June 1940 vs. June 2016: Putting UK Relations with the EU in Historical Perspective

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In this essay, Professor Bosco presents the early efforts of UK politicians to involve their country in the European integration process as a contrast to more recent UK activities -- most notably Brexit -- which have sought to establish barriers between the British people and the rest of Europe. This analysis draws from Bosco's recently published book, *June 1940, Great Britain and the First Attempt to Build a European Union.*

June 2016 represented a turning point in British history. The decision to leave the European Union at the most critical period since its existence could bring unpredictable and far reaching consequences both for the United Kingdom and the Union itself.

June 1940 was a turning point in British history. On the afternoon of 16 June, a few hours before the French Government opted for the capitulation, Churchill made, on behalf of the British Government, an offer of "indissoluble union." "There would have been great difficulties to surmount," commented Sir John Colville, Private Secretary to Churchill, "but we had before us the bridge to a new world, the first elements of European or even World Federation."

When a sceptical Churchill put forward to the British Cabinet the text of the declaration drafted by Jean Monnet, Sir Arthur Salter, and Robert Vansittart, he was surprised at the amount of support it received. The Cabinet adopted the document with some minor amendments, and de Gaulle, who saw it as a means of keeping France in the war, telephoned Reynaud with the proposal for an "indissoluble union" with "joint organs of defence, foreign, financial and economic policies," a common citizenship and a single War Cabinet. The proposal, however, never reached the table of the French Government. The spirit of capitulation, embodied in Weygand and Pétain prevailed, and France submitted herself to the German will, for the second time in seventy years.

Many of those who had been recently converted to the idea of co-operation and understanding with France and the Continent were disenchanted. The British people, having just achieved a European identity, psychologically broke off with Europe. The marriage so carefully contrived

by the French and their friends in London was never consummated, not because the British were unwilling, but because by the time they plighted their troth, the French themselves were no longer able to see it through. One should therefore not be surprised at the negative response by Eden to Guy Mollet, when the French Prime Minister asked his colleague across the Channel, in the middle of the Suez crisis, if the British Government was ready to renew the offer of common citizenship made in 1940.

The summer of 1940 was certainly of fundamental importance to British attitudes to European integration. Before May, a closer relationship with France was the main object of British policy. After June, the British were forced to rely on their "kin" across the Atlantic. Britain was still, genuinely at that stage, a world power—albeit in rapid decline—with global interests in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Given the legacy of the summer of 1940—gratitude to the United States and the Commonwealth, and bitterness towards the French and the Low Countries for "letting us down", as they saw it—Great Britain took a negative attitude to the process of European integration during the post-war years. In those crucial months of 1940, deep currents and attitudes were formed and reformed in Great Britain, and a new sense of community with the United States rendered the North Atlantic an Anglo-Saxon lake around which free institutions flourished after the war.

After the Munich crisis, Great Britain had to face the danger of another European war, with the inevitable loss of the Empire, and it was at this point that the country first began to favour the application of the federalist principle to Anglo-French relations. In this conversion to federalism, a fundamental role was played by the Federal Union, the first federalist movement organised on a popular basis, and created in the autumn of 1938 by three young men: Charles Kimber, Derek Rawnsley, and Patrick Ransome.

The contribution of Federal Union to the development of the federal idea in Great Britain and Europe was to express and organise the beginning of a new political militancy: the aim of the political struggle was no longer the conquest of national power, but the building of a supranational institution, a federation (not a league) of nations. With Federal Union, the European federation was no longer an abstract "idea of reason", but the first step of a historical process: the overcoming of the nation-State, the modern political formula which institutionalises the political division of mankind. Federal Union represented a paradigmatic experience since it embodied the incarnation of the idea of European unification into a movement, and as such it also signified its first and decisive step in the history of that process. To write the history of Federal Union means to analyse the formation of ideas and decisions which dominated the first months of the Second World War, bringing the federalist project to enter the threshold of the Foreign Office and Downing Street.

Such an epic episode of the Second World War has been almost completely forgotten in Great Britain today, in spite of the fact that it deeply marked the future process of European integration. Not only the two major pioneers and architects of the European Union—Jean Monnet and Altiero Spinelli—owed much to the Federal Union for their federalist "conversion", but the British political tradition—of which federalism is a major product— also provided the theoretical basis for the European construction. It is not an exaggeration to argue that the

European Union is very much the creation of the British political tradition, as opposed to the Continental one.

During the interval between the Munich Pact and the downfall of France, a large and powerful literature was actually produced in the United Kingdom by a number of distinguished representatives of Liberal and Socialist thought, such as Lord Lothian, Lionel Curtis, William Beveridge, Lord Lugard, Lionel Robbins, Arnold Toynbee, Henry Wickham Steed, Ivor Jennings, Kenneth Wheare, William Curry, Norman Angell, Norman Bentwich, James Meade, J. B. Priestley, Alan L.

Rowse, Henry Noel Brailsford, Barbara Wootton, G. D. H. Cole, Julian Huxley, Ronald Gordon Mackay, Konni Zilliacus, Margaret Storm Jameson, Cyril Joad, and Olaf Stapledon. This literature, which had both a direct and indirect influence on British political thinking at the time, has been almost completely forgotten in Britain today. However, it is held in high regard by Continental scholars, where it is referred to as the "Anglo-Saxon Federalist School," and thought of as the most illuminating contribution to the evolution of the federal idea towards a mature theoretical articulation, and its application to the unification of Continental Europe.

Between the winter and spring of 1940, not only intellectuals, but also a number of prominent politicians—such as Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Eden, Attlee, Bevin, Sinclair, and Amery—and members of the Anglican Church—such as the Archbishops of York and Durham—openly supported the federalist project. The major national daily and weekly newspapers—The Times, Daily Telegraph, Manchester Guardian, News Chronicle, Daily Express, Daily Herald, Daily Worker, Observer, and Sunday Times—gave wide coverage to a lively debate on federalism.

It was this debate on federalism in general, and on Anglo-French war-time collaboration in particular, that brought the British Government to consider the application of the federal principle in order to transform Anglo-French war co-operation into a permanent and stable political union. Jean Monnet—then Chairman of the Anglo-French Coordination Committee, a body based in London and created on the initiative of Monnet himself in order to give greater effect to the war effort—had been strongly influenced by that lively debate. Monnet recalled that in this respect he became persuaded of the need for a federation between the two countries by just reading The Times, and that he took the initiative to discuss it with Chamberlain before the German offensive in May.

From March 1940 the Foreign Office had very seriously examined an "Act of Perpetual Association between the United Kingdom and France," drafted by Arnold Toynbee and Alfred Zimmern at Chatham House, and set up an ad hoc inter-ministerial Committee chaired by Maurice Hankey in order to translate it into a Constitution. The fact that the Foreign Office paid serious attention to a federal scheme in order to outline a new basis for Anglo-French relations was certainly for the strategic role played by Chatham House and, within the organisation by its main architect, Lionel Curtis. However, it would not have happened without the popular support for federalism which Federal Union had generated within British society at large. It was Federal Union actually which acted as a catalyst for ideas and behaviours which had already been relatively widespread within British society for some decades.

In spite of the obvious dislike for federalism in Great Britain, there is a strong federalist trend in British political culture. In three very different historical contexts, federalism inspired an important section of British political life. The rise of political movements such as the Imperial Federation League, the Round Table and Federal Union, resulted from the pressure of events connected in each case with the future of the Empire. Federalism was regarded as the solution to problems arising from the first signs of crisis, the disintegration and the possible collapse of Great Britain and its Empire.

Yet political conditions did not favour the success of these solutions. The British unitary tradition and the very fact that federalism was linked to a sense of decline, militated against widespread enthusiasm for such causes. The lives of those movements were relatively short, and as a result of their political failure, they became educational organisations: the Imperial Institute, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and the Federal Trust for Education and Research.

With the descent of the Teutonic night—and the consequent shifting of the centre of gravity of world power from the Channel to the North Atlantic—the only lights which allowed Europeans to comprehend the deep meaning of the tragedy which was all-consuming, and to imagine which way they could, one day, follow in order to return to the centre of their great history, were those fed by federalist ideals. From the eclipse of Federal Union immediately followed the rise of the European Federalist Movement, a political organisation that, under the leadership of Spinelli and Mario Albertini, marked the path of the European rescue. It is not a coincidence that this long march, from division to unity, has been initiated definitely from Resistance to Nazi-Fascism. Without the federalist perspective, the re-conquest of freedom would have been thwarted in the archaic forms of national sovereignty. National restoration, followed by the starting of the Cold War, has however been unable to stop the process of transferring portions of sovereignty by national States to the first supranational formation of contemporary history.

In the history of organised federalism, Federal Union represents a quantum leap, compared to previous experiences. According to a widely accepted definition, the mature form of organised federalism must have three basic characteristics. First of all, being designed to unify all the supporters of the federation, irrespective of their political beliefs and social affiliations, a federalist organisation should not be constituted as a political party, aimed at the conquest of national power, and antagonistic, within the society, to political organisations. The struggle for national political power is, in fact, in sharp contradiction to the transfer to supranational institutions of substantial portions of national sovereignty. Secondly, they should be movements aimed at uniting all supporters of the federation, beyond their national loyalty, and directed to strengthen a supranational loyalty able to generate a political action on a supranational level. Finally, such action should aim to directly influence public opinion, regardless of national electoral campaigns, in order to influence the process of formation of a supranational political will.

However, the existence of movements with these characteristics represents only the subjective condition for effective action. There must also be objective conditions, produced by periodic crises of national political systems. In periods of relative stability, when national governments seem able to successfully settle economic, political and social problems, the movements for European federation are not able to exercise effective influence on national governments,

because public opinion tends to support governmental policies. Only at times of acute crisis, when governments are not able to cope with the pressure of events, public opinion appears willing to support a supranational solution. During these crises, the movements are able—if they are well organised and influential—to mobilise the support for such solutions, and to induce governments to adopt them.

In the course of such a crisis, the moderate school has adopted in Europe a functionalist approach, while the radical school has fought to initiate a democratic constitutional process, in which the ultimate responsibility to define the nature of the new supranational institutions falls into the hands of the representatives of the European people, on the model of the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, and the successive passage of national ratifications.

The existence of these three fundamental characteristics manifested itself for the first time in the history of organised federalism specifically with the Federal Union. The preceding movements had had the key feature of gravitating around the figure of the founder, who played a guiding role within them, or to constituting themselves as leagues, in order to achieve a specific political goal, and then dissolving themselves after attaining the aim for which they had been created, or as a consequence of the failure in achieving it, as in the case of the Imperial Federation League and the Round Table. The movements which followed Federal Union were certainly occasionally influenced by charismatic leaders, but they continued to exist even after the disappearance of their charismatic leaders. Moreover, they identified from the very beginning the temporal dimension of their existence with the historical course itself, since the battle for the European federation is just a stage—and certainly not the most critical—in the fight for the realisation of the rule of law in the world as a whole. Their fundamental raison d'etre lies in fact in the affirmation of an absolute value—therefore with a metahistorical character—that of universal peace.

If it is true that Federal Union marks the watershed between an archaic and a mature form of organised federalism, it appears plausible to identify the year zero of militant federalism with the birth of Federal Union. Since it is not possible to prescind from Federal Union in order to assess the significance of the first supranational political action in modern history—it is not possible, in fact, to consider as such the attempts to reform on federal lines the British Empire, or that by Briand to create a European confederation—it is also not possible to prescind from Federal Union in order to assess the significance of the emergence in history of a new political behaviour, according to which the end of the political struggle is no longer the conquest of national power, but the construction of a supranational institution.

Federal Union also represented a paradigmatic experience as regards the manifestation of this new political behaviour in two schools: the moderate and the radical one. Federal Union was primarily the expression of the radical school—defined constitutional by Spinelli —but, as we have seen, stances by the functionalist school coexisted, either within the movement itself, or within the broad debate generated by the movement.

Following June's failure, it was precisely Monnet who, inspired by David Mitrany, became the champion of that functionalism which has marked the history of the European post-war construction. The battle which the three young founders of Federal Union thought they could win

in the space of a few months has developed over more than half a century, involving more than a generation. At its most critical period, the European Union owes much to those intrepid young men who, in the autumn of 1938, devoted themselves to the impossible, proving to the world that that venture was considered as such only for having never been attempted.