of Europe, in which the barriers between the nations will be greatly minimised and unrestricted travel will be possible.

Churchill was, if nothing else, a pragmatist. He believed that world peace could only be secured by a collaborative effort between Britain, the US and Russia. In a radio broadcast in March 1943, he proposed a 'Council of Europe' after the war to manage Europe with a series of states and federations formed from their own chosen representatives:

We must try to make the Council of Europe...into a really effective League with all the strongest forces concerned woven into its texture; with a high court to adjust disputes and with forces, armed forces, national or international or both, ready to enforce these decisions.

In a May 1943 memorandum on a trip to Washington, Churchill expounded that this regional European Council would comprise twelve federations, states and confederations and be policed mainly by Britain, seconded by the USA. It would be one of three global, regional councils (for the Americas, Pacific and Europe) forming part of a 'Supreme World Council' with the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and perhaps China. Churchill argued that the 'Big Three' would sit on the regional councils of which they were directly interested – thus ensuring control and influence. The 'regional principle', as he called it, would also include these regions sitting on the World Council by rotation to ensure the Council rested on a 'three-legged stool', whereby no one region could gain the upper hand over

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the others. Churchill believed that the United Kingdom and the United States should play an active overseeing role in the new European order and that Britain should be in an integral position.

The Americans favoured a global solution, and the British Foreign Office was also opposed to European regionalism. By the summer of 1944 Churchill, under pressure from all sides to shelve his ideas for Europe, was increasingly lukewarm to his original thinking and began to accept that the 'Big Three' would have to oversee matters at the United Nations-type organisation, without actually being part of Europe. Nevertheless, by the time of his most famous and oft-quoted speech on Europe made at the University of Zurich on the 19th September 1946, Churchill reiterated his calls for a 'Council of Europe' or 'United States of Europe':

There is no reason why a regional organisation of Europe should in any way conflict with the world organisation of the United Nations. On the contrary, I believe that the larger synthesis can only survive if it is founded upon broad natural groupings. There is already a natural grouping in the Western Hemisphere.

He concluded, famously, by saying: 'Therefore, I say to you, let Europe arise!'

Churchill never did spell out the exact nature of the Council of Europe, and it is here that confusion can be found as to how far the British would have been involved in any European project. The ambiguity can be mainly explained by what was happening in the latter years of WW2. The war was being won, but Britain's preeminence has evidently waned with increased American and Russian involvement. Britain was economically decimated, to say nothing of Churchill being ejected from office in 1945 in favour of a Labour government with a more pressing social agenda.

Throughout his lifetime Churchill passionately believed in the "fraternal associations of English-speaking peoples", but was likewise a keen Francophile with a deep appreciation of French history and Britain's historic place in Europe as he said in a 1940 radio broadcast:

For more than thirty years in peace and war I have marched with you...Here at home in England, under the fire of the Boche, we do not forget the ties and links that unite us to France...

He was also slow to appreciate the eventual collapse of the British Empire, and just how irrelevant the British were becoming to the burgeoning Cold War between the United States and Russia. It was a conflict of thinking that would endure until his death in 1965.

The Council of Europe of the European Union?

In October 1948, at a Conservative Party meeting, Churchill made clear that Britain held a unique position at the heart of 'three majestic circles': the 'British Empire and Commonwealth', 'the English-speaking world' and a 'United Europe'. He described these three circles as 'co-existent' and 'linked together':

We are the only country which has a great part in every one of them. We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps of the airways also, we have the opportunity of joining them all together.

Most apparently, Churchill was committed to any effort to ensure peace on the European continent. The Congress of Europe in the Hague was the first federal moment in European history with 750 delegates participating from around the continent, including observers from Canada and the United States. On May 7, 1948, Churchill addressed the meeting, saying:

It must be all for all. Europe can only be united by the heartfelt wish and vehement expression of the great majority of all the peoples in all the parties in all the freedom-loving countries, no matter where they dwell or how they vote.

He was acutely aware of the horrors of the Nazi regime and wanted to see an organisation which committed to a 'Charter of Human Rights and with the sincere expression of free democracy.' While this most resembles the Council

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of Europe, he also articulated a vision which describes a forebear to the European Union that we know today:

It is impossible to separate economics and defence from the general political structure. Mutual aid in the economic field and joint military defence must inevitably be accompanied step by step with a parallel policy of closer political unity.

The Council of Europe came into being in 1949, with the Treaty of London, predating the European Economic Community by eight years (the precursor to the European Union). Article 1(a) of the statute states that:

The aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.

Membership is open to all European states who seek harmony, cooperation, good governance and human rights and accept the principle of the rule of law and are able and willing to guarantee democracy, fundamental human rights and freedoms. No sacrifice of sovereignty is required as with the European Union. Nevertheless, since its creation the Council has been powerless to make binding laws and to enforce a commitment and compliance to human rights, and it is only the EU which can make enforceable laws.

All Council of Europe member states have incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into national law, but there is no real enforcement mechanism against gross domestic human rights abuses. The Council of Europe can co-opt, promote and guilt-trip compliance to human rights, but before any allegations of human rights abuses can be considered domestic courts must be exhausted before reaching the European Court of Human Rights.

In 2000, the EU adopted a Charter of Fundamental Rights. This became legally binding in December 2009 when the Treaty of Lisbon came into force. Although the rights outlined in the Charter correspond to the rights in the ECHR, it's the European Union which can give greater protection to them than the Council because of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). The job of the Council of Europe in this context is to supervise the way in which governments give effect to ECHR, whereas the primary role of the CJEU is to interpret EU law and make sure it's applied in the same way across the European Union.

The confusing nature of these protections gives rise to the debate of whether Churchill would have favoured the Council of Europe with its normative ambition or the European Union with its more practical enforcement powers. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe can claim to be heirs to Churchill's ideas; unified by Churchill's want for Britain to play an influencing role for peace.

Europe, the Empire and America

The debate surrounding just how much Churchill envisioned Britain's involvement in Europe primarily stems from his commitment to the British Commonwealth and the English-speaking peoples of the world. Churchill was torn between his affections for the United States and a United Europe, both for the sake of Britain's long-term economic and military benefit and because securing a lasting peace on the Continent was the culmination of years of war. He was half-American himself, and an ardent believer in both countries as beacons of liberty.

Churchill looked both ways across the Atlantic and the Channel. At a meeting of the Primrose League at the Albert Hall on 18 May 1947, Churchill declared not only 'let Europe arise' but was 'absolutely clear...that we shall allow no wedge to be driven between Britain and the United States'. Speaking in London in 1949, he also opined that: 'Our friends on the Continent need have no misgivings. Britain is an integral part of Europe, and we mean to play our part in the revival of her prosperity and greatness.'

Churchill's balancing act was again made clear during a House of Commons debate on Europe in June 1950. Churchill remarked that he could not 'at present' foresee Britain being 'a member of a Federal Union of Europe', explaining that this was because of Britain's position 'at the centre of the British Empire and Commonwealth' and 'our

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fraternal association with the United States of America.' When asked directly by a fellow MP if he was "prepared to part with any degree of national sovereignty in any circumstances for the sake of a larger synthesis?", Churchill obfuscated:

We are prepared to consider and, if convinced, to accept the abrogation of national sovereignty, provided that we are satisfied with the conditions and the safeguards...national sovereignty is not inviolable, and it may be resolutely diminished for the sake of all men in all the lands finding their way home together.

The following year in 1950, Churchill even went so far as to call for the creation of a European Army 'under a unified command, and in which we should all bear a worthy and honourable part.' (The French objected to the idea). Even though Churchill is evidently uncomfortable ever declaring himself in favour of Europe or America, what is subtly evident is just how frequently he indulges 'we' to discuss the construction of a United States of Europe. The absence of 'you' or 'they' is revealing, as is the tightrope he walked between the three majestic circles he spoke of in 1948.

After returning as Prime Minister in 1951, Churchill issued a memo to his cabinet on 29 November listing British Foreign Policy priorities as 'unity and consolidation of the British Commonwealth', 'fraternal association of the English-speaking world' and a 'United Europe, to which we are a closely and specially-related ally and friend...it is only when plans for uniting Europe take a federal form that we ourselves cannot take part, because we cannot subordinate ourselves or the control of British policy to federal authorities.'

By 1955, his view had changed again. Churchill made a speech about European integration at London's Central Hall, Westminster in July 1957, some four months after the six founding nations established the European Economic Community with the signing of the Treaty of Rome (France, Italy, West Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg). Churchill welcomed the formation of a 'common market', provided that 'the whole of free Europe will have access', adding:

We genuinely wish to join...[yet]...If, on the other hand, the European trade community were to be permanently restricted to the six nations, the results might be worse than if nothing were done at all – worse for them as well as for us. It would tend not to unite Europe but to divide it and not only in the economic field.

If there is a softening in Churchill's approach towards Europe, it's likely due to the diminishment of the United Kingdom on the world stage by the late 1950s. The British debacle over the Suez Canal in 1956 under Prime Minister Anthony Eden signalled the end of Britain's ability to conduct unilateral foreign policy. The United States was extremely hostile to the UK's involvement in Egypt and threatened economic reprisals. The event was a humbling one for Britain as much as it was a humiliating one for Eden who resigned not long after in 1957. Churchill knew that Britain's preeminence was at an end and became determined that Britain must play a role on the European Continent while still emphasising American economic, military and cultural ties.

British trade with the Commonwealth was four times larger than trade with Europe. The British government under Eden even considered a "plan G" in 1956 and 1957 to create a European free trade zone while also protecting the favoured status of the Commonwealth. Britain even considered inviting Scandinavian and other European countries to join the Commonwealth so it would become a significant economic common market. Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, famously declared in 1960 in Cape Town that: 'The wind of change is blowing through this continent'. Independence for many of its African territories, including South Africa occurred quickly, signalling the end of the British Empire and the relevance of the Commonwealth. As the American Secretary of State Dean Acheson quipped: 'Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.'

Churchill was aware of all of this. During the 1960s his health was rapidly declining, although his support for a united Europe was not. According to Churchill's last Private Secretary, Sir Anthony Montague Brown, in August 1961, Churchill wrote to his constituency Chairman: 'I think that the Government are right to apply to join the European Economic Community.'

In the letter, Churchill supported the 'welding' of Western Europe into 'an organic whole', which he described as a

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'happy outcome' of the European Economic Community. He added that: 'We might well play a great part in these developments to the profit of not only ourselves, but of our European friends also.' Sir Anthony confirmed that in 1963, two years before Churchill died, that the former prime minister wrote in a private letter that 'the future of Europe if Britain were to be excluded is black indeed.'

Decades later in 1993, Montague-Brown, responded to an article in The Spectator titled 'Would Winston Churchill have signed Maastricht?'. He said that he had not attempted to reach a verdict and that it was a 'vain exercise' to try. Nevertheless, in 1957 Montague-Brown remembers that Churchill saying that: 'My message to Europe today is still the same as it was ten years ago: unite; Europe's security and prosperity lie in unity.'

Support for Brexit?

Would Churchill have supported a Brexit? Churchill would never have been so foolhardy to dismiss 70 years of peace in Western Europe as a mere coincidence. He always believed that the UK still had a part to play at the centre of world affairs and would unlikely be in favour of walking away from the EU. The Commonwealth is largely ceremonial, and Britain's 'special relationship' with the USA is not America's most important global connection.

Even in Churchill's prime the loss of empire and the quest to find a role for Britain was an unrelentingly ambiguous challenge. By the time Prime Minister Ted Heath took the UK into the European Economic Community in 1973, Britain was too late to the party. Britain's immense contribution to securing Europe's freedom from Hitler gave it a historical right to be at the heart of the EEC, but it was a place neither side fully encouraged.

The cultural and popular memory of Britain's imperial past should not, however, be conflated with Churchill's opinion of Europe. Churchill was first and foremost a student of the past, with a cast iron understanding of Britain's inextricable role in European affairs over the last thousand years. The European Union, as it is today, might be too much at odds with Churchill's romantic ideas about Britain at the head of the table. But idealism, coupled to the British interest, would still form the basis of Churchill's pragmatism about what was in the country's best long-term interests. In 1956, after retiring as Prime Minister, Churchill went to Aachen in Germany to receive the Charlemagne Prize for his contribution to European Unity. Today he is listed as one of the founding fathers of the European Union, and with good reason.

About the author:

Alastair Stewart is a freelance writer and journalist based in Edinburgh and Almería. He regularly writes about politics, history and culture for newspapers and magazines across Europe. He was formerly a press officer at the Scottish Parliament and graduated from Edinburgh University with an MA in International Relations.