BREXIT

Taking up the comment of Alistair, the Editor of our Newsletter relating to the historic event of 23rd. June 2016, this was indeed an historic set of events. I voted to remain in the European Union. I spoke to a number of friends in the community before I voted to elicit their opinions. Many of my friends in the area run businesses and are self employed, I have always been an employed person whether in private businesses or in the public sector as a Teacher working for most of my life in comprehensive schools. They are, in my view, in a far better position than I to judge the effects of political and economic events on people's lives. However, I was not able to elicit a definitive answer from any of my friends about whether we should leave or stay. One friend stated out that no one really knew with certainty what the short and long term results might be.

There is no doubt that being part of the European Union has been particularly problematic to the Conservative Party. It is ironic that we were taken into this by the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1973. I think that part of the problem has been that since the end of World War II many have questioned what the role of Britain in the World should be. The World, post 1945, saw two superpowers emerge the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. large sections of Europe were in ruins The United Kingdom had their attempt to join the Common Market vetoed primarily by President Charles de Gaulle of France. He apparently thought that the U.K. was more of a transatlantic power that a continental one.

My argument would be now is why does a choice have to be made? Britain is, in my view, in a very centralised location. It faces the Atlantic and the Americas to the West and Europe to the East. Its position is similar, in a sense, although this is not an exact comparison, to the Italian ports of Venice and Genoa two trading ports that were able to take advantage of trade in both eastern and western directions during the Renaissance period. Nowadays B.M.W., for instance, does huge trade in China and India and yet Germany is the predominant European country in economic terms. Another historical example of economic cooperation might be the Hanseatic League, a very powerful trading organisation. This was a Confederation of Merchant Guilds. The Guild system was of vital importance in the Middle Ages in Britain as on the Continent of Europe. They controlled the training of people entering trades and also ensured that acceptable standards were delivered to customers. The Hanseatic League dominated the Baltic Trade from 1400-1700 along the coastal area of Europe. The Baltic Trade was, of course, very important to ports on the east coast of England. There were very significant cities in Holland e.g. Groningen and Zutphen that were part of the Hanseatic League and in Germany, for instance, the cities of Bremen and Hamburg; these two cites call themselves Hansa cities. Hamburg and Bremen continue to refer themselves as "Free Hansa Cities "with Lubeck referred to as "Hanseatic City". The power of the Hanseatic League was shown in the reign of Henry VII (he reigned from 1485-1509); he was not able to impose his will on it. In 1489 a Treaty was signed with Denmark to give English fisherman the right to fish in Icelandic waters. Does this not sound like the present day not the distant past!

Certainly that as I write this article history is being made. I do not think there has been a time in my life when events have been so fast-moving. Each day brings a new development. I wrote previously about the Franco-Prussian War because I felt that it was so important in that it set in train events for the next hundred years or so. Many others might disagree with me but surely that is the point of a subject like History and in the wider context the value of living in a democratic society. These current events will be analysed by historians and political commentators for many years to come.

History is about stories of people and events but it is also about the analysis of people and events. I was struck by a completely unrelated comment made by A.N. Wilson in his brilliant biography of C.S. Lewis. He discussed the election to the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University in 1938 and the candidate that Lewis and Tolkein supported; and he commented that “no quarrel in England is ever about what it seems to be about”.

So that brings me to the point that it is very difficult to analyse key events from the present because we are not privy to the many conversations that must inevitably take place behind closed doors. It is only by mature reflection on the events of these past few weeks that they will be fully understood and analysed. One of my thoughts on all of this, and this is only an opinion, is that Referenda are not a satisfactory way of settling constitutional matters. I think that we can all remember the concern that set in when it seems that Scotland might vote to leave the Union in 2014. That Referendum ended with the result that the Government had clearly hoped for. The one held in June this year on the membership of the European Union yielded a different result! This result will clearly be, I imagine, the defining moment of David Cameron’s Premiership!

The new Prime Minister Theresa May has moved quickly to form her new Cabinet and, as stated earlier, events are moving very quickly. A key question is what will happen in the Labour Party with its struggles over who leads and the competing interests and factions within that Party. Equally what will happen in relation to the Liberal Democrats? Will we see some type of realignment of the political centre ground? There are, in my view, a number of very clever and well-informed political commentators on all of the major T.V. channels so I would suggest that for those interested in politics we will have interesting weeks and months ahead. One of the issues that has been raised is that of age, the idea that somehow the over 60’s and the so-called Baby boomers (this refers to the generation of people born between 1945 and 1964 though this definition is open to question amongst demographers) have somehow stolen the future of the young. I would counter that by asking how many young people actually turned out to vote as a percentage of the population.

Another interesting aspect will be what will happen in Scotland? The people of Scotland voted by a very significant majority to stay in the European Union. The Scottish Nationalists, as we know, are led by Nicola Sturgeon who is in my view and in the view of many, a very capable politician. Mrs. May commented the she was a Unionist and made the point that what is very little known today is that the Conservative Party's full title is the Conservative and Unionist Party. We are, as I have just stated, living through very interesting times!

John Hodson