‘Tony Blair and Europe: shattering the Ming vase’
Andrew Adonis, Hertford College, Oxford
10 November 2017

In my diaries there is this wonderful story Tony Blair told of President Chirac:

‘Jacques told me how surprised he was that we had a homosexual in the Cabinet. He’d been reading about Chris Smith. “We couldn’t possibly do that in France,” he said. “Oh,” I said, “I’ve got four in my Cabinet.” His jaw dropped. “Four? Four?” he repeated. “Mon Dieu, dear Tony, and you can’t even join the Euro!”’

Advancing gay rights was one of Tony Blair’s great achievements. By contrast, his support for the Euro never came out of the closet and his greatest legacy on Europe is something which at the time of enlargement in 2004 he said would never happen: the migration to Britain of nearly one and a half million Poles and other central and East Europeans, which is one of the reasons why we may be leaving the European Union.

My diaries contain two contemporary notes by Tony on his legacy written shortly before he left office in June 2007. In the first he writes of ‘A nation open, at ease with globalisation, prepared to compete on its merits not its history.’ Of Britain’s international standing he says: ‘We took Britain’s key alliances, Europe and America, and kept them both strong. In Europe, the UK went from the Beef War and isolation to leading the debates on European defence, economic reform, energy, enlargement, and did the Budget deal.’ In another note he is more succinct: ‘On Europe, we have moved from the sidelines to the Centre. We have been prepared to defy Eurosceptic opinion to do so.’

Ten years on, we aren’t just on the sidelines, we are leaving the stadium; and the Eurosceptics are running the country.

Tony’s great friend and mentor, and mine, Roy Jenkins, once likened Tony’s attitude to power to the museum curator carrying a priceless Ming vase across a slippery floor, desperate not to drop it. The European vase is now on the floor, in a thousand pieces. David Cameron dropped it, but the inescapable question for this lecture is, what role did Tony play in polishing the floor? And what are the lessons of the Blair decade?

Tony was certainly the most instinctively pro-European Prime Minister since Edward Heath. Indeed he had two big advantages over Heath. He was a member of the human race. And he enjoyed meeting people, including foreigners, not least the French.

Tony spoke colloquial French, learnt in a Paris bar as a student, which he deployed before the Assemblee Nationale to admiration. He took most of his holidays in the south of France or Tuscany. By my calculation he spent in total more than half a year on holiday in France or Italy during his decade as Prime Minister, more than any Prime Minister since Lord Salisbury, who had a chateau near Dieppe.
I still recall the tense office discussion after the 2001 foot-and-mouth crisis on whether, just for once, the Prime Minister might take a holiday in the country he ruled, to show solidarity. He wasn’t – how shall I put it – at all keen on this idea. The best Anji Hunter and Sally Morgan could extract was two days in Cornwall, which he and Cherie enjoyed only marginally more than their annual visit to Balmoral with the Royal Family. It rained solidly, and they were on the next Ryanair to Carcassonne.

When Tony says in his memoirs, ‘I regarded anti-European feeling as hopelessly, absurdly out of date and unrealistic,’ this is from the heart and soul. He could and still does express his Europeanism with extraordinary passion – as when he received the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen Cathedral in 1999 – and it is part of the reason why so many of us admire him so much.

Tony had another advantage: a united pro-European party. John Major had been torn limb from limb by right-wing Euro-sceptics he called ‘bastards.’ By the 1990s there were few overt Euro-sceptics in the Labour party, and none in the leadership, thanks to the social chapter and the seminal speech by Jacques Delors to the TUC conference in 1988 – a speech which Charles Powell, in his lecture on Margaret Thatcher two weeks ago, identified as the turning point in her attitude to the EU.

I now realise how significant was the fact that the Bruges speech, drafted by Charles, came precisely twelve days after Jacques Delors’ appearance in Bournemouth. Thatcher was deliberately replying to Delors, just as the very title of Delors’ speech, ‘The Social Dimension of Europe,’ had been designed to enrage her. Hence the oddity that contemporary Euro-scepticism was born in Bruges and Labour pro-Europeanism in Bournemouth.

So, the New Labour new dawn which rose over Britain – or at least the Royal Festival Hall – on May 2nd 1997 appeared to herald a rebirth of Europe too.

However, in retrospect there were storm clouds even as the sun rose.

First, New Labour normalised referendums and opened the way to anti-European populism. At the time we thought referendums were a good idea. I wrote a Demos pamphlet with Geoff Mulgan entitled ‘Back to Greece: the case for Direct Democracy.’ It was full of juvenile, simplistic arguments of which I am now ashamed as an alumnus of this great university.

Before 1997 there had been only one national referendum and two other referendums in mainland Britain, all within the space of four years in the turbulent, ungovernable 1970s.

The argument could be made – and was made – that the 1975 referendum on the European Community and the 1979 referendums on devolution to Scotland and Wales were aberrations caused by government and party breakdown, not democratic principle. Charles Powell told us that Mrs Thatcher ‘detested’ referendums. She never held one; nor did John Major, even in the darkest days of Maastricht.

Then New Labour came along and held five referendums, two almost immediately after the 1997 election, on Scottish and Welsh devolution, followed by three more in the next
decade. Faced with the not particularly controversial question of giving the proposed Scottish parliament modest tax raising powers, Tony reached for a second question in the Scottish devolution referendum in order to avoid an argument with the Tories and the right-wing media on higher taxes north of the border. Later there were referendums on the London mayoralty and a regional assembly for the North-East – essentially matters of local government reorganisation – and even on a proposal for a congestion charge in Manchester.

After all this referendum-itis it was going to be hard to avoid an in-out referendum on Europe at some point, particularly with the 1975 precedent, the regular referendums in the rest of the EU, and the rise of UKIP, a party which grew out of the Referendum Party, founded in 1994, whose sole policy was an in-out referendum on the EU.

Tony led a long way towards this by coming out for a referendum on membership of the Euro as one of his first acts of leadership in 1994. Then in 2005 he declared for a referendum on former French President Giscard d’Estaing’s proposed European Constitution.

Herein lies another Chirac tale. Chirac was under pressure to grant a referendum on the European constitution. Once Tony had unexpectedly come out for one, Chirac felt he had to follow, despite Gerhard Shroder’s opposition. The French referendum was held before the British. It was lost by a decisive 55 to 45 margin, whereupon the constitution was repackaged as the Lisbon Treaty. Tony argued that Lisbon didn’t require a referendum because it was a treaty not a constitution – let’s not dwell on that distinction – and he got away with it because everyone knew that if there was a referendum on Lisbon would have been lost.

Tony’s comment in his memoirs about this lucky escape takes on a greater significance in retrospect. ‘As ever, I was sanguine. I thought we might just turn it into a referendum that was effectively in or out ... My advisers disagreed, but I rather fancied mounting a really big public argument on an issue I felt strongly about and on which I was right. I could also see how, in the course of such a campaign, the progressive alliance – fractured over Iraq – might heal. So although plainly a tough challenge, I somewhat relished the fight.’ To which one can only reply: Mon Dieu.

Anyway, it was a short step from all this referendum-itis to the Cameron-Clegg coalition’s national referendum on electoral reform in 2011; its 11 referendums on directly elected mayors in English cities a year later; its legislation mandating referendums for all new EU treaties; the Lib Dems and then David Cameron coming out for an in-out referendum; and finally the cataclysm of June 23rd 2016.

This second storm cloud on the horizon on 2nd May 1997 was Tony’s attitude to the Euro.

From the moment the 1992 Maastricht Treaty gave Britain an opt-in to the single currency – into the planning of it before 1999 and directly into the currency after its launch in 1999 – the question of whether or not to join had to be answered. It was the key unavoidable
question facing the British state in the run-up to the 1997 election and for the entirety of the Blair government.

In immediate economic terms it wasn’t obvious, then or now, where British interests lay. Put five economists in a room in the 1990s and you got six answers – unless one of them was my friend Ed Balls, when the other four fled with mortal injuries.

This is still the case today. Preparing for this lecture I asked four distinguished economists whether the Euro would survive and whether, if the politics were different, we should join. One said it won’t survive; the Italians will bring it down. Another said it will survive, and we should join now. The third said it will be reconstituted as a north European currency union; we should wait for that to happen then join. And the fourth – the economics fellow of Hertford College – told us over dinner after last week’s lecture that she was a micro-economist and it wasn’t her subject. So you take your pick.

In this context I note, on re-reading it, that the Treasury’s 2003 assessment of Ed Balls’ ‘5 tests’ for joining the Euro is actually even-minded in its judgements, full of caveats and ‘it depends.’ Without much change it could have been presented as the case for sufficient convergence having been reached to join. It is the executive summary which comes down hard against joining, and you can guess how that was produced.

The difference between then and now, of course, is that now British membership of the Euro isn’t a choice as we are heading for the exit. Then, in the 1990s and early noughties, it was a choice which was real, which couldn’t be ducked or finessed. And it is now clearer than ever that the decision not to join has determined Britain’s fundamental relationship with the EU, and France and Germany in particular, ever since. If we had joined the Euro it is hard to see how it would be possible to be leaving the EU. Ivan Rogers, who is lecturing on David Cameron in a fortnight, argues that the moment we decided to stand apart from the Euro was the moment Brexit seriously started because for the first time since we joined the EU in 1973, on a fundamental European project, we decided to keep out and thereby of necessity hand the leadership of the EU to Germany. After much reflection, I agree with this assessment.

There is remarkably little about the Euro in Tony’s memoirs. In fact there is only one paragraph in the entire book. Let me read it in full:

‘My problem with the euro was very simple. In principle, I was in favour and for me the politics were clear: better to join and be full players in Europe’s economic decision-making. But I also knew that the politics were also very clear in another direction. It is, after all, as I used to say to my folk, an economic proposition. It is called economic and monetary union. Unless it was economically plain that it would be good for Britain, it was simply not politically sellable, i.e. the political problem was the economics. The trouble was the economic case was at best ambiguous; and certainly not beyond doubt. At the time of the 2001 election, I thought it conceivable the economics would shift decisively in favour and I was absolutely determined that if they did, I would chance it all on a referendum. My disagreement with Gordon was that he was expressing himself negatively on the euro. I was
always saying, Even if we don’t join and maybe especially if we don’t, for reasons of diplomacy always sound positive. If the economics had changed, I would have gone for it. They didn’t. And for me, that was that.’

Now, the one quality never Tony lacked was fluency. This is perhaps the least fluent piece of prose he has ever published. I have re-read it a dozen times, and after his characteristically decisive ‘that was that’ I keep asking myself ‘but what was what?’ We have politics pointing in two diametrically opposing directions, politics as economics, economics as politics, and Tony urging Gordon to sound the more positive about the Euro the more opposed he was to it.

There is another striking point: Tony speaks as if the issue was resolved soon after the 2001 election, when it was anything but. There were furious arguments between Tony and Gordon on the Euro long after the 2001 election – in 2003 – and the issue was not finally resolved until Gordon’s statement in effect ruling out British membership on June 5th 2003, two years after the election and three months after the invasion of Iraq.

I say the issue was ‘finally resolved’ in 2003, but in Tony’s mind it was never finally resolved. Even after the June 2003 statement he still thought it might be possible to re-open Gordon’s negative Treasury assessment and hold a referendum in 2004. But as the months passed this option silently disappeared without being explicitly abandoned.

In politics decisions not to act are as important as decisions to act, although the impact of them is obviously harder to judge. The decision not to join the Euro, and the decision to invade Iraq, were the two determining international acts of the Blair government, an increasingly stark reality as the Euro approaches its 20th anniversary in the year, 2019, that Britain might be leaving the European Union. Do the simple thought experiment: that we joined the Euro but didn’t invade Iraq, and you get a sense of how different things might have been.

And this isn’t with hindsight. In my diaries, more pages recount No 10 conversations and strategy sessions on joining the Euro than any other single issue between 1997 and 2003, and that includes Iraq and public service reform. Actually, fox hunting is a close competitor, but we won’t go there. At the time Tony did not see joining the Euro as a finely balanced judgement: he keenly, desperately wanted Britain to join. There was nothing on which he spoke more passionately over a longer period – apart from New Labour itself – and it was a passion which many of us shared. It’s why until Iraq Roy Jenkins saw Tony as the real deal, unlike Hugh Gaitskell, who at the critical moment made his dreadful, historically illiterate 1962 Labour conference speech about a thousand years of British history being in jeopardy.

So understanding why we didn’t join the Euro is vital to understanding not only the Blair government but the whole theme of these lectures – why Britain is isolating itself and disengaging from Europe despite the fact that isolation and disengagement was not the policy of any of the eleven Prime Ministers since Harold Macmillan applied to join the Common Market, as we then called it, nearly 60 years ago.
In retrospect, there are two occasions when Tony could realistically have sought to take Britain into the Euro: immediately after the 1997 election, and immediately after the 2001 election. Let me take these in turn.

First, 1997.

A vital secret of the Blair government is summed up by two pages of the Chequers visitors’ book. The Chequers visitors’ book, by the way, is a remarkable historical document for all governments going back to Lloyd George though it wasn’t there when I last visited – I’m told because of FOI, which was Tony’s favourite legacy.

The two pages in question are the first two pages of Tony Blair’s possession of Chequers, headed ‘Saturday 3rd May 1997.’ On the first page are the signatures: ‘Tony Blair’ and ‘Cherie Booth QC.’ On the second page are the two signatures: ‘Alastair Campbell’ and ‘Rupert Murdoch.’

Tony didn’t dare move on the Euro before the 1997 election because he was simply not prepared to have a full-frontal argument with the Tories and the Murdoch press. He thought it might imperil the election; but in truth, Tony never liked arguments to his Right, only to his Left, and the problem with the Euro is that united the entire Right, plus Murdoch and Dacre. There was also the recurrence of another characteristic British attitude to the EU: the patronising belief that every time the French and Germans commit to something bold and very challenging, it probably won’t happen and if we sit it out we can avoid the pain and get the credit for picking up the pieces. There was a widespread mandarin and political view before 1999 that the Euro probably wouldn’t happen, in the same way as Eden was convinced the Treaty of Rome would never happen and if the Euro Six really did try something so ambitious it would soon collapse. The only problem is that the Treaty of Rome did happen; the Euro also happened and it appears to be surviving. The only thing that has collapsed is our entire foreign and trade policy because we bet the house on the French and the Germans being useless.

Anyway, on becoming leader Tony immediately committed to a referendum on any decision to join the Euro and adopted increasingly negative – if carefully hedged – language on joining. At this point Gordon wasn’t the obstacle. Ed Balls wasn’t yet on the scene and Gordon was desperate for a credible framework to signal economic policy stability under Labour. This is why he had been ‘first in and last out’ on the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, of which John Smith had been a strong supporter, as he was of monetary union. Roger Liddle, in his excellent first-hand account of the internal politics of European policy under Tony, says that Gordon ‘fiercely resisted’ Tony making this pre-1997 referendum commitment on the Euro. But Tony was fixated on the Ming vase and not slipping.

The pity of the famous Granita pact – the tragedy even – isn’t what was or wasn’t agreed between Tony and Gordon about when the one would abdicate in favour of the other, but that Tony and Gordon didn’t concentrate instead on policy and agree a plan to join the Euro immediately after winning the election. Instead, the 1997 manifesto had one paragraph on
the Euro: ‘there are formidable obstacles in the way of Britain being in the first wave of membership if EMU takes place on 1st January 1999,’ it started, as negatively as possible without categorically abandoning it. In case this wasn’t explicit enough, a few days before the 1997 election the Sun ran an article by Tony under the headline: ‘Why I love the pound.’

And that was that, not only for the election but for the crucial first months of the Blair government. I didn’t work for Tony until 1998 but Jonathan Powell tells me that there were no serious internal discussions about the Euro – and none whatever between Tony and Gordon – until the ‘Red Lion Fiasco’ in October, of which more in a moment. Gordon’s economic stability reform was instead to give the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates, an incremental change dressed up as a dramatic reform.

The Red Lion affair and the Chequers visitors’ book sum up how decisions on European policy were made in the Blair decade. The Red Lion affair began with an over-egged FT story that something might be happening on the Euro. Tony, Gordon and Alastair immediately decided this had to be killed as a story. Gordon was deputed to give an interview to the Times saying that the Government was a long way from making an assessment on whether to join. The words were carefully crafted and deliberately ambiguous, but once Gordon’s media aide Charlie Whelan got briefing from the Red Lion pub, pint in hand, the ambiguity lasted about five seconds. According to the Sun, Whelan even suggested to its editor, Stuart Higgins, the headline: 'Brown saves the pound'.

Tony immediately regretted what he had done and from 1998 my diaries recall him constantly seeking to keep open an option to move on the Euro. There was the so-called ‘National Changeover Plan’ of 1999, except there was no plan actually to change anything over. Then there was discussion about preparing for a referendum in 2002, except there was no willingness to say anything in the 2001 manifesto or election which might actually admit this in public, still less prepare for it. We ended up instead with a repeat of the 1997 manifesto, promising referendum on ‘any proposal to join the Euro,’ as if somehow this unpleasant imposition might somehow be forced on us by a tyrannical Brussels.

The best description of Tony’s stance on the Euro is captured by this justification for his wider European policy in his memoirs: ‘Though my general posture was pro-European, I took care not to go beyond what was reasonable for British opinion. This … allowed me to govern and to move things forward where I could.’ Put simply, on Europe he was a follower not a leader.

Two further points about the 1997 to 2001 Parliament. Stewart Wood’s insightful lecture last week said this of Gordon and how he handled European policy:

‘On the Friday before a Tuesday morning [meeting of the European Finance Ministers’] Council, Gordon would call us in and ask what the main item of business was. Not atypically it would be final agreement on a directive in some niche part of the financial services industry, discussed for months if not years, and now agreed between officials after tortuous discussion. Over the weekend, financial journalists would be told that Gordon was fighting for the future of the City of London. On Tuesday, we would awake to stories about Brown
going into the lions’ den in Brussels. At the end of the Council, Gordon would march straight into the press conference and proclaim victory, for a deal that had been sorted out between officials weeks earlier.’

This wasn’t a Chancellor signing up to a national changeover plan.

Equally, other preoccupations had taken hold of Tony, particularly abroad. He fought two wars in the 1997 Parliament – Sierra Leone and Kosovo – as well as two bombing campaigns against Saddam Hussein. Tony’s major foreign policy speech of the Parliament, indeed of his premiership, was his 1999 speech on the ‘doctrine of international community,’ delivered in Chicago. The Chicago speech was drafted by Jonathan Powell – Prime Ministers came and went but the Powells kept the show on the road for two decades. In the shadow of Milosovic and Kosovo, Chicago is most convincing statement of Tony’s liberal interventionism. It barely mentions the European Union. NATO gets far more references. And the United States looms far larger than France, Germany and Europe.

Tony is blunt about this in his memoirs. Europe was, he writes, ‘brilliant at ringing statements of intent, which then evaporated into thin air when the consequences of seeing them through became apparent … In truth, without the US, forget it; nothing would happen. That was the full extent of Europe’s impotence.’

And he says this despite what he regarded as one of his early achievements, the St Malo initiative, which raised the possibility of common European defence efforts. There was much hype but little happened. And unless NATO withered, little was ever going to happen.

Just before the 2001 election Tony, for about the 20th time recorded in my diaries, told Roy Jenkins that he was going to go for the Euro. Roy told me: ‘Tony says this time he’s really going to do it: he is going to call a referendum very soon after the election, whatever Murdoch does.’ To up the ante, Roy encouraged his friend Robert Harris to write a column in the Sunday Times the week-end before polling day, likening Tony’s record on Europe to Baldwin’s on rearmament, citing Churchill’s damning verdict: ‘he was decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent.’

So why didn’t Tony seek to join the Euro – whose notes and coins were now in circulation – immediately after the 2001 election?

Memory plays strange tricks and can be unreliable. In my first draft of this lecture I wrote that whatever Tony intended to do on the Euro after the 2001 election was rendered null and void by 9/11. But on reading my diary, I realise this is untrue. There were three months between the 2001 election and 9/11 – two if you allow for Tony’s holidays – and there was intense internal debate on what to do about the Euro in these two months. By 9/11 this debate had been resolved – in favour of doing nothing.

In an office note of 23rd June 2001, Tony wrote: ‘I see two possible openings for the referendum, autumn 2002 or summer 2003’ – ie at least 15 months away. At a Policy Unit
Awayday at Chequers at the end of July I asked Tony at the end of lunch what was his game plan for getting us into the Euro. According to my diary:

‘Tony said, that’s a good question. Let me go and gather my thoughts. He promptly disappeared into sun-drenched rose garden, scribbled notes, and came back to give us pep talk at the start of the afternoon session. ‘If we can we should do the Euro in this Parliament. I am absolutely clear how I see this. There are two sides to the British character: the cautious and the adventurous side. The cautious side has dominated us for the last 40 years and done untold damage. John Major and David Owen epitomise it perfectly. It is the cautious side which wants us to wait another 4 to 6 years, to wait and see how it all goes, but I tell you if we do that – and I can already see all the forces of caution uniting, on our side also – we will repeat the mistakes of the past. ... We should do it in this term. There is no point being Prime Minister unless you take risks to do the right thing. If we don’t go in, we will be a supplicant in 5 or 6 years’ time.’

I asked, if we aren’t waiting 4 to 6 years, when are we going for it? ‘That’s a good question,’ he replied. I’m going to think it through on holiday.’ Which he did, and told us at another Awayday, five days before 9/11, that it wouldn’t be for at least another year. ‘I simply can’t open a second front with Gordon while I am doing the public services.’

So 9/11 didn’t change Tony’s policy on the Euro. What it did, as Afghanistan gave way to Iraq, was to mortgage his capacity to do anything much else as Prime Minister to George W Bush.

This isn’t the place to discuss Iraq. Suffice it to say that over 2002 and 2003 Tony’s dealings with Chirac and Schröder on Iraq were first difficult, then fraught, and finally, virtually non-existent; and his attempt to impose a European policy on Gordon never got anywhere as Gordon took complete control of the assessment of Ed Balls’ 5 tests and steered relentlessly towards rejection.

The key discussions between Tony and Gordon on the 5 tests took place in parallel with the key decisions on Iraq. On 23 Apr 2002, I record them spending an hour arguing about the Euro and Jeremy Heywood telling me: ‘It is the first proper Euro discussion they have had since 1997!!’ In early May Philip Gould’s polling presentation noted that the ‘Euro deficit [is] minus 12-15% and there are no signs of breakthrough. Euro support we must win in key groups v difficult because of levels of disconnection, disengagement, asylum, and crime anger very high.’ A month later Peter Riddell told me that Gordon had told him that ‘he wouldn’t repeat Churchill’s 1925 mistake of going onto gold, despite Keynes’s strong advice that it would wreck the economy.’

Tony returned from his summer holiday at the end of August 2002 to tell us that he now favoured a referendum in 2004, with an 18 month campaign to follow a positive assessment of the 5 tests. This was a pipe dream. There was by now zero chance of Gordon and Ed Balls agreeing to a positive assessment. When Jeremy told Tony this in early October, Tony said: ‘that’s not happening.’ But it’s precisely what did happen.
A final point about the history books. A surreal aspect of all these No 10 discussions about Europe is that they focused almost entirely on what didn’t happen – the Euro – as opposed to what did happen – enlargement, and the decision to admit the first eight central and East European states in 2004 without the seven year brake in immigration which almost the entire rest of the EU decided to adopt. My diaries don’t record a single conversation about the immigration issue and whether we should have imposed a brake. From memory, there was one short discussion, in a strategy meeting with Tony in late 2003 when someone mentioned Home Office advice that the number of Poles likely to come after January 2004 would be about 30,000 and it would all be ok; and we agreed we would go after Iain Duncan Smith as a quasi-racist if he played the anti-immigration card, as indeed we did Michael Howard in the 2005 election.

I should have known better and done better than this. As Roy Jenkins’ biographer, and the son of a Cypriot immigrant who arrived in 1959, I was only too familiar with the politics of race and immigration in the 1960s, when the response of both parties to Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood,’ and really acute concern, particularly in white working class communities, about the scale of Commonwealth immigration was – to paraphrase Tony – to be tough on racism and tough on the causes of racism, in particular unrestricted immigration. In precisely three days in 1968, with cross-party support, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was rushed through Parliament. Overnight this stopped virtually all immigration; in particular it stopped the expected imminent arrival of 200,000 Kenyan Asians. I remember Roy telling me that it was the most brutal but probably the most necessary act to which he was a party as Harold Wilson’s sort of equivalent of Gordon Brown in the late 1960s.

The right policy in response to enlargement should have been to agree upper limits on immigration as part of the treaties of accession beyond which nation states could impose controls. Having failed to get this right at their accession, it should have been done by Tony once migrant flows became far larger than initially envisaged. We had a lucky escape in the 1960s because Enoch Powell turned out to be more professor than populist. Nigel Farage, by contrast, isn’t at heart a professor of Greek but a professor of grievance.

I have three more points to make about Tony and Europe.

First, Tony never developed a successful political project with fellow European social democrats. I say ‘fellow European social democrats,’ but privately Tony didn’t think he had much in common with most of them, particularly Jospin and Schröder who happened to be the two most significant of the decade. The ‘third way’ was a political project mounted with Bill Clinton, not with the Europe’s left. It didn’t help that the European left insisted on calling itself ‘socialist.’ Tony didn’t think they ‘got it’ on the need to move beyond old style welfare socialism towards the ‘third way’ of triangulating with the Right and modernising public services – even though Tony’s brilliance, as a social democrat, was the skill with which he persuaded the middle classes to pay more tax in return for genuinely better public services. As Gordon has been repeating constantly in launching his memoirs this week, the biggest tax rise in modern history was the Blair government’s National Insurance increase to pay for the NHS.
In the early months of Gerhard Schröder’s Chancellorship, Roger Liddle and Peter Mandelson got Schröder’s team to sign up to a version of the Third Way. But it was promptly disowned by Schröder himself when was bitterly attacked by Oscar Lafontaine and the German left. The irony is that with his 2002 Harz labour market reforms, Schröder became as significant a moderniser of European social democracy as Tony himself; but by 2002 Schröder and Blair were daggers drawn over Iraq and didn’t spend much time discussing labour market reform, the future of Europe or indeed anything else.

Tony was constantly amazed that Shroder managed to win elections and felt New Labour and the SPD were essentially different parties. He is disarmingly frank about this in his memoirs: ‘The truth is – and I fear this was becoming increasingly the case in my relations with the European centre right – we had more in common with [Merkel] than with the German SDP … Their view of the European social model was very traditional. Angela would see the need for change. I liked her as a person also. She seemed at first rather shy, even aloof, but she had a twinkle that swiftly came through. I thought she was honest and instinctively a kindred spirit, and we got on well.’

Tony was equally disparaging about Lionel Jospin, who he thought would be eaten alive by Nicholas Sarkozy, and he saw in Sarkozy a kindred unideological ‘action man.’

Secondly, the critical international project which Tony forged in his decade wasn’t with European social democrats but with George W Bush. The worst thing that happened to Tony was the election of Bush because it ignited a strong neo-con strand within Tony himself. Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who played a central diplomatic role in the Iraq crisis, makes a highly revealing comment in his recent memoirs: ‘The details of the frequent conversations between [Blair and Bush], and of the almost daily exchanges between their Foreign Ministers or close advisers … amount to an extraordinary chain of bilateral consultation and debate, more continuous and substantive than at any other period of US–UK cooperation that I have lived through or read about, including the Churchill–Roosevelt relationship during the Second World War.”

My diary contains an equally revealing discussion with Tony in December 2002 about the relative merits of Bush and Schröder. ‘We stay completely with Bush,’ he said. ‘Just look at the Germans. Schröder knows he is in a dreadful hole now that he has lost the Americans. He is desperate for me to help him build bridges. We’d be loonies to make the same mistake.’

Tony was brilliant at getting alongside people when he needed to; and equally adept at ignoring them when he lost patience. He made a huge investment in getting alongside Bush, while paying cursory attention to Chirac and Schröder. ‘It’s not us that are destroying Europe, it’s the French,’ Tony remarked to me on the eve of Iraq. He had basically written them off.

This is Schröder’s view of Tony in his memoirs: “At the beginning of my tenure as chancellor, I believed one could add a British component to the French-German relationship, making it a sort of triangle,” he writes. But the effort died in Iraq.
And Chirac says pretty much the same in his memoirs. ‘Having tried, on coming to office, to free himself from the control of Washington, Blair had not been long in bowing down to it. What saddened and angered me, to be frank, was that he did not make greater use of the former experience that his country had of the Middle East and of Iraq in particular. By immediately rallying to the American side, Blair unfortunately deprived himself of any real ability to influence the analysis made by the American government of a regional situation that it knew less well than Britain.’ Chirac’s words mirror de Gaulle’s famous statement in January 1962 as to why he was vetoing British membership of the European Community: because Britain was essentially an Atlantic not a European power.

And the point about these verdicts isn’t whether they were right or wrong – Tony would contest them strongly – but that they were made at all. The reality is that Iraq shattered the concept not only of a ‘European foreign policy,’ but the very notion of European solidarity.

My final reflection. Looking back, there was more than one Ming vase. Tony successfully carried the precious vase of electoral success across the slippery floor. No one has done it better. But the European vase dropped and shattered; and the best that can be said is that Tony essentially continued John Major’s policy of moving Britain to an associate membership of the EU which handed the leadership of Europe to Germany.

At the time we thought this associate membership of the EU was stable. We even thought it might turn into something decisive if the Euro collapsed. But instead it led remorselessly to Brexit; and now as a country we have to work out how to reinvent our international strategy and influence from a position of failure and weakness similar to Macmillan when he took over from Eden after Suez.

For me, the most poignant commentary was the changing attitude of Roy Jenkins to Tony in the months before Roy’s death in January 2003. Roy’s last speech in the House of Lords, in September 2002, was a searing criticism of the Iraq policy, which he thought utterly misguided. He told me that if it led to war it was the equivalent of LBJ going into Vietnam. JFK was Roy’s guiding star; in his view, JFK would never have got sucked into a major war in Vietnam and once LBJ made that mistake the best thing Harold Wilson did as Prime Minister was to keep out while maintaining civil Anglo-American relations.

Roy’s memorial service was on the 30th March 2003, just after the invasion of Iraq. I remember it vividly because Tony had been due to speak – I had even drafted his address – but at the last minute he had to pull out in order to fly to Washington to meet George Bush. It was in Westminster Abbey and I found myself sitting a few feet away from Margaret Thatcher. The most moving moment was when Sir Nicholas Henderson, a close friend of Roy’s and a former British ambassador to France, read from Jean Monet’s memoirs. The sentence I remember is: ‘The roots of the Community are deep in the soil of Europe: they have survived some hard seasons and can survive more.’

We are in a hard season. Let’s hope we can survive more.

AA 10.11.17