On April 1st, 2010, five days before Gordon Brown called the 2010 Election, he invited Angela Merkel for a private lunch at Chequers. It was ostensibly to discuss the next steps in Europe’s effort to recover from the Crash, the state of Europe’s banks & the Greek financial crisis. But it was actually a lunch to say goodbye. Everyone assumed we were about to lose power, and Gordon was about to leave no.10. It was never spoken of, but it didn’t need to be.

That day, Merkel had snubbed David Cameron, who would become Prime Minister 6 weeks later, by refusing to meet him during her visit to Britain. She was furious with Cameron for taking the Conservative Party out of the centre-right European Peoples Party grouping in the European Parliament, in favour of a new group that would collect a ragbag of right-wing populist parties – and some more sinister right-wing authoritarian parties on the fringes of mainstream politics.

At lunch she told Gordon how angry with Cameron she was. How it would undermine British influence in Europe by removing the governing party from the main party grouping. Gordon nodded and said: “I’m afraid Angela that Cameron doesn’t understand how Europe works”.

I was at the lunch as Gordon’s special adviser covering European affairs. I’d worked with him in that role for a decade – first at the Treasury, then after 2007 in 10 Downing Street. When Gordon said those words, I remember asking ourselves if we passed that test, as we faced the prospect of the famous black door of no.10 opening to let us out for the last time. Did we understand how Europe worked? Did we understand Britain’s place in it?

I wasn’t sure that we did. And looking back a decade later, I’m still not sure. Maybe it’s because, as Madeleine Albright once said, “to understand Europe you have to be a genius, or French”. But it’s more than that. We shared many of the blind spots that plague Whitehall & the main parties’ leaderships’ approach to the European Union – on its institutions, its internal politics, the ties that bind its members beyond mere commerce.

Yet Gordon Brown had strong convictions about the way the European Union had to change to adjust to an unprecedentedly interdependent world, and the kind of EU (and arguments for the EU) that would maintain the essential but fragile ties that connected the British people to the EU project. He was also convinced that his leadership during and after the extraordinary economic crisis from 2008 onwards could help navigate both Europe and the UK through choppy waters & to a better relationship.

There is a political tragedy at the heart of Gordon Brown’s time at the top of British politics. Having spent a decade working with Tony Blair to chart Labour’s return from the political wilderness, Gordon spent 10 years at the Treasury waiting for a shot at the top job. He didn’t always wait patiently. But when his time came, his Premiership
only lasted three years, and took place during a time of momentous global economic crisis, with a domestic backdrop of political crisis around MPs expenses.

For a man who craved control so much, he ran a country at a time when control was more elusive than ever. It was a period of all hands to the pump. There was little time or political breathing space to enact a vision for reshaping Britain’s relationship with Europe. And compared to Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair’s decades in power, there may be an understandable view that there is not that much to see in Gordon’s time as PM with regards to an evolving view of Europe.

But that would miss much that was important and distinctive. For one thing, Gordon is unusual in that during his time as Chancellor, he had a huge impact on our relationship with Europe – most notably through the 2003 decision not to join the Euro. For another, the economic crash that engulfed us all, provided an opportunity for him to show economic and political leadership within the EU, and a taster of the kind of statecraft he thought was necessary to engineer a coordinated international response.

Gordon is a voracious and ferocious thinker, a reader & a debater like no other politician I have ever met. At 4am, we would receive the first quizzical emails of the day. At 2am into our Inbox would drop the latest draft of a speech he would probably never give, that he miraculously produced himself during the course of an overpacked and stressful day, thinking through how to communicate an argument. Gordon wrote speeches to himself. Every day. To work out the argument, and to work out how to communicate it.

There was no respite with Gordon as your boss. It was exhausting. It took chunks out of us that are still missing. But, for all his faults, he was a Prime Minister that brought a brilliant intellect, immense energy and stamina, & a burning desire to understand change to Downing Street (both no.11 and no.10).

He brought that strategic mind to the question of Europe & Britain’s place within it. And what I want to do is assess his understanding of & approach towards the EU in three sections. First, I want to outline Gordon’s worldview & the place European affairs had within it. Second, I will look at the characteristics of how he engaged with Europe - intellectual, political and personal. Some successful, some less so. Third, I want to look at the strengths and limits of how Gordon saw the issue of Europe, in light of the unravelling of our country’s European affair in the past few years.

Let me start with Gordon’s worldview. He spent so much time thinking about how the world was changing. If you flew anywhere with Gordon, you kiss goodbye to small talk. Within minutes you would find yourself immersed in an interrogation about global trends, what you considered the great challenges of our time. He wanted to be a leader of consequence who faced up to the tectonic shifts in economic power and technology, and responded with a politics that shaped change in the direction of prosperity and social justice.
Gordon’s view of the UK’s relationship to the EU was seen through three lenses – economic, political and historical.

Firstly, the economic lens. The starting point for most of his views was the same: the unprecedented transformation of economic and social life caused by globalisation. For Gordon, the fundamental political fact of our age is interdependence between nations: brought about by a revolution in trade, capital mobility & technology; with repercussions not just in economic life, but in environmental, security, political and cultural spheres.

Interdependence is not a choice, but an inescapable fact. As Tony Blair put it in his 2005 Conference speech: “I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalisation. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer. They’re not debating it in China and India. They are seizing its possibilities, in a way that will transform their lives and ours.”

Globalisation means that cooperation between nations has become as inescapable as the condition of interdependence. Partly because transnational problems require transnational solutions. Partly for risk-pooling reasons: as he puts it in his book “Britain Leading Not Leaving”, “building a shared future is our insurance policy against a risk-laden world”.

What is fascinating about Gordon’s case for the European Union is that it is not a case particularly based on values, history or affection. Nor is it a case for a particular kind of EU. At an economic level it is a case for a free trade zone. And at political level it is a case for international institutions that can produce a coordinated, cross-national response to globalisation. In this sense, Europe is simply the first bit of the rest of the world that you come to when you leave the UK. Its specialness is really its geographical position – its inescapability.

The case for the EU is that, flawed as it is, it is the only available structure for achieving continental cooperation. In Brown’s view, you don’t spend your time investing massive political capital in wholesale reform of international institutions or their founding treaties: you make do with what you have, and you make them work to deliver the goods.

The second lens through which Gordon viewed the EU was that of domestic politics. To understand New Labour, Blair and Brown, you have to understand the 18 years that came before Blair won the 1997 election. The emergence from the divisions of the 1980 Wembley Conference, the splintering of Labour into a new SDP, the disaster of the 1983 election – and the slow march back to credibility under Neil Kinnock. The loss of the 1992 election – in my view the most important and searing experience in the origins of New Labour – reinforced Blair & Brown’s determination to do what it took to restore Labour’s credibility.

The yardsticks for Labour credibility were shaped by the difficult years of the 1980s, and the ways in which Britain changed under Thatcher. Put simply, New Labour saw the challenge as reconciling Labour to a market economy at home, and to a global economy internationally. And central to that reconciliation of Labour with market liberalism was making Labour’s peace with a European Union that, by the mid-
1990s, had become a single market project. For Brown, embracing the economic liberal case for the EU was not just fundamental to continued prosperity, but fundamental to reassuring Britain’s voters that Labour was safe for Britain again.

The third lens through which Gordon viewed Europe was a historical one. Gordon was determined to avoid the pitfalls of previous national choices about engagement with Europe that had done so much damage to Britain. The most fascinating section of Gordon’s book “Britain: Leading, Not Leaving” is the section on Britain’s pre-history with the EEC before joining in 1972. Brown is critical of Labour and Conservative imperial delusions in the postwar period. And he thinks there were many. The reluctance to move on from a Romantic but unrealistic attachment to the Commonwealth. The inability to see the economic necessity of engaging with Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War Two (Gordon accuses the Attlee Government, for example, of a “failure to distinguish between the temporary state of Europe – its debts, devastation and division – and its long-term prospects”). The Quixotic quest to make Britain into a third great power (whether through the Bevin’s Western Union idea, or the obsession with maintaining a role East of Suez at massive, unsustainable cost to Britain). And the wrong-headed view that there is a zero-sum relationship between the Special Relationship with the USA and closer relations with the EU – that Britain needed to choose between Brussels and Washington. That false choice, for Gordon, was one of the most damaging myths of all.

In contrast to these dead-ends, Brown speaks effusively about Harold MacMillan’s reassessment of Britain’s place in the world after Suez – in particular of the Cabinet Paper “The Position of the UK in World Affairs” commissioned in 1958. The paper includes a sentence that captures Gordon’s starting point on foreign policy perfectly: “In the 19th Century, we had the power to impose our will. Now we have to work largely through alliances & coalitions”.

Of course, Gordon is no dewy-eyed Europhile. At one point he quotes Churchill approvingly saying “We are with Europe, but not of it”. He also, somewhat amusingly, remarks: “We will always be distinctive, situated between mainland Europe and North America”. (I looked up the distances involved: it is 3,700 miles to the USA, and 23 miles to France.) But the dictates of facing up to interdependence, making his beloved Labour Party credible and electable again, and avoiding the catastrophic windmill-chasing of previous governments – all these considerations pointed him towards hard-headed practical engagement with Europe, combined with, rather than at the expense of, other international alliances.

So much for the strategic considerations shaping Gordon’s view of Europe. What were the hallmarks of how he dealt with EU affairs day to day?

Let’s start with a familiar refrain in Gordon’s thinking: the primacy of economics. Repeatedly during his time as Chancellor, Gordon converted huge national challenges into economic problems, and then provided an economic rationale to justify a course of action. He did it on renewing the NHS through the Wanless Report. He did it on climate change by setting up the Stern Report on the economic impact if the world took no action. He did it on immigration – ultimately less
successfully – by justifying larger numbers of foreigners in Britain in terms of their economic impact. It is a version of what the political scientist Bill Riker calls “heresthetics”: the changing of a frame of debate to win a political argument with the public.

He did this for a combination of reasons: because he believed the way to the British public’s heart was hard-headed economic pragmatism. But also, let’s be honest, because as Chancellor it put him in the box-seat in political and policy terms.

Europe was no different for Gordon. He was convinced that the path to UK support for and engagement with Europe is built on economics. Again, MacMillan is the pioneer in Gordon’s lookback at 70 years of postwar engagement with Europe. His speech on 31 July 1961 recommending Britain applies for membership of the EEC sets the pattern, in Brown’s view, for how to make a pro-European argument to Britain, focusing overwhelmingly as it does on the positive investment, trade & growth consequences of joining.

The economic benefit test also served to distinguish between European projects that should be supported and those that should be rejected. The famous Five Tests, assembled in the back of a taxi, was a clever way of marginalising the symbolic, political & diplomatic arguments for the Euro, in favour of the economic arguments. And the disastrous flirtation with a constitutional treaty for the EU during the Noughties conspicuously failed this test in Gordon’s view. He regarded it as a damaging, hubristic diversion, failing to learn the lesson from Maastricht, unable to appeal to the public on any economic added-value rationale. Gordon remained extremely detached from the constitutional treaty debacle – infuriatingly for Tony’s no.10 at the time – and was right to worry that it was a project that alienated people from its elites, with no public justification. And when Tony Blair decided that he would offer a referendum on the outcome of the treaty, Gordon thought it was a huge political mistake – and a deviation from the tried and trusted formula established by MacMillan back in 1961.

Alongside a relentless focus on the economic value-added sat Gordon’s belief in what I call “muscular intergovernmentalism”. His overwhelming focus in the EU was on the Council, and even more narrowly on bilateralism and summity between the Big 6 (the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain & the President of the Commission). He had no time for the European Parliament, nor for the Commission beyond the President himself as an ersatz Head of State. For Gordon, the EU working well meant the Big 6 agreeing something, and driving it forward. The institutional interstices of the Parliament, the Court or any other part of the EU landscape was for others to worry about.

In his book, Gordon refers to this vision of how the EU should work as “a United Europe of States, not a United States of Europe”.

This “muscular intergovernmentalism” was coupled with a heroic faith in shuttle diplomacy – his own shuttle diplomacy – between the heads of Government of countries across Europe (and in the case of the Crash, across the world). His style was to work out the answer to a problem, and then present fellow leaders with the
solution as a fait accompli, relying on the brute force of reason to get them to agree. It was a process he saw as the only way for internationalism to work: the accumulation of a coalition behind his grand plan, assembled by him talking personally to leaders.

It baffled some leaders, who started meetings with Gordon under the mistaken apprehension that they would be discussions and exchanges of views, only to find that Gordon had in best Blue Peter style prepared the answer earlier, and wanted his interlocutor to agree it as a way forward. But it was a process that could produce results. Indeed I think one of the reasons that Gordon had such faith with is because early on in his days as Chancellor, he scored a spectacular success on the issue of resisting corporate tax harmonisation across Europe.

In 1999 the UK was facing the near-certainty of being totally isolated in opposition to the Commission proposal for a harmonised corporate tax rate across Europe, partly to reduce avoidance problems. Gordon responded by arguing that harmonized taxes would lead to large outflows from the EU that would hurt everyone, and proposed instead a new policy to combat tax avoidance based on exchange of tax information between jurisdictions inside and adjacent to the EU. With Gordon’s muscular intergovernmental shuttle diplomacy in overdrive, a majority of 14 to 1 against the UK on harmonization became a unanimous decision in favour of the tax transparency approach.

Gordon thought of this as his greatest EU-diplomatic triumph at the Treasury. He provides an extended discussion of it in his book, and cites it as a model for how to achieve the coordination needed to manage interdependence more generally. It raises an interesting issue about path-dependence in the way leaders see problems – the precedent set by early negotiating successes in shaping their view of subsequent challenges they face. Here is a more recent example. Theresa May’s public remarks on a sector-by-sector ‘cherry-picking’ approach to Brexit negotiations clearly owe a lot to what she saw as her great triumph in EU negotiations when at the Home Office – over the cherry-picking of opt-ins on Justice and Home Affairs issues once the wholesale JHA opt-out came into effect in 2014. Her conception of how to negotiate Brexit was shaped by that success, just as Gordon’s muscular intergovernmentalism was shaped by his success on corporate tax rates.

Gordon’s shuttle diplomacy was extraordinarily vigorous. There was lots of shuttling. But it wasn’t that diplomatic. He was a politician who fundamentally believed the world is propelled by interests, not by relationships. He was totally uninterested in chemistry. Relationships were, to use a Marxist term, epiphenomenal. If interests collided or could be aligned, you could do a deal. It is a worldview that made him, shall we say, unpersuaded of the value added by the Foreign Office, which with some notable exceptions he saw as a department more concerned with relationship management than with delivering Government policy.

His indifference to relationship cultivation led to some interesting moments. On day 3 of being Prime Minister we flew to Berlin for dinner with Merkel, to make a point that Gordon would be taking the EU, and the most powerful leader within it, seriously. But despite the fact the whole point of the dinner was symbolic and relationship-
cultivating, Gordon got impatient at the lack of substance on the agenda for the dinner as we were coming in to land in Berlin. He asked a senior Foreign Office doyen on the plane, irritatedly, “What exactly is the point of this dinner?” The man from the FCO replied: “It's what we call a getting-to-know-you dinner, Prime Minister”. Gordon replied with an expression full of consternation and anger. He just didn’t do getting to know you dinners. There wasn’t time.

On another occasion, Berlusconi had come to London for a private lunch. During which the Italian PM spent an animated ten minutes talking about Roman Abramovich’s new 75-foot yacht, aboard which he, Abramovich and Putin had just spent a lovely weekend. At the end of an effusive description of the vessel, Berlusconi paused and asked: “Have you been on Abramovich’s yacht yet, Gordon?”. “Er no, not yet”, Gordon replied. Yachts are something else Gordon doesn’t do. Bunga bunga had met the Son of the Manse.

Economics, intergovernmentalism, interests not relationships: these were the characteristics of his approach to all matters European. As a matter of political tactics, Gordon saw most EU affairs through the lens of domestic politics. The vast majority of Council business – first in ECOFIN when he was Chancellor, then European Council business when he was Prime Minister – didn’t excite his interest. The point of a visit to the Council was to show people back home that Britain was winning an argument, or a fight. And sometimes that might mean manufacturing a fight.

Let me describe for you a not untypical sequence in the run-up to an ECOFIN meeting when Gordon was Chancellor. On the Friday before a Tuesday morning Council, Gordon would call us in and ask what the main item of business for ECOFIN 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 ECOFIN, Gordon would march straight into the press conference and proclaim victory, for a deal that had been sorted out between officials weeks earlier.

Clever and perhaps just a bit cynical politics, you might think. Yes, but it also reflected a serious part of Gordon’s view about sustaining a pro-European Britain: that the British electorate needed to feel that Britain was defending its corner, winning victories, fending off regulation that would undermine what was distinctive and successful about our economy. Maintaining Britain’s commitment to the EU could only be done with economics, with wins, by what he called a “pick and mix” approach to European engagement that said no to many integration projects (like Schengen or the Euro) and sought specific carve-outs. And also by adopting an approach to negotiations that hugged the slightly Eurosceptic end of the pro-European consensus. Ultimately, of course, the positioning of both Labour and Tory governments at the sceptical end of pro-Europeanism came back to haunt the pro-European case in the referendum. When politicians of both parties who have been
saying for years that they are fighting hard for Britain against the Brussels madness then turn around and say Brussels is a good thing, the public can be forgiven for being unconvinced.

This also raises a fascinating paradox about the kind of pro-European social democrat that Gordon was. Despite the fact that the great achievements of European social democracy, the most successful combination of prosperity, equality and social justice, were achieved in northern European countries, he had no particular cultural connection to or intellectual interest in the political history of post-war Europe. He felt much more affinity with the United States than with continental Europe. And he felt more affinity with the US Democrats – its key figures, its history, its language and politics – than with any centre-left party in the EU. So when Blair and Brown looked to develop progressive policies for transitioning people from welfare into work in the 1990s, it wasn’t Copenhagen or Stockholm that they visited, but Wisconsin.

Working as Gordon’s political Sherpa to the Party of European Socialists grouping, I have to admit I often found this frustrating – not least because centre-left leaders revered him as a political heavyweight. But looking back, I see the logic of looking across the Atlantic rather than across the Channel with more sympathy. Because Gordon was aware of the different political-cultural context of Anglo-American democracy and Anglo-Saxon capitalism. His love of the US Democrats was emotional, but it was also an affinity with a party who like Labour were trying to achieve progressive change in a liberal market economy that made it difficult to tack left.

So overall, how successful was his approach to EU affairs? As Chancellor, very successful. The Treasury used QMV to serve the interest of UK business and in particular the UK financial sector incredibly effectively. The absence of the veto over most economic matters (apart from tax and welfare) was neutralised as a political problem, in the short term, by the sharp-edged, aggressive muscular intergovernmentalism that he pursued.

It was also a success on two issues in particular for which Gordon will always be remembered: the decision not to join the Euro in 2003, and his response to the Crash in 2008.

Gordon was not always opposed to the Euro. Prior to 1997 he spoke in positive terms about the possibility of Britain joining. A story knocked around in Team Brown that in February 1997, before Blair became Prime Minister, Peter Mandelson called Gordon from a radio station in the USA, saying that he was about to go on radio, and wanted for pre-election tactical reasons to rule out joining the Euro for at least the first term of a Labour Govt. Gordon said no, that it should not be ruled out – that we should retain flexibility.

So what changed? Partly it was politics. Gordon’s first act as Chancellor was to set up independence for the Bank of England over interest rate setting. Abandoning what was his greatest early achievement was not an attractive prospect. But working on the Euro decision in the Treasury (one of my first big jobs there having joined in
2001), I was struck by three characteristics of how we approached it: the phenomenal secrecy that shrouded the work we did; the comprehensive, rigorous economics that formed the basis for the verdicts we gave; and the brilliance of Gordon’s dovetailing of economic arguments with political positioning. It was Gordon at his best.

And one main reason for why Gordon and the Treasury agreed that joining the Euro would be economically inadvisable was that they thought it wouldn’t work well. Gordon genuinely thought it was not an optimal currency area. That countries would free ride on fiscal policy, and that its design militated against counter-cyclical policy when it would be most needed. And that the UK economy, with its dependence on financial services, and its unique and dominant housing market, could not be governed properly by the same interest rate decisions that would be needed in Madrid, Berlin, Rome or Athens. Gordon believed the Euro would not work, and would not work for Britain economically. And if it hurt our economy, it would be a disaster for Britain’s relationship with the EU.

You’d be hard pushed to find anyone – economist, politician or voter – who honestly thinks now that judgement call was wrong. And yet right at the end of the process, in March 2003, we suddenly got nervous that Tony Blair would intervene and overrule the economic assessment. Looking back this nervousness was overstated. But it was a fraught time in the Blair-Brown relationship, with differences over Iraq, the Euro & tuition fees policy combining to make life tricky between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. One day on the eve of the start of the Iraq War, Donald Rumsfeld gave a press conference in which he hinted that Tony Blair may decide not to intervene alongside the US in military action in Iraq. The next morning, Ed Balls, Gordon’s chief adviser – and incidentally the most talented person I ever worked with in politics – came up to me in the corridor and said: “Imagine this scenario: Tony decides not to go into Iraq with the Americans. He becomes the darling of Europe for siding with France and Germany and not the US. On the back of this popularity, Blair rips up the Five Tests and steamrollers us into the Euro. What do you think?” I said I thought it was possible but unlikely. “So do I”, Ed said. “I think I do, anyway”.

If one great success was taking control of the Euro assessment process, his other great moment came in the face of the economic Crash in 2008. The events of October 2nd to October 9th 2008 are etched in my mind. It was a period of turmoil. At one point I was in a meeting where someone said it was not out of the question that soldiers might have to be brought onto the streets to stop a mass run on the banks. Gordon knew that the only response that would avert a continuing, cataclysmic slide in the markets was a coordinated global response. But it looked impossible to achieve that agreement. Each government seemed to be have a different favoured response. The Bush administration opted for a TARP bill, buying up toxic assets; while over that weekend the Irish Government announced they would guarantee bank deposits (and the Germans hinted they may do the same).

Gordon’s approach was to get international backing for an approach that combined recapitalisation with guarantees for interbank lending. An impromptu summit in Paris called by President Sarkozy on October 4th didn’t generate an agreement. On
Tuesday, officials went into the Cabinet Room throughout the day, as Gordon prepared for PMQs, telling him RBS was in danger of imminent collapse. At the end of the day, Gordon authorised the announcement of his recapitalisation plan for the next morning – remarking that if you do a bail-out late in the afternoon it looks like panic, but if you do it first thing in the morning, it looks like strategy.

The next day the announcement was made, and a coordinated interest rate cut across the world’s major central banks was announced five minutes before PMQs. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive, and Gordon made the decision to take the principles of the British plan and go global. That Sunday, he was invited to lead the discussion at an emergency heads of government meeting of Euro countries – five years after deciding not to join it. And over the next six months he showed energy, determination and stamina that I’ve never seen in anyone else in politics – inventing a new international organisation (the heads of govt G20, with Brazil ceding the Chair to the UK early) to provide the venue for his muscular intergovernmentalism. Six months later at the G20 summit in London, a $1.1 trillion reflationary plan was announced.

Gordon didn’t save the world, as Paul Krugman famously said. But he showed that in a time of unprecedented economic crisis, muscular intergovernmentalism could work – even for only a brief though crucial time. Yet this very success also sheds light on the limits of Gordon’s approach to matters European and international, on which, in the spirit of honest reflection, I want to end on.

Oscar Wilde once said that the “problem with socialism is that it will take up too many evenings”. Something similar can be said for muscular intergovernmentalism. On specific issues, such as corporate tax rules, or bailing out the world’s banks during a time of crisis, the vigorous but painstaking work of building a coalition, one head of government at a time, may be necessary and may work. But it is simply infeasible to serve as a general model for how to do business across all issues. For one thing, the EU operates on a system of constant trades across a panoply of issues – based on a recognition that you concede on things you care less about to deliver you results in those areas that you do. No UK government has ever been really comfortable reconciling itself to these trades. And Gordon wasn’t either.

For another thing, the EU is much more than deals between the heads of Government. Gordon had no time for Parliament, the politics within European party groupings, or intra-Commission politics. When he was asked by the FCO to intervene to back British officials for senior posts inside the European Commission, he rarely engaged.

The best example of where this rebounded against us was the appointment of Cathy Ashton to the post of High Representative – essentially responsible for EU foreign policy – in 2009. Gordon very much wanted the UK to get a senior economic portfolio in the new Barroso Commission. Yet he was hamstrung by two factors. Firstly, Tony Blair had ambitions to become the first President of the European Council. In the wake of the Iraq War, and because Blair was from a big rather than a small EU member state, Gordon knew the chances of this happening were vanishingly small. Yet Blair continued to harbour hopes until very late in the day, and Gordon felt duty...
bound to quietly support or rather, not oppose) Blair’s nascent bid, and therefore unable to lobby for another job.

Secondly, after the Blair candidacy had finally died, Gordon found himself the prisoner of EU party politics. The centre-right EPP grouping & the centre-left PES groupings had done a deal that the EPP would get to appoint the President of the Council, while the PES would be queen-makers for the new High Rep post. The Blair saga meant that the UK was one of the only remaining countries yet to nominate a Commissioner candidate. And the number of female Commissioners nominated by other countries was shamefully low.

These considerations all conspired to limit Gordon’s options. Gordon went through various forms of minor resistance – trying to get David Miliband to consider the appointment, for example. Eventually we were told by PES leaders that Britain could get the new High Rep post, but that the successful candidate should be a woman from the centre-left. By the time we flew to Brussels for the key PES meeting, this meant only one possibility: appointing Cathy Ashton, already a member of the Commission, an excellent colleague, trusted by Merkel & other leaders, and the favoured candidate of other Heads of Government whose support Britain would need in the PES meeting to be successful. Cathy, by the way, turned out to be an excellent High Rep, playing pivotal roles in important moments such as the Iran nuclear deal.

That was a case of Gordon being hamstrung by domestic politics & not reading PES politics in Brussels very well. In other ways Gordon was straightforwardly unlucky. He fiercely rejected the idea of a zero-sum relationship between the UK’s relationship with the USA and engagement with the EU. Yet by 2007 when he became Prime Minister, the Iraq war had driven a huge wedge between Europe (at least Old Europe) and the USA. The constitutional treaty had been a damaging, self-indulgent distraction that ignored all Gordon’s rules for how to engage with sceptical citizens. And the combination of the Crash and structural weaknesses of the Euro meant that Europe could no longer provide the economic stability and prosperity that gave it legitimacy. The Crash also ushered in a general retreat from international cooperation, with the exception of the 2009 G-20 moment, making intergovernmental advances in trade or climate change near-impossible. The Copenhagen Summit in 2009 was a particularly dismal illustration of the breakdown of intergovernmental cooperation in which Gordon passionately believed.

These were not propitious times for cooperation between enlightened heads of government. Nor were they fertile times to make the case for Gordon’s main mantra about the EU: that if Britain wanted to engage with the rest of the world, investing in its membership of the EU was essential first pit-stop. A man whose entire political strategy rested on economic justifications for international cooperation ran up against both the collapse in the ability of market economies to sustain prosperity and living standards, and the rise of a politics across the West prioritising issues beyond the economic. When voters started questioning whether globalisation was inevitable or acceptable, when anger about immigration irrespective of its economic contribution to UK GDP and productivity grew and grew, the New Labour worldview and
arguments that Brown and Blair had articulated successfully for years suddenly seemed to belong to a previous age.

Now, ten years later, we are paying the price for a strategy of engagement with Europe that relied too much on a rather abstract argument about the benefits of trade and the EU single market for the UK economy as a whole. It was not a case that survived the Crash. It isn’t one that sat well with families seeing their incomes cut and living standards decline.

It’s easy to look back and criticise the inadequacies of New Labour’s approach to EU engagement. But the Crash changed the playbook of politics in Britain across all issues, perhaps the European issue most of all. It made what worked in 2005 looked like part of the problem of by 2015.

But my one big regret about this narrative is that we never made a genuinely social democratic case for Europe. Our argument was not just economic, pragmatic and pick-and-mix: it was almost always an economic liberal case. But the Left’s case for the EU, as I think Gordon knew, goes far beyond the scale of the market it provided. Of course the single market is an important part of binding the UK to the EU. But the EU should also be the best example of what happens when governments come together, and stand up together, against the power of global capital and multinational corporations. It should show how democracies can combine to impose limits on markets. At times it does this incredibly well – just ask Amazon and Apple, for example. But what a tragedy for pro-Europeans that in recent years, the EU’s approach to crises in Greece, Portugal and elsewhere has seemed as concerned with imposing limits to democracy as with limits to markets.

Apart from on Britain’s adoption of the Social Chapter back in 1997, I think Gordon believed that a social-democratic case for Europe was too radical a message for a Labour Prime Minister to communicate to a public that was sceptical of the EU. He may have been right then. But given the journey that the UK electorate has been on since the Crash, I am not sure he is right now.

Gordon’s approach to international affairs often came back to a fundamental question: how can countries combine to meet ever-more severe international challenges without sacrificing the sovereignty & control that their domestic electorates increasingly demand? Gordon’s answer – muscular intergovernmentalism – worked for some high-profile, big-ticket issues. And he deserves more credit for that than he gets. Yet ultimately, an EU of 28 (soon to be 27) needs to develop a more effective model for transnational cooperation than the one Gordon was prepared to offer. Without the Crash, I suspect Gordon’s brand of intergovernmentalism may have had a chance to persuade Britain to keep faith with the EU for a little while longer. As it is, a Britain detached from the EU, frantically searching for multiple overlapping trade deals to compensate for the catastrophic effects of Brexit, would do well to find a Prime Minister with just 25% of Gordon’s energy, stamina, intellect & sincerity. We’re going to need those qualities in our leaders very badly.

Stewart Wood 03.11.17