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“Between Europe and America: Britain after Brexit”

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After Brexit, Britain once again faces a dilemma of finding its role in the world between Europe, the United States, and the Commonwealth. Professor Gamble compares the British referendum on accession of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1975 with the 2016 referendum on leaving the European Union as member state. While 67 per cent voted for joining the EEC in 1975, only 48 per cent of voters chose Remain in 2016. Gamble reflects on the reasons behind this drop of support for the EU/EEC by analyzing the 47-year period of the British membership. He finds that the membership was an uneasy one, in which the UK chose to opt out of the Schengen area, Eurozone, and the European Exchange Rate Mechanism.

Gamble alludes to a change of EU-politics across British political parties over time. Historically, the Labour party was opposed to European integration throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, while the Conservative party was pro-European, with Margaret Thatcher as strong supporter of British EU-membership. Beginning in the 1990s, the Conservatives started to adopt a more critical view of EU integration. Gamble continues to discuss the role of British Media in pursuing a strong anti-EU campaign. On the other hand, he refers to universities, civil service, and businesses as the bedrock of EU support. The United Kingdom is a divided country with regards to Brexit. These divides emerge between generations and groups with different educational backgrounds, as well as geographically between big cities and small towns and across regions.

The meaning of Brexit remains puzzling. It has been considered a vote for “Britain First”, as supporters expect British jobs for British workers, improved public services and infrastructure in the regions, as well as a re-balanced British economy. Brexit has also been seen as a populist insurgency that was motivated by cultural resentments of Leave voters against London and its elites. Yet another explanation considers Brexit as call for a Global Britain that is characterized by de-regulation, flexible labor markets, lower taxes and a smaller state. According to Gamble, supporters of a Global Britain see Brexit as an elite project and are willing to sacrifice sectors that depend on EU-membership in order to promote new global service sectors. Gamble concludes that in rational terms, Brexit – in whichever form – is worse than remaining a member state of the EU, as it means that Britain loses access to its main trading partner, negatively impacting investment and supply chains.

As the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, questions emerge whether it will form a stronger alliance with the United States. Gamble states that for many Brexiteers, Brexit was a choice for the US as opposed to the EU. Ideas of “Anglobalization” and the 1970s Hegemonic stability theory promote the belief that the US could take over Britain’s role in the world in spreading Britain’s rules-based, liberal, and cosmopolitan world order. The idea of an Anglo-American hegemony has existed since the 19th century and serves as a myth, as political space, and as an imagined community of interests and ideals. It can be found in Winston Churchill’s vision of Three Circles of the British Commonwealth and Empire, the Anglosphere and a United Europe, and was shared by Charles Dilke and Joseph Chamberlain. The United States and Britain have held a ‘special relationship’. After reaching a high point with the creation of the NATO in 1949, a series of frictions including the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Vietnam War and the Heath government caused a decline in US-UK relations. Other leaders, including Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, as well as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, positively impacted the relationship of the two nations. Gamble states that recently, the debate on Britain’s future role focuses on a global Britain that is rooted in the Anglosphere rather than Europe.

Professor Gamble concludes that the Brexit referendum of 2016 posed fundamental questions to the country in terms of economy, culture and geopolitics. While the 2019 General Election led to a resolution of the Brexit debate, as the Conservatives were able to unite the Leave vote behind their party, considerable tensions between different wings of the coalition remain. The country seems once again to be in a stage of indecision between Europe and America, as it is confronted with the option of pursuing different strategies, such as a Global Britain, a European Britain, and Britain First.