

Eurosceptic Sweden?

Sweden has been in the news for its new school system and literary successes, but for many readers of the British press and TV news viewers, it is more probably associated with euroscepticism. Bearing in mind that Sweden like Britain has a history of being a great power and is extremely proud of its military prowess in the 17th century and the cultural brilliance of its royal court in the reign of Gustav III in the 18th century, such euroscepticism might be understandable if it existed. But Swedish euroscepticism has more to do with perceived slowness of European progress rather than with narrow insularity of the British type.

Having been associated with Sweden since the early 1950's and being fairly fluent in spoken and written Swedish I can assure British readers that the type of untrue or slanted accounts about the EU, so often appearing in the British press or even more unfortunately in TV news bulletins, simply do not occur in Sweden. This may of course be due to the fact that no major Swedish political party has ever adopted an anti-European policy of the type we have seen in the UK Conservative Party.

During the Swedish presidency of the EU last year it was indeed encouraging to see in Stockholm banners across the street advertising the part Sweden was playing and also the number of detailed descriptions of how the EU works displayed in shop windows. Both then and now it is noticeable how often the Swedish national flag is accompanied by the European flag. The Swedish news media highlighted the part played by the Swedish government (headed by the Conservative Party) in pushing for the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and, following two visits to Prague by the Swedish prime minister, the success of the Swedish presidency in obtaining the final ratification signature of the recalcitrant Czech president.

Members may be interested to know that by signing the accession treaty with the EU some 15 years ago, Sweden undertook to adopt the euro at some stage. Unlike the UK and Denmark, Sweden did not seek an opt-out. Five years ago, a referendum on joining the eurozone was heavily defeated mainly due to the timing. A popular foreign minister, Anna Lindh, had just been assassinated and a massive turnout voted "patriotically". The latest polls show a steady majority in favour of adopting the euro.

John Warner

“The Lisbon Treaty does not change the scope of the EU”

We were delighted to welcome Jan Krauss, from the European Commission in London, at a lunchtime meeting on March 25th. The Lisbon Treaty has three main purposes, he said - to make the EU more democratic, to make decision-making more efficient, and to present a single voice on the world stage.

On the first, the European Parliament has a lot more power, but at the same time, national parliaments have more power too. If they combine they can get change. On the question of more efficiency, there is now more qualified majority voting in Council meetings. For the EU to speak more often with one voice, the appointments of Herman van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton have focused responsibilities.



The EU has no more spending powers as a result of the Treaty. It still has no army, no police nor any tax raising powers. The scope of the EU remains the same, Jan averred, the Lisbon Treaty was basically a tidying up exercise and no national sovereignty is threatened.

In question time, he was asked how easy it would be for an incoming Tory government to repatriate powers from Brussels. It would not be easy, he felt, because any opt-out might well need a new treaty formally agreed by the other 26 states. However, the Treaty has made it easier for a state to leave the Union altogether.

Town Twinning

Over the last weekend in March 2010 I went as a member of the Reigate & Banstead Twinning Association to our German twin town Eschweiler (which is near Aachen) on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee (the 25th Anniversary of twinning between our towns).

I have paraphrased, from an already shaky translation provided by our hosts, the speeches made by the Burgermeister and the Eschweiler Partnerschaftsverein Vorsitzender (the equivalent of our Twinning Association Chairman). These make it abundantly clear that for the Germans partnerships and friendships were no longer regarded as an end in themselves. Putting things very much in an EU context, it was stressed that we must look beyond proclamations and speeches. Europe has evolved to meet the challenges of rapid globalisation. Robert Schumann could not have imagined the way the European Community has changed. The EU is the guarantor for peace, wealth and friendship in Europe. Despite all the different problems, the people in Europe have converged. Town twinning has contributed to that to an important extent. It emphasises this convergence and fills it with life. The “combined Europe” thus becomes tangible for the people. Our twinning partnerships are the source that keeps Europe alive and they are the foundation and the basis of “European integration”, they are the motors of unity and variety.

The certificate signed by the Burgermeister and Reigate & Banstead’s Mayor was couched in similar terms. The celebration of 25 years of Twinning was stated as renewing the vow of international understanding from which a deep friendship and fellowship had arisen and looking to the future in a spirit of accommodation, with the cutting through of language barriers and, despite political differences, learning from one another and never letting up in helping one another’s endeavours to consolidate our respective citizens in friendship. The hope was that our partnership in the years and decades to come might be supported by mutual appreciation and contribute to the maintenance of peace and freedom in the united “House of Europe”.

I was impressed by how much more seriously, and in an overtly political way greatly influenced by Europe’s past, the Germans regarded our “partnership” when compared with us in Reigate who have largely concentrated on personal friendships built up over the years, town band exchanges and getting to know more about German culture, much as any tourist might. The EU was obviously taken for granted by the Germans and, indeed, regarded as a good thing per se for what it offered them as they went about their daily lives, with none of the angst all too apparent in the U.K.



Kambach moated Castle, Eschweiler

I found it significant that there were no less than five elected German politicians listed in the printed programme as among those present, in addition to the Burgermeister and the Vorsitzender. Reigate & Banstead had one Councillor (Lib Dem) present in support of our Mayor. Most significantly, the Conservative leader of our Council was not there.

The fact that the EU supports twinning activities financially with its programme “Active Citizens for Europe” was also referred to warmly by the German speakers. Both the Silver Jubilee and Eschweiler’s “English Week” which preceded it had been supported by the EU and it was said not to have been possible otherwise. Our Twinning Association was recommended to take similar advantage for future events in order, as it was put: “to live the European idea for our followers”. The Councillor told me that he would certainly follow this up.

I think we should all learn from this visit. In the European Movement, we should perhaps concentrate our efforts in somehow trying to get across the value of the EU in everyday life in our local communities and thus demonstrate how out of touch with reality are Westminster and the national media.

Richard Kempshall [Richard was a branch committee member for many years]

Talk by John Palmer at our Annual Dinner

A large turnout of members for the Annual Dinner at the Ship Hotel in Weybridge on April 9th heard a challenging address by John Palmer, the highly experienced columnist for the Guardian. He takes issue with the view that Europe has become so large and complicated that a halt should be called on further integration.

Certainly the EU, with 27 members each with a veto in key areas, has become large and, in some ways, the Lisbon Treaty has added complications, but it continues to function pretty smoothly and governments across Europe are increasingly finding that only via the institutions of the EU can important issues of common concern be tackled. The problem is that a large proportion of the citizens of the EU still do not recognise its importance and feel it is irrelevant to their daily lives.

Mr Palmer outlined the “staggering progress” that had already been made in Europe. Borders no longer pose problems for students and workers who want to move around the continent. There are even English maires elected in French towns. Though the UK has resisted measures to coordinate and cooperate on questions of crime, internal security, migration and justice, great progress has been made. EU states came together on an agreed policy for the Copenhagen conference on climate change and, though the final communiqué was the result of negotiations between China and the USA, Europe continues to lead the way on where we should be going.

Even the current financial crisis for Greece is seeing unprecedented cooperation between the eurozone states and further coordination of policy is likely.

While all this integration of policy is happening at government level, the average European citizen is being allowed to continue in ignorance and scepticism.

The answer, proposed by Mr Palmer, is that political parties must have a truly European policy when it comes to European elections. At the moment these are largely fought on domestic issues and there is little coordination between MEPs and MPs. Electors must be given a choice on the policies that are being decided in Brussels.

Sir, Thank goodness we are not in the eurozone, we are told. Look at Greece. But the UK is not in the eurozone and yet look at us. Poor Greece cannot devalue because they are in the eurozone. Yet we have been able to devalue because we are not in the eurozone and we are in the same mess. I am confused.

Martin Wolf keeps thanking Gordon Brown for not taking us into the eurozone. "I shudder to think what would have happened if the country had been in this trap" (14.5.10). Presumably he thinks things could be worse. Why do we not start comparing ourselves with Germany and eurozone countries not small and on the periphery.

The eurozone has helped to avoid the competitive devaluations of the 1930's and their dire consequences. Greece has been helped by its partners. The time might come when we could do with some help, but we are on our own.

Is it not time to think a little more about old economic shibboleths of national currencies in a global financial world?

Keith Tunstall, Betchingley, Surrey

Letter to Financial Times 19.5.10

Perhaps it isn't that 'confusing'. If a country overpays its civil servants and doesn't collect taxes etc - like Greece - it is going to have problems - whether it is in the eurozone or not.

If a country allows a housing asset bubble and promotes an economy based on too much debt - like the UK - it is going to have problems - whether it is in the eurozone or not.

The euro is not the key issue. No country in the eurozone blames the euro for its troubles and none want to leave. Others will be joining - Estonia, e.g., next January.

Martin Wolf is the FT Economics editor. I would suggest the euro is 60% a political issue. We should join to be at the heart of Europe.

Letter from France

For the first time in over 20 years I had not been actively involved in a General Election in the UK either as an activist or a elected representative, so to be viewing the 2010 election from a distance of some 1000 kms south in the Provence was a novelty for me.

For the first week, very little interest in the election was shown by the European media, as they concentrated on the problems created by the Greece debt crisis, and the volcanic ash cloud blanketing the whole of Europe. However, as the ash cleared, the view of the UK was thrown into high focus by the dramatic emergence after the Leaders' Debate of Nick Clegg. Since then, no day went by without comment in 'Le Figaro', from a back page spread giving his background and c.v., to half-pages detailing the progress of the polls, and the changing fortunes of the Liberal Democrats. Given that "Le Figaro" is a



supporter of the centre-right, the comments were, perhaps surprisingly, very favourable. They liked that he had a knowledge of Europe and Europeans both politically and domestically. They were fascinated to know just what changes to the kaleidoscope of British politics an increase of interest in the third party would bring.

As France's political parties have over the years been a much more fluid arrangement – splitting up, and re-forming almost every few years -they are used to variations of either the left or right merging, and forming new alliances to effectively win elections, but the media realised that this was a new form of politics in the UK.

They were also not slow to point out that M. Sarkozy and Mrs. Merkel were not at all happy at the prospect of a Conservative win, given the fact that David Cameron had taken his MEPs out of the EPP grouping in the European Parliament. In the event, they have both had meetings with him after the election.

Once the results were announced, the media here was as fascinated as anyone else as to how the British would deal with the unusual set of circumstances. What they could not understand was that there was such a feeling of urgency. Most European countries who expect to end up with coalition governments, do not make their alliances and commitments all in the space of a week. They are much more likely to take up to three months, and contrary to the hype in the UK, the heavens do not fall in while long-term coalition partners and their particular 'red-lines' have been accommodated.

They are now reporting regularly on how David Cameron and Nick Clegg are handling the various aspects of being jointly in government, and had quite a detailed article about the Queen and the Queen's Speech.

In addition to the common problems across Europe, geological, political and financial, France has been in a state of almost constant strikes. The railways have been 'en grève' for some ten days and the farmers have converged on Paris in hundreds of tractors to make known their grievances. These follow on from strikes in the higher educational establishments earlier in the year, when schools and colleges were closed, to the dismay of students who wanted to be able to sit their degree exams in the summer, and those by the civil servants, who fear the tighter restrictions coming in, in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The President himself has been constantly on the go to try and bring some order to the grand scheme of things. This week the 'reason' for the strikes is the threat by President Sarkozy to take the retirement age to 62 or 63 from the current 60, in order to rein in the burgeoning costs to the state. As the age of 60 was President Mitterand's legacy to France, for many this is sacrosanct.

Anxiety about the status of the euro has also taken pride of place here in the last few weeks, but if I were to pen an article on the subject, it would need another whole newsletter!

Meanwhile, I shall keep a watching brief on the politics in Britain from my vantage point in France.

Veronica Stiastry

[Veronica was on the branch committee until recently, is Vice-Chairman of the Movement, and on the International Committee]