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BRITISH INTEREST IS TO STAY IN EUROPE

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Viscount Palmerston, one of United Kingdom's foremost 19th century political leaders, three times foreign secretary and twice prime minister, uttered one of the most famous quotes in the country's history: Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests. When the mayor of London, Boris Johnson decided to campaign for Brexit he was convinced that he was putting himself on the right side of history. Maybe he is right in a narrow sense but when he argued that Winston Churchill, a statesman of the calibre of Lord Palmerston tried, like all politicians "to anticipate what will happen, or put (himself) on the right side of history" he is deluding himself. The former came out very early, and strongly against Nazism in the 1930s. He did so because he was convinced of the peril Adolf Hitler posed to the interests of the United Kingdom and France. This was not as Johnson would tell the readers of his recent biography of Churchill a "bet which came off in spectacular fashion".

Lord Palmerston also remarked that "the best and most effectual security for the future peace of Europe would be the severance from Russia of some of the frontier territories acquired by her in later times, Georgia, Circassia, the Crimea, Bessarabia, Poland and Finland." The greatest winner of a Brexit would be Russia whose president did all he could to encourage the Scots to vote in favour of leaving the United Kingdom 18 months ago. It is beyond reason to fathom how politicians who belong to a party famous for the importance it has attached to Britain's international influence and role since the 18th century, fail to grasp that a Europe reeling from the influx of refugees which Vladimir Putin is happy to encourage will be severely weakened were Britain, which boasts with France one of two of the best trained and well equipped armies in Europe, to quit the European Union. Nor does the mayor, a doughty fighter for the interests of the City, seem to grasp that a Brexit would severely damage the many financial institutions which are such rich bread winners for millions of people.

The European Union has its faults: it has not managed the fall out of the financial crisis well – especially with regard to Greece. Its leaders are not promoting economic and fiscal policies which encourage growth and a reduction of unemployment. It has failed to anticipate the Arab revolts of 2011 and believed, for too long that they would lead to an Arab Spring and flourishing democracy. Such failures however do not warrant undoing all the good work which, since the Coal and

Steel Community was founded sixty years ago has helped to guarantee peace and freedom of movement in Europe.

Boris Johnson may be anticipating the direction of events but he is wrong to think that Churchill was gambling, as politicians are wont to do, when he opposed Hitler – and he was a very lonely voice in the House of Commons during most of the 1930s. That he benefited politically from his prescience is beside the point: he aligned himself with the right cause, which happened to be very much in the interests of Britain and history vindicated him. Both Palmerston and Churchill were conservatives and it is sad to see the UK referendum descend into “a glorified cockfight” in the words of the leader of the liberal MEPs, Guy Verhofstadt. The former Belgian prime minister added that it was “pathetic and totally bonkers”. His feelings are shared by many in the United Kingdom. He could have added that Johnson’s behaviour was an insult to great British leaders such as the two aforementioned ones and to the history of a country whose much admired foreign policy over centuries has included a cold-headed appraisal of its own long term interests.

When he was a press correspondent in Brussels in the 1990s Boris Johnson was known for headlines like “Brussels recruits sniffers to ensure that Euro-manure smells the same”. His brand of journalism fits in well with the endless Euro-bashing of the media owned by Rupert Murdoch and the Daily Mail. Their power to influence the British electorate is considerable and it has nothing to do with democracy. It is striking to what extent in Britain, it is an older generation, nostalgic of empire and people who are finding it difficult to adapt to the broader economic globalisation who wish to leave. The younger ones want to stay in. He might also reflect that it was the destruction of Iraq – a Labour government policy fully supported by the Conservative party when it was initiated in 2003 and the destruction of Libya – a policy led by his party and prime minister, David Cameron which handed back to Vladimir Putin a capacity to intervene in the affairs of Europe and the Middle East which his predecessor had lost in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Although the debate will be conducted on economic lines, the broader security issues are essential. Close cooperation with NATO is fine but border controls at Calais depend on French cooperation. The fight against terrorism demands close liaison within the EU in the form of the European Arrest Warrant. How would a Brexit help where EU sanctions against Russia are concerned? Last but not least, what of the much vaunted “Special Relation” with Britain’s closest ally, the United States? It is astonishing that Tory leaders, of all people, should forget that during two world wars, it was America which saved Britain and Europe in their hour of need.. Barack Obama will travel to London shortly to make this point.

The Out campaign appeals to emotion over logic. The British are famously level-headed. One can only hope that cold logic and, as Palmerston would have put it their “permanent interests” will carry the day when electors go to the polls next 23 June.