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The evolution continues

By Bunn Nagara

BOTH the Leave and Remain sides of “Brexit” portray it as a unique and dramatic break from the norm, but Britain’s EU exit is merely the latest phase of the evolution of Europe.

Historically, Britain’s vote to quit was a natural, even predictable progression of the state. Far from “no turning back,” this is not the end of state remodelling.

Observers of Britain’s latest referendum on Europe compare it with the 1975 version, but the real issues go back centuries. More specifically, four centuries to Westphalia in today’s Germany.

In 1648 several peace treaties were signed in Westphalia, creating the modern nation state with such principles as national sovereignty based on distinct borders and a code of conduct among governments.

In time, other kingdoms and principalities also evolved towards the Westphalian model. Meanwhile, the European states developed and grew, becoming colonial masters through conquest in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Britain was the most successful European colonial power as its rule spanned the globe. In the 19th century, it was also the world’s leading industrial nation.

Then came the period of decolonisation, as former colonies gained independence and developed in the Westphalian mode.

European nation states looked inward as they abandoned their “overseas possessions.”

The “New World,” an early term for America coined by Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci who gave the continent its name, had also been developing for three centuries.

Led primarily by the US, a former British colony, the earlier emergent economies became increasingly competitive. The British economy in particular had further been weakened by the Second World War.

The next phase of the Westphalian state came after the end of that war. Spurred on by the Cold War that divided Europe, the future of western European states seemed to lie in grouping together.

The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1951 to create the European Coal and Steel Community. It was to ensure peace by promoting cooperation between historical adversaries France and Germany.

In 1957, the Treaty of Rome was signed to establish the European Economic Community (EEC).

The 1992, Maastricht Treaty then made the EEC the European Community (EC), which in turn became the European Union (EU).

In the process, the euro, the Eurozone and a string of controversial rules originating in impersonal bureaucracies in Brussels emerged.

Much of this left a proud Britain, separated from mainland Europe, unimpressed and even rebellious.

Regardless of the party in government, Britain was never a complete Europhile as its rejection of the euro shows.

Even Margaret Thatcher, although committed to Europe, had her limits with the Europeanisation of Britain. But the process continued, and after Thatcher it became even more intense and insensitive to national prerogatives.

In the 1960s Britain applied twice to join the EEC but was blocked by France. It gained entry in 1973, with the Wilson government the following year promising a referendum in 1975 on staying or leaving.

A majority voted to stay. However, those campaigning to leave argued that the referendum had been fixed by big corporations paying big money for Britain to stay in, with hopes of reaping huge profits.

By contrast, this second referendum is vastly different in an age of widespread ICT, better informed citizens, some bitter experiences of membership – and broader participation. Thus, the different result.

The referendum is hailed as the democratic way to decide, but the result of the referendum (to leave the EU) is even more democratic than the Remain side may like to acknowledge.

The dispute is partly between big British corporations which benefit from European integration, and many more small and medium enterprises (SMEs) tied up in intractable EU regulations. Since SMEs also make up most of the British economy, a vote in their interests is the democratic option.

Those pressing to quit are incensed at having to pay for reduced sovereignty, while being made helpless with growing disenfranchisement.

Some of the 10,000 EU officials earn more than Britain's Prime Minister – and are paid by the British taxpayer.

Both sides agree that the chief issues are the economy, immigration and national identity.

On balance, the substance of these issues favours the Leave side over Remain.

It may seem that arguments over the national economy could be made either way, but Britain is already the world's fourth-largest national economy (currently fifth with the plummeting pound) regardless of EU membership.

Britain's trade with EU countries is said to be only 6% and declining, while non-EU markets are of growing importance to Britain.

Ten years after its establishment, the EU's GDP surpassed that of the US in 2003. But its share of global GDP dropped from 30% to 24% in another 10 years (2013) because of newly emerging economies.

Immigration is an issue the Remain side could not win on. It is of growing concern in Europe, and British control over inflows into the country has been usurped by the EU.

National identity also works against Remain, which could only deny there had been any loss. Yet increasingly, the EU seems to erode the social, cultural and even political elements that constitute British national character.

Perhaps chief among these is Britain as "the mother of democracies," having taken the Greek democratic ideal and spread it around the world – only to lose it to Brussels.

Making the arguments on both sides required covering much ground and many issues. Challenged on the core issues, the Remain side could only unleash passion amid some confusion.

They argued that US officials like President Obama said it would be better for Britain to remain in the EU. But these are American officials representing US interests, and the US itself is not in the EU.

They said being in the EU was better for defence, but defence issues are covered by Nato, not the EU. Prime Minister David Cameron stressed the economy as key to Britain's future. Nobody was disputing that, but the greater argument for the economy lay in leaving by saving money.

Former premier Gordon Brown argued passionately for the EU as the best guarantor of peace between France and Germany. That is an argument for both countries to stay in the EU, not for Britain to do so.

Sweden, Denmark and even France could be next in pushing to quit. Even Germany may not be far behind.

As Remain advocates insisted just before the vote that leaving would mean higher taxes imposed by countries like Germany, senior German officials immediately denied that.

Germans have also had reservations about the EU. In the 1990s they complained that EU regulations prevented a ban on suspected cattle feed from Britain that had devastated its beef industry with mad cow disease.

Now that Europe has gone to the edge of full integration and seen a component part step back, what lessons can other regions draw from it?

Every region is different. No other region has integrated as much as the EU, or has a Nato equivalent as a defence bloc, or is without a credible potential adversary today like Europe.

Britons and Europeans on the mainland will have to continue to fashion the nation state as they see fit.

Others will observe and learn from their successes and failures.

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