

# Thanks Mr Chignell; an appreciation of one man's belief in Europe

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On being expelled from his grammar school in 1959 for, he stresses, a misdemeanour he claims didn't commit, future frontman of legendary and long-lasting group, The Who, Roger Daltrey, was told by his headmaster, "You'll never make anything of your life, Daltrey" Though that oft-quoted suggests the rest is history, for those who want the inside story of The Who, he's just written a very readable autobiography titled *Thanks a Lot Mr Kibblewhite* in mock homage to his headmaster who clearly had no inkling of the future that lay ahead for Daltrey.

For those wondering about the title of this blog, it is in genuine and heartfelt homage to the headteacher of the school I attended in the 1970s and whose influence and thoughts have remained with me ever since. Given the current emotion and furore concerning continued membership of Europe, his views on Europe seem more relevant than ever.

Like all headteachers, Mr Chignell at first seemed a remote figure whose interactions were limited to speaking at morning assembly though, I got to know him better later. However, even as an eleven year old, I identified something different in this man. And one thing that seemed unusual was the fact that the caretaker of the school, who lived on site, was a German. Though the second world war had been over for over a quarter of a century, there were many whose memories of this dreadful conflict were still raw; particularly if their loved ones had been killed or injured or had suffered from the effects of bombing by the Luftwaffe.

Discovering that Mr Chignell had been a prisoner of war in Germany during the war was a revelation. Moreover, that the German caretaker had been a guard in the camp he was held seemed unusual. But, as I came to understand, this act of rapprochement was typical of a man whose experiences during the war had led him to conclude that

conflict was the failure of politicians. I have no idea what services Mr Chignell as part of as he never talked of the glory of war. Rather, his stance was that whilst war is sometimes inevitable, as was the case in the existential threat that the Nazis posed, we should strive to avoid it all costs.

As a 14 year old in the summer of 1975 when the first referendum was fought, the arguments played seemed pretty irrelevant. I wouldn't vote so what could I do? However, as the child of immigrants who'd come to England in search of work, I understood only too well the importance of an institution that was dedicated to sharing resources and creating opportunity and equality in poorer countries. At one assembly in particular, Mr Chignell passionately argued that continued membership of the EEC (European Economic Community) would make the potential for the sort of war that he'd been involved in less likely in the future.

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Almost 44 years on from that the referendum of 1975, there can be no doubt that we've enjoyed relative peace and prosperity free of the conflict that blighted this country between 1914-18 and 1939-45. Though I accept that leaving the Europe will not make war any more likely, the desire of Brexiteers' to create 'splendid isolation' is one based on the apparent belief that it's better to go it alone.

Undoubtedly the most unedifying part of the current debate concerning the potential departure of the UK from the EU has been the views expressed by some that other European countries are underhand and don't understand British culture. I make this comment in the recognition that such a comment is loaded in that there are huge regional variations. Fintan O'Toole's book, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* provides a wonderful analysis of the constant tension that has underpinned and, ultimately, undermined the UK's relationship with Europe since 1945.

I wondered whether the referendum in 1975 was conducted with more decorum than is currently the case. Quite the contrary. A cursory glance at newspaper reports shows that though the arguments were very similar, the bile and, it must be said, jingoism, is even more explicit. The level of abuse directed towards Germany in particular was something that would now be considered borderline racist.

One analysis might suggest that many of those who were against continued membership of the EEC were those who'd fought in the war in pursuit of freedom from the tyranny of the Hitler and his henchmen. Mr Chignell's stance demonstrated this wasn't the case. Significantly, many of the most pro-European politicians had been engaged in military service. Undoubtedly the most notable of a politician who'd served his country in the forces but supported membership of the EEC was ex-Conservative prime minister Edward Heath. Ted Heath's role in taking the UK into the EEC in 1973, though cause for celebration by some, led to opprobrium by many others on the left who saw it as overly- capitalist and, more especially the right of the Tories who hated the idea of being part of a pan-European institution. Such tensions within the Conservative Party continued relentlessly and are the cause of the current malaise.

Advocates of membership of the EEC argued prior to joining, and in the 1975 referendum, that economic improvement would ensue. Indeed, looking at economic data between 1945 and 1973, the ratio of UK's GDP per capita when compared to founding members countries, demonstrates that Britain was in decline. Joining a group of trading block of countries whose growth was higher made sense. Significantly, between 1973 and 2010 growth in the UK economy was markedly improved. Despite what detractors of the EU contend, such economic data provides indicative evidence that we've benefitted from membership.

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However, such data doesn't matter in the fog of emotion that characterises Brexit. Michael Gove made clear his belief that we'd heard enough from experts! Rather, and in exactly in the same way as in 1975, emotion and nationalistic fervour has become pervasive; sovereignty and freedom from the perfidious influence of Europe is all that counts. Those who argue that economic decline and chaos will result from leaving the EU, especially is the country departs with no arrangements in place, are seen as disloyal and insufficiently patriotic.

It has to be said that the belief that prosperity will result from crashing out of the EU is, on the basis of all the evidence I have seen, palpable nonsense borne of blind – some might suggest reckless – faith that the last 40 or so years of membership of the EU can be airbrushed out of history. We have more chance of seeing human beings living

on Mars! Though the EU is in need of urgent reform and we suffered from having joined the EEC too late and subject to costs that may not always have been fair, continuing our relationship with the EU is utterly logical and economically sensible.

Though stripping emotion from the debate concerning Brexit should not blind us to the realities. Almost 44 years on I admire Mr Chignell's passionate willingness to support membership of the EEC. Very sadly, currently, there is a real danger that those with the most passionately vociferous views – that the UK should leave the EU with no deal whatsoever – are drowning out the views of all others.