

Forty years on - what if?

Stanley Henig

A few miles outside Leicester (the great city which has played some part in the modern history of both the Pinder and Henig families), there is a slightly unusual stone monument. In the middle of a park of natural beauty, it overlooks much of the county. To generations of Leicester folk it is known as 'Old John'. I do not know, or know of anybody who knows, how the name arose. It is affectionate, nostalgic, but by no means inconsequential. Nor do I think it is ageist. It stands for a kind of permanence in a changing world.

My first contact with John Pinder was rather more than forty years ago. A student at Oxford University I wanted to revive the 'Strasbourg Club'. I was advised of an excellent potential speaker for an early meeting – an academic economist, a federalist – involved with an organisation called the Federal Trust and an active campaigner for a united Europe. Inevitably, such a brief description does scant justice to John's vast range of activities and accomplishments, but all these years later it accurately pinpoints his major interest, commitment, even vocation. During the more than forty years since our first meeting, John has been a beacon of inspiration and leadership for all who want to see a better future for our continent and share his passion for federalism as a means to secure that future. Perhaps this is why I retain close memories of events of around forty years ago and of what I can only describe as John's passionate campaigning zeal.

Back in 1961 Britain at last made the apparently decisive move of seeking for the first time to join the European Community – then popularly known as the Common

Market. Some two years later came the French veto – ‘The General Said No!’. Perhaps there was nothing so special about this veto: after all, the same General – better known as President de Gaulle – was also saying no to the Atlantic alliance, no to the community method, no to political union. Re-reading John Pinder’s second book (the first was *Britain and the Common Market* published in 1961), its title *Europe against de Gaulle* seems altogether appropriate. I suppose it must be classified as a ‘tract for the times’, but what can best be described as ‘white hot passion’ – occasionally even anger – comes through on page after page. John describes the different approaches to Europe of Jean Monnet, founder of the European Communities and President de Gaulle who saw Europe as an entity to be led by France. ‘Traditional power politicians such as de Gaulle are a menace to everyone and particularly to the peoples of Europe’. The 1968 Paris demonstration is recalled with its slogan ‘de Gaulle au musée’. Moreover, John never loses sight of the wider context – world problems such as the Bomb and the economic consequences of the population explosion: ‘In these circumstances, those who do not respond are, in both the Greek and English sense, idiots’. *Inter alia*, this is also a gentle reminder that once upon a time academic economists and political campaigners alike had some grounding in the classics!

If *Europe against de Gaulle* opened a chapter, then John’s next book seemed to close it with the change of a single word. *Europe after de Gaulle*, published in 1969, was co-authored with Roy Pryce, Director of the Centre for Contemporary European Studies at Sussex University. A Penguin Special, priced at just 30 pence, its front cover displayed a map of Europe coloured red and super-imposed on a dice! Passion undimmed, the authors could look to a relaunching of the European programme – British entry into the EEC, a political community with a directly elected Parliament and majority voting, a transatlantic partnership of Europe and the USA as equals. Six wasted years could perhaps be relegated to a historic footnote, or could they?

I have never completely come to grips with the ‘What if’ approach to history, if only because we have no means of checking, let alone verifying, hypotheses. However, where Britain’s relations with Europe are concerned, I cannot help feeling even now that de Gaulle’s veto did have consequences which outlived him and his veto. Those consequences continue, in some respects at least, to haunt what is now the European

Union to this day. An essay dedicated to John gives an opportunity to explore these issues, perhaps based on a subtle change in the actual events of the 1960s. ‘What if’ John Pinder and his hero of the time Jean Monnet had defeated de Gaulle in 1963 without waiting for a French referendum to oust him after those wasted years? I hope to do two things in this short paper – first, to summarise the major points in these two ‘tracts for the times’ of a bygone age. Second, to make some suggestions as to what might have happened ‘if’.

The major theme of the first tract is the differing European outlooks of Monnet and de Gaulle.

‘The clash is not so much between two men as between two opposing principles. It is one of the great conflicts of our time. Not just Monnet against de Gaulle, but Monnet’s Europe against the Europe of nation states; federalism against nationalism; in the last analysis, order against chaos.’

John demonstrates de Gaulle’s hostility to both the community and the transatlantic relationship, exemplifying his role in opposing the creation of a European Defence Community in the mid 1950s and blocking progress in the early 1960s towards a political union. He expresses fears about how de Gaulle might seek to sabotage or delay the then forthcoming Gatt negotiations. But federalists are always optimists, and John is convinced that Gaullism would not long outlive its founder. This inspires a close look at the future options for Britain, and John takes issue with those claiming that membership implies an extinction of ‘separate national identities.’

Europe after de Gaulle picks up on, and widens, the same theme in an opening chapter on ‘The failure of the nation-state’:

‘What is wrong with the present-day state in Europe is that it has accumulated a great many functions which should be exercised at different levels of the political system. It has both arrogated to itself those which could perfectly well be carried out by local or regional authorities, and at the same time has insisted on holding on to those which today can be effectively exercised only at supra-national level.’

It is well to remember that back in 1969 John and Roy saw no contradiction between ‘claims for regional autonomy and the equal need for the construction of a new level of government for western Europe as a whole’. More than three decades later these problems continue to exercise and engage a considerable part of the energies of the Federal Trust, the think tank whose work has been so inspired by John over all these years.

This book re-iterates some of the charges against both de Gaulle/France and successive British governments. The former created a major institutional crisis in the mid 60s, so that thereafter the community could only 'hobble along'. The demise of de Gaulle left Britain with an opportunity and a challenge – and a reminder from John and Roy that past British policies towards Europe had 'failed because they have offered too little, and too late'. Their dismissal of the 'defenders of national sovereignty' is judiciously barbed – 'they are attempting to resist the logic of the world as it is, where agreements between states are necessary for the pursuit of each of their national interests'.

Three other features of the book seem to me particularly worthy of comment or review in the light of three and a half decades of history. Whilst the authors are passionate Europeans, they also re-iterate the clear commitment to Atlantic Partnership expounded in *Europe against de Gaulle*. They also devote space to détente. Interestingly, the partner in this process is named as Russia rather than the USSR. However, there is no evidence that the authors were even speculating that within little more than two decades the Soviet system would be swept away. Finally space is given to the need for a European currency. Here the context is essentially external – a contribution towards world economic stability given the essential weakness of sterling and the then recent problems affecting the dollar.

Looking back, the problems of international finance had considerably more impact on the Labour government which came to power in 1964 than arguments about Britain's role in Europe. We need to recognise that British membership of the EEC as a result of successful negotiations in 1963 might well have affected the result of the 1964 election. Both major parties were divided, but the split in Labour was at the time deeper. The temptation for an opposition party is always to oppose: the British public appear in opinion polls to be anti-Europe, but tend not to reward parties taking up that position at elections. At the time it also seemed that rejection of Britain's first attempt to join the EC was a final epitaph on thirteen years of Conservative government. So, it is conceivable that without de Gaulle's 'help', Harold would not have 'found a den at number ten' (and I would never have been elected MP for Lancaster at the age of 26!). Given that in many ways Wilson begat Thatcher – his mirror opposite in style – political developments in Britain would have been

profoundly different. The 'old' patrician one nation Conservative party might be battling out to this day with 'old' Labour – with trade union tanks on a Labour Prime Minister's lawn. For better or for worse?

For the purpose in hand, it is obviously much easier to make the assumption that a changed outcome in the enlargement negotiations would not have affected the outcome of the 1964 and subsequent 1966 elections. It is possible to imagine the Wilsonian compromise of the 1970s being brought forward by a decade – no real problem about the principle of membership, criticism of the detail, renegotiation of the terms. I find it difficult to recall the exact circumstances which occasioned Tony Benn's introduction (or import from Europe?) into British political discourse of the idea of referendums. Perhaps the 1975 Europe referendum on a meaningless question would have taken place in 1965 and, certainly, with a similar result. Two consequences would have flowed: we would have been spared a decade of pointless arguments about whether or not to re-apply for membership, and Britain's first economic experiences of European integration would have been very much more positive.

British membership from the mid 1960s and not acting as the 'reluctant European' would self-evidently have had a profound impact on the internal dynamics of the EC as well as on British politics. However, we need to widen the context of the hypothetical defeat of de Gaulle and the victory for Monnet/Pinder: it is a vast canvass. In parallel with delaying and finally vetoing enlargement negotiations, de Gaulle was blocking moves towards Political Union. Within a week of the veto, France and Germany signed their historic treaty of reconciliation – undoubtedly a decisive move to reject the past and celebrate a new Europe, but also a means of ensuring that the community method would not invade the political realm. Two years later came the major crisis over agricultural policy and the Gatt negotiations. French boycott of the community institutions led to a weakening of the Commission – and ultimately the replacement of Hallstein as its President – and the so-called 'Luxembourg compromise' with an effective delay on the introduction of majority voting.

It is all too easy to forget the similarities between Britain and France – at the time two former imperial states, living to an extent on past glories and having failed

to relive them at the time of the Suez venture. Whatever the potential economic gains from European integration, Britain had a significant political interest in a European 'bloc': in actual history Wilson's motivations for making Britain's second application is clear evidence for this proposition. Had Britain joined the EC in the early 1960s, the Franco-German axis would never have been so dominant. Without de Gaulle, the 1965 crisis over Gatt negotiations and the role of the Commission would not have occurred; majority voting, initially on a modest range of issues, would have been introduced in accordance with the Rome Treaty. Political Union would have been progressed within some kind of community framework rather than separately through the co-operation machinery devised in the 1970s. Inside Britain, the near theological – and futile – debate about national sovereignty, which has occupied so much time and intellectual energy, would probably never have taken place.

It is a truism that all political careers end in failure. Ultimately President de Gaulle lost a referendum and resigned. The institutions of the Fifth Republic have proved remarkably robust and have certainly helped provide political stability. Other aspects of the Gaullist legacy have been much less beneficial. The golden moment for Political Union missed, Europe has struggled to establish any kind of momentum for Political Union or a common foreign policy. This in turn is a major contributor to the failure of Europe and the USA all these decades later to find the new basis for the Atlantic partnership which John considered so vital. If, in this respect, successive governments of Britain and the USA have much to answer for, it needs to be recognised that the contribution of France has been almost entirely negative. Whatever history's final verdict on American and British policy towards Iraq, the modern version of Gaullism recycled by President Chirac and the French government seemed straight from the theatre of the absurd!

Part of Europe's problem is that de Gaulle was in power long enough for others to imitate certain aspects of his style and approach. In what is sometimes called the golden age of integration – from the signature of the Treaty of Paris establishing the Coal and Steel Community down to de Gaulle's veto – Europe rescued the nation state. By 1969 economic prosperity meant that the traditional European states were far stronger than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the second world

war. There was a feeling that they could choose, if they wished, to say 'no' to further doses of Europeanisation. What sometimes seemed to be Europhoria in the 1950s was based on a calculated assumption that integration was the ultimate national interest of all member states. Logic and rationality pointed the direction: in John's words 'order was better than chaos'! History demonstrates that Europe delivered – a generation of political stability and unparalleled economic growth shaded the memory of past failures of nation states. By the time the community was enlarged at the beginning of 1974, what I have termed 'Europhoria' – never experienced by the newcomers – had also largely evaporated in most of the original member states. The clock could not simply be turned back.

After de Gaulle, the Community was slow to resume what had seemed at one time like inevitable – even automatic – progression towards the goal of a united Europe. During the 1970s, integration all too often seemed to have been reduced to little more than the creation of a newish playing field in which the age old inter-state rivalries and differences could be exploited and, in due course, reconciled. In the context of the long course of European history such an achievement should not be under-valued, but it was a far cry from the vision of Monnet and Pinder. Every new stage was fought over by the member states, apparently more interested in trivial gains for very short term narrowly conceived national interests. No member state operated in practice as if its major national interest were successful completion of the integration project. The establishment of the machinery for Political Co-operation, direct elections to – and extension of the powers of – the European Parliament, and the European Monetary System all were significant achievements. However, it was not until the slightly improbable signature of the Single European Act that the Community at last took stock of where it was and where it thought it might want to go. Given that the SEA laid the groundwork for European Union, Thatcher's agreement still seems to me one of her stranger acts – if highly welcomed by all federalists and Europeans. Conceivably, and in the absence of de Gaulle, this might have been a treaty negotiated at the end of the original transition period in 1970 rather than as actually happened in 1986.

It would, of course, be historically wrong to ignore other achievements of the Community during what I seem to be suggesting was a kind of interim period.

Many of them were concerned with technical issues – removal of trade barriers, not finally completed until 1992 – and above all with securing the conditions for complete economic integration. Such concentration sometimes made it look as if the Community was little more than a very legally minded policeman, making and implementing regulations and causing problems for every day life. I know it goes way beyond the remit of this paper and I should be challenged to substantiate the argument, but I cannot help feeling that something like the ‘Bosman ruling,’ which liberated footballers to make ever vaster fortunes, had little to do with the kind of federalism in which John so passionately believes. The Commission and the Court of Justice have jointly pushed out the boundaries of integration, but to what avail? Ruminating on John’s not totally judicious use of the word ‘idiot’ (in both senses!), I cannot help feeling that such activity has not brought the integration project any closer to Europe’s peoples. Interestingly, de Gaulle had nothing but contempt for European bureaucracy and no interest in economic minutiae. In concentrating on the big picture, which he got totally wrong, he was quite happy to leave the technical side of integration to its own devices. It certainly helped to ensure that the Community never obtained ‘a good press’!

John’s two books – the trigger for this essay – were written at a time when the external world confronting Europe seemed immutable. The Soviet Union which had gobbled up, or taken control of, half the continent seemed to be a permanent feature; détente was a priority; the Atlantic partnership – whatever de Gaulle’s posturing – an indispensable guarantee. There is a real sense in which the external world offered no real challenges during the next twenty years. It stayed the same – potentially hostile, but in practice ossified. Then events at the very end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s suddenly blew it all away. History may attribute this to a victory of the West’s passion for liberal democracy, the solidity and strength of the Atlantic alliance or the economic and social impact of McDonalds and Levis. Of a sudden the Community was faced with new external challenges – the first such since loss of Empires and the activities of Stalin and Nasser precipitated it into existence. Pressures from a myriad of states to the East of the Community’s borders virtually forced it back to centre stage, required to think the big picture. In apparently rapid succession the Community turned itself into a Union, expanded its remit,

adopted a common currency, laid foundations for a common foreign and perhaps ultimately a common security policy, incorporated a charter of fundamental rights and accepted a shoal of membership applications from central and eastern European states – some of which had only just come into (re-)existence. A delayed programme – we can find it all in *Europe against de Gaulle* and *Europe after de Gaulle*. We can also look forward to further contributions from John. I have no count of the books he has written in the intervening period but he ends *The European Union: a very short introduction* with powerful words which sum up his commitment and beliefs and in language perhaps rather more circumspect than some of that employed in the publications of forty years ago:

‘The Union has the capacity to provide the framework for Europe’s new economy and democratic stability, and to assist the development of a multipolar world system that can deliver security and sustainable development. British people who choose active participation rather than passive acceptance could do a great deal to ensure that this is what does in fact happen.’