

## **Attlee Lecture 2001: “Let us Face the Future”**

London, 22 March 2001

Being asked by the Foundation to give the Annual Attlee Lecture was an honour, but it also offered challenges.

First, as the only former Leader of the Labour Party to have received such an invitation, I am naturally somewhat daunted by speaking in memory of a man who was not only the longest serving but – in Francis Beckett’s accurate appraisal – the most successful Leader Labour has had.

Second, I am wary of the tendency of memorial lecturers to claim posthumous endorsement of their favourite nostrums or enthusiasms. Monstrosities of historical twisting are not unknown as a result. You know the sort of thing:

“If John the Baptist was with us now, he would, like me, have been a spin doctor.”

Or,

“It is absolutely clear from his mastery of rhythmic verse that John Milton was the first rap artist.

Or, as I once heard said of a departed and lamented Councillor in South Wales, “If Emlyn was alive now, he’d turn in his grave...”.

I will try to avoid claiming such post mortem authority except in one reference where Clement Attlee’s perception was so audacious and timeless that it really does provide an insight for our age. More of that later. Meanwhile, all that can truly be said is:

- That if Clem was alive now he would be 118 years old, and that would be a miracle.
- That, if his accomplishments had been built on prosperity, security, solvency and precedent, they would have been impressive – but since they were built on physical and economic ruins, and in defiance of orthodoxy, they were supremely great.
- And that his deliberate and practical political application of ethical convictions, with determination but without arrogance, was inspirational.

All of which made me think that, in considering one significant part of the context for our country now – our relationship with the rest of our continent – there was no better title to use, or attitude to adopt than that of the 1945 Labour Party Manifesto; ‘Let us Face the Future’.

In doing that, in facing the future, I begin with recognition of the very obvious fact that, at the beginning of the new century, Europe has unprecedented stability, security, prosperity and liberty. The Single Market continues to develop its commercial and social dimension. The EU is already the World’s largest trading bloc. Monetary Union is now a reality. Economic and political integration of democracies through Enlargement of the European Community has been freely decided upon, and is set to happen over the next decade or so, on a scale and in a way never seen before.

And the European Union has been the main reason for, or a major contributory factor to, these and other features of progress.

None of that can be allowed to give cause for complacency. But it should reasonably provide some grounds for encouragement – at least as a spur to further consolidation and advance. But there's an irony: At the same time as the benefits of Union are increasingly tangible, popular support for the Union is falling in almost all Member States. Overall, it has dropped from 72% in 1990 to 50% in 2000, and the approval levels in the UK are plainly lower than that.

The conjunction of these practical and progressive realities on the one hand, and the negative public perceptions on the other is not only paradoxical, it is problematic – not because Europhiles are frustrated because their enthusiasm is not shared, but because of the fundamental importance of ensuring that advance with the European construction is not only achieved, but achieved with public understanding and active consent.

I strongly believe that winning that consent requires two basic – and strenuous – efforts:

- First, it is essential to modernise the making and the implementation of decisions in the Union to make both more effective, transparent, accountable, and more plainly related to the conditions in which people work, trade, travel, live and want to bring up their children. My present preoccupation with the comprehensive Reform of the systems and structures of the European Commission is part – but only part – of that.
- Second, there must be better explanation and communication of what 'Europe' really does – what gains it facilitates, what opportunities and assurances it provides, and what threats it does not offer.

In Britain, there is a particular reason to do that: The intelligence of the British people is not in doubt. The quality of much of the information generally given to them is. And whatever else determines attitudes to the EU or to the Euro, every British citizen has an interest in ensuring that it isn't distortion. Serial newspaper and political fallacies about "Brussels" therefore have to be contested, and the truths about what is happening and not happening, what is intended and not intended, have to be provided more accurately and objectively. That is not because of Euroevangelism, it is because of Eurorealism. Eurorealities like the facts that:

The UK has been in the EU for over a quarter of a century; all but the most rabid nationalists agree that the UK will – and should – stay in; our country will continue to have its due share of powers, responsibilities and representation; EU developments of every kind will continue to affect the UK and its people substantially; and – crucially – it is therefore in the interests of the UK and the EU that Britain exercises its full and proper influence.

All of those are – or should be – self-evident. But the persisting problem is that continual Europhobia inhibits use of that full influence because it generates unsure involvement, and unsure involvement reduces the weight of the positive and legitimate effect which the UK as a country should exert in its own interests and to shape Europe.

Clearly, sureness of involvement doesn't mean unconditional acceptance of proposals, or any spirit of submissiveness at all.

But it does mean being confident instead of being diffident, resolute not hesitant. And every adult knows which of those attitudes produces the most positive results. Clement Attlee certainly did. Faced by any significant political reality, he characteristically preferred full engagement to either passivity or half-hearted daintiness. That disposition is the best equipment for Britain's approach to Europe now and in the future.

It stands, literally, to reason:

Our country's participation in 'Europe' was for all of recorded history, bloody. Attlee was of the generation that twice saw it at its bloodiest – hand to hand in the trenches, gas attack to massacre, and blitzkrieg to blanket bombing, concentration camp and totalitarian occupation.

But for the last 56 years our country's participation has been free of violence, and for half of that time it has been politically, economically and constitutionally integrative. That has been the predominant fact of life about our relationship with the rest of the continent for 28 years, and it will remain. In those circumstances a perpetual press and political barrage of blame, scaremongering, foreigner-bashing and nationalism is not only cheap and nasty, it is against the nation's interests: It carries the subliminal – and sometimes overt – message that somehow we'd be "better off out", thereby sustaining either the lingering delusions that isolation would be splendid, or the damaging illusion that European and Trans-Atlantic commitments are somehow exclusive alternatives when – in reality – they are dual, simultaneous advantages. The continual negativism distorts perception of Britain's obligations and duties in Europe and of Britain's opportunities and rights in Europe. And it turns reporting of essential negotiations into a repeated variation of the European Cup – with all of the consequent pressure on leaders and representatives to show whether they "won" or "lost" every single bout rather than to demonstrate cumulative progress and consistent influence.

Of course, no one could or would seriously argue for uncritical coverage of EU affairs, or for enthusiasm that was so avid that it amounted to infatuation.

But the right of the public to know the pros and cons to inform objectivity, the need for representatives to be able to act pragmatically without risking accusations of 'betrayal', and the need of the country to be able to face the future in Europe with self assurance rather than semi-detachment are all clear. They call for balance to replace prejudice in coverage, for scepticism to mean reasoned doubt instead of unreasoned bigotry, and for fact in reporting to be separated systematically from jaundiced opinion in reporting.

A pendulum swing to unreserved endorsement of any and every purpose that could be claimed in the name of Euroeagerness would not, of course, be wise or justified.

There is a view among some theorists in Britain and elsewhere that the public appeal of the European Union depends on the rapidity of political integration and that, unless 'Europe' is hurtling forward, it will come off the rails. But public judgement doesn't depend on that. Public assessment of the Union relates to what it does and how well it does it. It is a matter of utility, not a matter of velocity.

What interests the public here and in the rest of Europe is the ability of the Union to add usefully to the means of dealing with today's challenges and changes. That is not a mere requirement of political reassurance, it is an essential response to the major forces which are now shaping societies and economies.

The continuing radical evolution in the structure, skills and location of labour forces; the new levels and forms of crime; the globalisation of markets and technology; the unprecedented transmission of knowledge; the communicability of disease; the travel capacity of goods and people; the environment without borders; the benign - and the morally perplexing - revolutions of science are just some of the seismic changes altering life.

The people of our country and every other nation who live with the good and the bad effects of the changes every day know that. They also understand the basic reality that such developments and

problems do not have simple ‘single nation’ answers – now, or in the future. No one has taught the people that. They have certainly not absorbed it from most of what is said to them in the largest circulation newspapers. Their views derive from experience and common sense, tutored to some extent by the unprecedented internationalism of broadcast news.

And they show that understanding repeatedly, both in spontaneous expressions of opinion and through more systematic means – for instance in opinion polls.

Time after time, and by large majorities, those polls record strong public awareness of the international scale of modern problems - and equally strong awareness of the scope of the international power necessary to help to deal with them.

That is particularly evident on issues like protection of the environment, controlling biotech development, improving food safety, combating crime, counteracting illegal migration, enforcing peace, promoting research, generating investment and jobs, and on many other areas of daily concern and interest.

Alongside that, in Britain and several other countries, there are big poll majorities against the creation of a common European Government, the election of a European President, and the establishment of a common European Army. I readily report that I’m definitely part of the majority on all of those issues.

But I am also one of the majority which recognises the common nature of modern challenges, the reality of interdependence, and therefore the need for effective means of international co-operation and co-ordination - through democratically agreed policies, and under the rule of law.

In Europe we have such an instrument: The European Union. Using it effectively means Member States sharing the ability to exercise effective power to exploit advantages and benefits and to combat disadvantages and dangers. In other words, sharing sovereignty. No other feasible means exists for dealing convincingly with the demands that have gone, or are going, beyond solely national resolution.

But I do mean sharing sovereignty.

Reading most newspapers, you’d think that common EU decisions only move sovereignty one way - and that is towards being “lost” or, in the more lurid versions, “surrendered” or “stolen”. It is not true.

Sovereignty isn’t being secretly hoarded by the Council, the Parliament, the Commission or the Court of Justice, having been pilfered from hapless Governments. And no Government of any political persuasion or nationality has been wilfully throwing power away without getting rights in return. So there isn’t a one way traffic in power: Sovereignty is being shared, not dissolved. That is the arithmetical and constitutional fact.

Of course that reality doesn’t get much attention. “Plundering” of sovereignty provides a better headline than pooling of sovereignty – even if it’s a distortion. And even less recognition is given to the fact that real sovereignty is often being extended by being pooled: Democracies are agreeing to policies and laws in order to exert their common will over supranational conditions, through statutory and executive action, in ways that would not be feasible if they had to act alone. They are then adding to their individual and collective power, not losing it.

No one has to be a Europhile to understand that. All anyone has to do is ask themselves what can be done effectively about cross border pollution, cross-border crime, harmful commercial decisions, movement of dangerous food and other products, or a list of other international menaces in this crowded, free moving continent: 'Getting together', systematic co-operation, the pooling of some power, the exercise of international law are always there in the answer to those questions – and the "they" who must provide the answer are always governments and their agencies acting collectively.

Of course, the political and emotional anxieties generated by even the partial pooling of sovereignty are manifest and natural. This is a continent of marvellous cultural and linguistic diversity, where national identity and accountable democracy have been fought for and won as the only acceptable conditions for life.

The transition from familiar, prized national sovereignty to unfamiliar, functional and partially shared sovereignty is therefore not easy. It cannot and must not be achieved by some sort of political push button mechanism – and no one should be foolish or arrogant enough to think that it can or should be. The evolution requires practical justification and continual explanation. Evidence must be given that it doesn't diminish identity. Proof must be provided that the sharing of sovereignty is a careful and responsible means of achieving levels of opportunity, security and fair treatment that could not be gained by countries acting by themselves.

In short, citizens of democracies have a right to know that agreements and laws negotiated by their national governments are not "concessions" to some abstract purpose, but shares in decisions that - in modern conditions – are necessary for the well being of their own societies.

The future "power relationships" of Europe therefore need to be clear:

Enlargement is coming and welcome. Integration is continuing as a matter of organic economic development as well as agreed policy. Political and legal decision making will reflect those and other realities.

All of those verities make it essential for the Union and its Member States to ensure that sovereignty is shared where it is needed for practical purposes – and not to fulfil some constitutional theory; that decision making is otherwise devolved, returned or retained at the most appropriate levels; and that everywhere, civil society and representative democracy have meaningful rights of expression and influence.

It is therefore not academic for the EU Institutions, the Member States, or any interested citizen to focus on the governance of the European Union. It is vital for debate that can help to establish the best ways to deal with the newest challenge of democracy – its international scale and operation.

That challenge – and the opportunities arising from it – are not going to go away. Globalisation, communication and the other facts of 21<sup>st</sup> century life guarantee that. And it would be horrific if, when everything else is developing in ways that ignore borders, democracy didn't. That would not protect the sovereignty of the people, it would negate the sovereignty of the people.

There are, of course, some who would argue that international decision making is systemically to remote to be genuinely democratic. But if it was true that distance denies democracy no representative democratic Parliaments or governments could have emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when travel and the transmission of information across even small countries was slower than both across large continents now, and when the means of expression were rudimentary by comparison with the facilities of our age. Keir Hardie told his contemporaries "We are only powerless to affect affairs if we refuse to take interest, to organise, to speak, to write – and if we surrender our hopes to the

railway timetable”. Less dramatically, we are only powerless if we refuse to take interest, to pick up the telephone, employ e-mails – and if we surrender to airport delays.

Other less innocent doubters, particularly in politics and in press ownership, appear to have a vehement and inherent dislike of internationalised decisions. They give the sustained impression that they would like the World to revert to being an archipelago of separate, self-contained political islands.

Their rationale is difficult to respect. First, the World never was like that. Second, such people seem to have no noticeable reservations about the exercise of borderless economic power.

Perhaps it’s only internationalised democracy, law and redistribution that they don’t like. If it is, I must say that public understanding would be greatly assisted if they would say so instead of giving the impression that there is still some sort of stand alone, shut the door, pull up the drawbridge form of ‘independence’ still on offer.

That ended a long time ago as the UN, GATT, IMF, NATO and the European Community were formed. And those actions were not taken casually. On the contrary, they were taken deliberately and specifically because that post-war generation decided that the independence they were used to had to give way to the interdependence that they needed for security and stability in Europe and the wider World.

Anyone doubting that should heed the words of one of that generation – Aneurin Bevan – who, reflecting on contemporary developments, concluded in 1950 that “National sovereignty is a phrase which history is emptying of meaning”. Or doubters about the motivation of that generation of political leaders, architects and builders could take instruction from an earlier idealistic realist who wrote:

“I am being forced to the conclusion that nothing short of a World state will be really effective in preventing war. As long as you rely for security on a number of potential armaments you will have the difficulty as to who shall bell the cat ... I want us to come out boldly for a real long range policy which will envisage the abolition of the individual sovereign state...”

“Ben the cat” is a give-away:

That was Clement Attlee in 1933.

I do not present these references as exhibits in a sort of mock trial of fidelity or infidelity to sovereignty. Neither do I use them to suggest that either Bevan or Attlee were, in their time, embryonic supporters of the European Union of 2001 – there is little record to show Bevan’s view of the foundation of the European Community, and Clem Attlee’s stated opinion as late as the early 1960’s was unquestionably hostile.

But I do employ both mens’ words to give evidence of their understanding of the interdependence of human destiny and of the need to take collaborative and practical action to shape it for peaceful and productive ends. And I also use the words to demonstrate that there is every reason to believe that neither thought of classic national sovereignty – which both comprehended – to be an implacable, unchangeable fixture when times and demands objectively required a less introverted vision and less insular initiative.

The context given to Bevan and to Attlee in their era was mainly one of preparation for conflict, World War, devastation, unprecedented co-operation, and political division of the planet. That

experience convinced them that orthodox ideas of sovereignty sabotaged security rather than building it.

Obviously, anyone as dismissive of national sovereignty in 2001 as Attlee was in 1933 or Bevan in 1950 would be bathed in vitriol by the flag-waggers and their ilk now. But that is not the reason why no one says that sovereignty is “empty of meaning” or – even more assertively – that it should be “abolished”. The reason is that abolition has been rendered unnecessary as a vision or as a practical ambition because the sharing of power has proved to be more feasible, and more productive, than anything which most thinkers of the Attlee generation thought possible.

That sharing is not perfect, it is not complete and it is unlikely ever to be either. But it exists, it is workable, it serves – and it does not threaten anything or anyone who can free themselves from paranoid nostalgia.

The Attlee generation saw the devastation of a World fragmented by sovereignties and sought to provide the functioning mechanisms of interdependence physically, constitutionally and mentally.

This generation – particularly in this continent - must now decide the form of interdependence that is fitted to our needs, how it is to be managed, what are the best ways of ensuring that the managers are accountable to democracy, what is their “catalogue of competences”.

Those decisions must be based on fact, not distortion; on truth, not propaganda; on the realities of modern life, not atavism.

Britain should be unreservedly central to those decisions and therefore show audacity, not defensiveness. And the shape of things to come must not be left either to the fixated who want centralising Federation, or to the obsessives who want destructive Fragmentation.

The judgements must be the property of the majority – the majority which sees that the World is smaller, the decisions are bigger; which knows that a new reality of shared sovereignty has emerged; which wants to ensure that it gives effective and accountable answers to the common, borderless challenges of our time.

Bigots, mythmakers, fear-mongers, xenophobes and political introverts need not apply.

What Labour’s Manifesto – Attlee’s Manifesto – called “all Progressives” must prevail. So let us Face the Future.

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