



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

From Menton to Ventimiglia

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Menton is a typical Provencal seaside resort. Tall buildings painted in mellow tones of rusty red, buff and pale yellow rise up from the palm-fringed corniche. Scrub-covered mountains paint in a subtle blue-green backdrop for the town, between bright azure sea and sky. These days, French drivers are both skilled and considerate; waiters dart deftly between the slow-moving cars to bring brimming glasses from cafés to drinkers taking an early evening aperitif beneath the umbrellas bordering the beach.

Take the coast road east out of Menton and within a mile or two you will cross the Italian border into the town of Ventimiglia. The cars are Italian, not French. Vespa scooters hurl themselves at you from every direction, some with small children asleep on their parents' knees. The language is different. The food is different. The buildings are different. Even the town names sound very different though they come from the same linguistic root and their histories have run side-by-side. Ventimiglia is a hectic, even manic, place which might be a million miles from sedate Menton, instead of its next-door neighbour.

The European bogeyman

I cannot believe that Nigel Farage MEP and the less benighted leaders of UKIP do not know that the visions they conjure up for their members of a homogenised Europe ruled by an army of unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels, are pure melodrama. Cross any border between the 27 countries of the European Union and you will

find changes of scene every bit as sudden as those between Menton and Ventimiglia. David Cameron's eurosceptics know that. Every Brit whose European travels have not been confined to sunbathing and clubbing in Playa de las Americas or Magaluf knows that. The European bogeyman is a politician's phantasm designed mainly to help them cling on to power and keep the natives from asking awkward questions about UK governance in comparison with the best of our European Union partners.

You may have guessed by now that I am an unapologetic enthusiast for the European Union. I'm for it, root and branch, warts and all. If I were Gordon Brown I'd stick it to David Cameron with something to really rattle his backwoodsmen's bars. I'd announce that next year's election would also be a referendum on adoption of the Euro.

It was interesting, was it not, that Ireland – given a bit longer to think about it and a good dose of recession – voted last month to ratify the Lisbon Treaty? The alternative to wholehearted solidarity with the rest of Europe, they clearly believed, was a long, lonely struggle to regain their former prosperity and falling back into the economic maw of our own dear country. Even if you were a eurosceptic it would surely be hard to blame them. If you looked for a big, strong neighbour to help out when the going got rough, would you choose the UK with an annual turnover of about £1,000 billion and a dodgy historical relationship, or the European Union with earnings of 12,276 billion Euros, especially now

that a Pound and a Euro are worth much the same?

Bigger is safer

If you don't think that 12,000 billion Euros is that impressive let me tell you that it is a good deal greater than the gross domestic product of the United States (10,094 billion Euros) and seven times that of China (1,787 billion Euros). If you are willing for the European Union to be 'us' then 'we' have a population of 495 million, the world's third largest after China and India, and half as large again as the USA. We are the world's biggest exporter, conducting about one fifth of the world's total trade. We have improved life expectancy by 10 years in the last 50. Like the UK, most of our economic effort goes into services of one kind or another, with about 28 per cent of our earnings coming from manufacturing and only 5 per cent from agriculture.

Before things went pop the UK was the seventh most prosperous economy in the Union (between Belgium and Sweden) in terms of what you and I have to spend. We sent 57 per cent of our exports to our partner countries, which is why the employers' associations and the trade unions are hard-headed supporters of the Union. Like the Irish, we might be well advised to think at least twice before casting ourselves on the mercy of the wide, cold Atlantic. And the nightmares of Commission profligacy? The European Union budget is 134 billion Euros; that is roughly one-fifth of UK government expenditure and about 1 per cent of European total GDP. Of that budget, 7.7 billion Euros is spent on administration, or less than 6 per cent. That doesn't look bad to me.

The peaceful half-century

In the end though, it's not economics that keep me firmly in the euroenthusiasts' camp. I'm there for the same reasons the founders of the infant European Union were there, 60 years ago. As they stood in the ruins of the Second World War, German

and French politicians determined to end an obscenity that had lasted at least 300 years. Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle had experienced conflict at first hand. Their vision was of a Europe in which young men were no longer slaughtered, generation after pathetic generation. Most of the uncountable dead had been sacrificed for reasons which are hard to put a finger on. Europe's elites had intermarried for centuries. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany was the nephew of Queen Victoria of England. Related by family, those who declared wars were even more closely tied than those who did the fighting. The warriors, nevertheless, were bound by culture, religion, history and place. So much European war looks in retrospect like dynastic squabbling, from which ordinary citizens in the age of democracy should be excluded.

Time has proved Adenauer and de Gaulle triumphantly right. It has proved Edward Heath – another experienced warrior – right in hitching our wagon belatedly to the European movement. Not only has my generation missed the regular European cull but so has that of my son and so, God willing, will that of my grandson. As a political entity, let alone an economic one, the European Union has fulfilled the first and highest duty of a state. It has provided its citizens with security.

This year's party conferences began the political monsoon season. Mr Farage, the Tory ultras and their (I think, distant) relations in the BNP, and even the hesitant Mr Brown, should look to Europe, Adenauer and de Gaulle to understand how politics can be transformed into statesmanship. And it is only statesmanship that matters.

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