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Britain’s abandonment of Australia saved it from Europe’s excesses

IFSIGHT is a dubious ben-efit. A common perception of the past can make later events appear not only consequential but downstream inevitable. As if any thinking person at the time could have predicted Rome was destined to conquer the ancient world. As if it was Britannia’s fate to rule the waves. As if Germany was meant to become the most fertile breeding ground for anti-Semitism.

Historians know there is no such inevitability. Judging the past's importance is no inanimate mechanism. Historical developments, whose familiar consequences we take for granted, frequently unfold in an unplanned, and at times, erratic fashion.

Part of the world is such an histori- cal outcome that almost looks logical given the benefit of hindsight. From British settlement in 1788 to Federation in 1901, from the Australia Acts of 1896 to the modern Australia in the Asia-Pacific context, it seems like a straightforward path from a British dominion to an independent Pacific nation.

The degree of change in Australia’s self- awareness is dramatic. It is even on display in cricket, this most peculiar of British bequests to Australia. A commentator in London’s Daily Telegraph quipped that Australia’s “poor performance demonstrated that it had become “more like the rest of the world” (which possibly meant less good at cricket). The article was illuminative of Australia’s struggle with the economic performance had also diminished the perceived value of sporting success in a country that used to find its pride on the cricket field.

The diminished significance of this once emotionally charged contest between the motherland and Australia is a good indicator of Australia’s change for the better. Of course, other historic developments, these changes appear to be the result of self-evident realities. Surely geography, if nothing else, would have weakened the link between Australia and Britain, or more broadly between Australia and Europe, sooner or later. What does that certain? Or is our post facto understanding of Australian history only playing another trick on us?

It is useful to imagine a scenario in which the fundamental changes of the last decades had not happened. This thought experiment might reveal alternatives to Australia’s strategic and psychological reorientation, and hint at future directions. So let the following excursion be a flight of histori-cal fancy.

The scenario in question is simple: imagine Australia had joined the European Economic Community with Britain in the 1960s, becoming a full member of today’s European Union. To counter the most obvious objection to this scen-ario, we should note that European institutions have always stretched the geographical dimensions of Europe.

The 15 original member states had overseas countries and territories whose nationals are in principle EU citizens. They include The Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean, the British Falkland Islands, and Denmark’s autonomous province of Greenland.

France’s overseas territories are even more closely linked to the EU: as they form their own constituency in elections to the European Parlia-ment. The member, Maurice Ponga, is from New Caledonia, which should make him the world re- cord holder for the longest commute between home and workplace.

Clearly, then, distance should not have prevented Australia from joining the European insti-tutions as established by the Treaties of Rome in 1957 in principle. But could it have happened in practice?

The initial EEC consisted of three big countries (France, Germany and Italy) as well as three smaller countries (Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxem-bourg). Britain initially stood outside the new organization, and only joined in 1973. French president Charles de Gaulle had vetoed British entry twice — first in 1961 and even more brusquely again in 1967. In order to join the com-munity Britain was compelled to sever its remain-ing Commonwealth ties, particularly in the area of trade. As a result, Britain’s traditional partners faced European trade protections.

British consumers noticed this change in the mid-70s when Australian butter was replaced by Danish Lurpak spreads on the shelves of their supermarkets. The effects on Australian farmers were far more painful. After Britain had joined the EEC, Australian butter exports dropped by more than 90 per cent. The Australian trade deficit declined from 86,000 tonnes in 1975 to just 27,000 tonnes in 1990. The economic consequences of Britain’s European ambitions for Australia were severe.

The psychological effects were even more diffi-cult. In their brilliant book, The Unknown Nation — Australia after Empire, historians James Curran and Stuart Ward recall how shocking it was for British Australians in the early 70s to find them-selves traded in by the motherland for Britain’s entry ticket to the EEC. At that time “abandon-ment”, “betrayal”, and “edged firmly from the imperial nest” were typical expressions of Aus-tralian sentiment about the decision of the British government.

The Unknown Nation (2010) also reveals how hard Australian politicians sought to prevent their British counterparts from making their step towards Europe. They realised immediately that Britain in Europe would signify a fundamental change for Australia: strategically, culturally and economically.

When British prime minister Harold Macmillan had announced the decision to apply for EEC membership on July 31, 1961, prime minister Rob-ert Menzies described this event as “the most im-portant in time of peace in my lifetime”. Australia had no illusions about the looming changes.

So what if Australia’s efforts to prevent the de-parture from Britain had been successful? From what we know about the emerging pos-ition of British politicians at the time, neither Macmillan nor his successor Harold Wilson, let alone Ted Heath (who had led Britain’s initial negotiations with Europe, for which he had been awarded the Charlemagne Prize in 1963) could have been deterred from their plans to sign up to the EEC.

Australian politicians may have used colourful and emotional language to remind their British counterparts of their common Britishness. They may have appealed to feelings of kinship and praised the strength of Anglo-Australian trade. In fact, they did all of that. However, as continental Europe was booming, there was no way Britain would have given up on its ambitions to partake in this Wirtschaftswunder.

In the early 60s, there would have been one, and only one, way for Australia to retain its rela-tionship with a Britain suddenly hell-bent on be-coming a part of Europe. And that way would have been to become a part of Europe under the mantle of Britain.

Could it have happened? If Australia had man-aged to convince the other European nations that this was in their very own interest, the answer is probably yes. The least problematic case would have been to convince Britain. Trade relations be-tween Britain and Australia were important and neither side was keen on severing them. The greatest difficulty would have been per-suading France. It would have been an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. In a memor-andum, Macmillan had laid down his ideas on winning over de Gaulle for British membership by offering the French a greater role in a triangle with Washington, Paris and London.

Throughout the 1960s, France’s increasing influence in the region apart from New Caledonia would have been an additional sweet-ener. The French being the French may well have been convinced by this prospect of an elevated global role.

Compared with soliciting a French oui, work-ing on the other EEC members would have been child’s play.

If the Australians had played their cards dif-ferently, they may have well ended up in the euro-pean club in the 60s. Indeed, instead of having European car roads would drive the roads of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and they would be substan-tially cheaper than they are today.

For Australia’s political class, a positive side effect from these membership would have been the increased supply of jobs, titles and offices. Australia’s parliaments and ministerial bureaucracies at the state and national levels are certainly not small by international standards, but an addi-tional layer of government would have provided even more opportunities for party hacks and polit-i-cians approaching retirement. A seat in the Eu-ropean parliament or the job of an EU commis-sioner would have crowned many Australian political careers.

If those were the positive effects of Australia’s place in Europe, and irony aside now, what would have been the consequences?

The biggest disadvantage would be that Aus-tralia would not have had an opportunity to dev-elop and find itself in its own culture. They would have en-joyed near independence after Federation and ratification of the Statute of Westminster in 1942. However, as the account of historical events and opinions in The Unknown Nation demonstrates, the process of forming an independent national identity was by no means complete by the 60s. Curran and Ward called their chapter on Britain’s negotiations with Europe A Saha-ly industry who as prime minister in the early 70s still de-scribed Australia as a “West European nation”.

What would it have meant if, in order to retain the links to Britain, the Australians of the 60s had decided to become European? If the process of European integration had proceeded as it has, Australia’s membership would have been a disaster. The process of European integration has been accompanied by a few positive changes but many drawbacks. The positive developments are quickly spelt out. Australia would have been forced to reduce tariffs which would have benefited a bigger Euro-pean market, while the EEC would have had more powerful institutions.

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Since the English government had to give up its EEC membership. For the British voters this was the reason to support the EU treaties allow up to 60 per cent. The EU treaties allow up to 60 per cent. As Britain went into Europe and Australia developed in a European context. As leader of the negotiations bordered on self-righteousness. EU delegations worked towards the principle of soft-soften. The organisation grew out of discussions with tens of thousands of Australians who wanted to do something. But when trying to get such projects up and running, it is almost impossible to win start-up funding — risk capital is difficult to come by from the traditional government or corporate sources. It has its own ironies, because government and business have failed to support social problems in partnership with social entrepreneurs.

But who are today’s social entrepreneurs, and what makes them tick? They share many features with their business cousins, and often use similar strategies, such as scaling up. They often face ridicule for keeping at it when others, including governments and their peers, have given up. They stand out because they won the reasonable man adapts himself to circumstances is not particularly appealing. It still had to wait until the Australia Acts of 1901 to give Australia its own governing Parliament. At least compared with the national debt when it stood at 26 per cent of GDP. His opponents could have told him to calm down. The EU treaties allow up to 60 per cent. From this angle, running moderate budget deficits year after year almost looked like prudence. At least compared with really profligate comparable systems. It is not just the differences in government spending and regulation that are important but also the way they are spent. Our achievements in Australia in the past decade, often against the odds, suggests we could do much more. With a little more support, we could. It’s long overdue.

Jan Dee, co-founder of Do Something and Planet Ark, was the 2010 NSW Australian of the Year. The Pratt Foundation is funding Do Something. Ark, was the 2010 NSW Australian of the Year. The organisation grew out of discussions with tens of thousands of Australians who wanted to do something. But when trying to get such projects up and running, it is almost impossible to win start-up funding — risk capital is difficult to come by from the traditional government or corporate sources. It has its own ironies, because government and business have failed to support social problems in partnership with social entrepreneurs.

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received on a case-by-case basis, not on a con- veyor belt. And they could originate from Australia as well as from anywhere else.

Perhaps the most ironic fact is Australia man- aged to preserve parts of its British heritage, which Britain had to give up for its EEC membership. For example, the ancient British doctrine of the su- premacy of parliament now seems stronger in Australia. Although the doctrine is obviously qualified by the Australian Constitution and its interpretation in the High Court of Australia, par- liament’s position in Britain is much weaker. It is rapidly butxyet still preserved in Westminster, but Brussels. Washington sovereignty of parliament continues to erode in Britain. The EU is a matter of debate among British lawyers. This leads us to the most striking difference be- tween Britain in Australia, which is to the level of independence. Or to say with a word sounding old-fashioned in a European context, sovereignty.

According to the most common definition, sovereignty is the power of a state within a ter- ritory. It is a country’s ability to order its own affairs, internally and externally. It is a nation’s freedom to find, mark and defend its place in the world. Looking back to the 60s, Australia’s strong links to Britain meant that it was not fully sover- eign. It still had to wait until the Australia Acts of 1986. In the words of chief justice Anthony Mason, this act marked the end of the legal sover- eignty of the imperial parliament and recognised that ultimate sovereignty resided in the Aus- tralian people. The Britain of the 60s, on the other hand, was too busy preserving a sovereignty nation. Its independent legal and parliamentary institutions had been firmly established for centuries.

As Britain went into Europe and Australia went its own way, a role reversal happened. Of the two countries, Australia is the more sovereign. It is not just the differences in government spending and regulation that are important but also the way they are spent. Our achievements in Australia in the past decade, often against the odds, suggests we could do much more. With a little more support, we could. It’s long overdue.

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It has come the Grameen Bank, which he founded, and which has provided more than $5 billion in personal loans.

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