

A personal commentary by Sir Peter Marshall on the Federal Trust Conference “Europe’s Place in the World – and Britain’s Place in Europe”, held on 16th December 2010:

Developing a de facto national consensus on British EU involvement

As you know from my previous effusions, I am on the lookout for indications of where the prospects for a broad *de facto* national consensus on British EU involvement lie. There is only limited scope in efforts directly to achieve such a consensus. It depends rather on a wider mutual understanding, among those who recognise the importance of what is at stake, of the issues themselves, of the French and German standpoints, of the general European perspective, and of the spectrum of UK opinion. Your methodology for organising the agenda of the conferences is very helpful in this respect.

Semi-detachment

So is the distribution at the outset of a press statement like yesterday's. On the point which the statement makes about “semi-detachment”, I didn't detect any dissent from the suggestion that our absence from the Eurozone or the Schengen Agreement makes no practical difference as regards our participation in the EU's external relations. Looking at the Presidency Conclusions of the last three meetings of the European Council, while Cameron has been PM, I find it difficult to believe that our absence from these instances is of much significance as regards the conduct of EU business as a whole. So much depends on the relationships which the British representatives establish with their opposite numbers,

That said, I don't think we should be reluctant to admit that there is something semi-detached about us. Our partners seem to want us, and we have to be true to ourselves. The British people are never willingly going to try to be what they are not. But they can be as useful as anyone else to the EU

William Beveridge

I was fascinated to see that the Federal Trust was founded by that administrative phenomenon William Beveridge. I wonder what he would have made of today's concerns, and of the EU's efforts to tackle them. Doubtless he would have rejoiced at the hobbling, not the slaying, of his five Bunyan-like giants - idleness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want - and he would not have been afraid of the idea of Europe-wide social projects. But his concern for personal and human freedom might have caused him to hesitate about clothing such projects politically. Would he have espied a sixth giant, namely alienation? And I think he would have had a good deal to say on the subject of subsidiary.

Dr Antonio Missiroli's Message

I'm not sure I understand Dr M.'s message. I do not see the agenda changing as much as the way in which the EU handles it. Institutionally speaking, I see EU business as being increasingly transacted *around* the Union's institutions as well as *through* them. There was some discussion for example, of the role of the G20, I hope that it will come to play a key role, although there are already murmurings about an excessive Western component in its composition.

But there is another wider aspect to the question, namely the balance between representational and direct democracy. That balance may not as yet have changed sufficiently to reflect the inroads into everyday life made by information technology in the last decade or two. This applies at national level, and *a fortiori* at international level.

Europe and International Affairs

I would have thought that what David Hannay (and likewise Richard Whitman) said would enjoy very wide support in this country. As regards the EU Bill, I suppose that there may be a certain amount of old style trench warfare during its passage through Parliament. But the natural reaction to what went before, which the Bill represents, is a small price to pay for moving on from the Lisbon Treaty (*cet animal est tres mechant: quand on l'attaque il se defend*).

"Punching above our Weight"

Stephen Haseler's topic goes to the heart of the matter. I don't imagine anyone would dispute the point that it is essential to be as hard-headed/realistic/prudent about how we should see ourselves in the European and world-wide context. But I find it difficult to follow his line of thought. I question whether it is being overextended militarily and banking which has fostered the delusion that we could punch above our weight. One could equally argue that it is *because* we have been overextended that we realise we cannot do so.

Perhaps the imprecision surrounding this phrase is the trouble. It was first used, I fancy, by Douglas Hurd in a speech in 1993 at Chatham House: "NATO is one of the principal props which have allowed Britain to punch above its weight in the world". That proposition is open to a number of interpretations. I take it to mean that we were using NATO and the American connexion to try and cut a bigger figure in the world than our reduced circumstances either required or permitted. But Dean Acheson's famous 1962 gibe, about our having lost an empire and not yet found a role, to which Stephen Haseler also referred, implies that we were then punching below our weight, rather than above it. At the end of the 1960s, on the other hand, which Michael Palliser saw from very close to, in his capacity as the foreign affairs Private Secretary at No 10, we were painfully conscious of how overextended we were.

Humanitarian intervention and anti-terrorism

The phrase also implies that our punching is unwelcome as well as unrealistic. That might be the case if international affairs were still the zero-sum game of classical diplomacy. But we have learned the hard way that we are better off in co-operating than in rivalry, as witness the UN Charter. If then our punching is in response to some collective need, the picture is somewhat different.

At the time of the coining of the phrase, we had already taken part to the tune of 45,000 troops in the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. There was talk at the time of a "new world order". Since 1993 we have been involved militarily in situations overseas several times under the rubric of humanitarian intervention, now reclassified by the UN as the "responsibility to protect", or R2P. Should one describe Tony Blair's speech in Chicago in 1999 as "punching above our weight"? Or as evidence of willingness to make perhaps an indispensable contribution to the common cause, according to our ability and inclination? The events of Nine Eleven introduced a further unknown into the equation. So does the valid, if at times elusive, distinction between hard and soft power.

Our internationally active Lifestyle in the past 500 years has involved continuous "punching above our Weight"

In the heyday of classical diplomacy, foreign policy was in general the sovereign's prerogative. There are echoes of this state of things in the phrase. But the reality is that foreign policy is largely a matter of monitoring and reacting to external events which impinge on our world wide economic and trading interests. Ever since the time of the Tudors we have as a nation chosen a precarious way of earning a living, highly vulnerable to developments overseas. It does not suffice for the protection and promotion of those interests simply to wait and see what happens. We have to be active, perhaps abnormally active. In this perspective it could be said that we have been punching above our weight for the past five hundred years.

The first time this general thesis saw official, light of day was probably in Eyre Crowe's famous memorandum of 1907 on relations with France and Germany. More recently it was the essence of Jack Straw's two ground-breaking White Papers on UK International Strategic Priorities of December, 2003, and March, 2006. It is central to the Coalition Agreement and to the raft of government documents which appeared in October.