

DONNEZ-MOI UN BREAK

*Pascal Lamy tells Boris Johnson
where Britain's destiny
really lies*

played its hand with the traditional rather than the current skill of British diplomats, Britain would soon have both Europe and the United States bidding for its favour. Nafta is a free-trade association only, and, since the United States will not concede any sovereignty, it will not ask others to do so. Canada, despite its similarity to the north-eastern states of the USA and the fact that 45 per cent of its GDP is trade with the USA, does not suffer a fraction of the interference in its sovereignty that Britain endures from Europe. So much for the endlessly repeated platitude that association with the United States would make us the proverbial '51st' state. And Nafta is greatly more successful by any measurement than the plodding, top-heavy Euro-socialist Union.

The Prime Minister's interpretation of the national interest is bizarre. Instead of embracing the Schroeder-Chirac proposals for a two-speed Europe, he has pledged a level of Euro-enthusiasm that is irreconcilable with British public opinion. Rather than encourage the American overture, which at the least would strengthen his hand in the discussions with the Europeans, he has beseeched President Clinton to suppress the possibility. When US International Trade Commission researchers were in London this spring looking into the Britain-Nafta proposal, the US embassy assigned a thought policeman to accompany them and ensure that no geopolitical questions were raised. The US ambassador to Britain, Philip Lador, at the request of the British government, gamely submits to being frogmarched about, preaching the virtues of Britain taking up the euro. This surrealistic farce can't continue much longer.

Britain should request a Nafta invitation from the USA. It would be tendered at once. Then we should negotiate, from a position of great strength, an altered status with the EU, keeping the common market and shedding, if necessary, the yoke of political and juridical integration in Europe, which would be a relief to the vast majority of the British people. The Conservatives will obviously have to take the lead, as they have over the euro. They should discard their pathological fear of charges from Labour of being anti-Europe.

This could have a salutary effect on the inexplicably unimaginative Prime Minister. He must know the danger he is running of ending up at the head of a government that has no more authority than the Islington Borough Council. His promised criterion of the national interest is clear, and his government should finally become serious about pursuing that interest. Up to now it has behaved like a platoon of colonels from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, fiendish in the ingenuity with which it truckles to the Europeans, minimising the American relationship, dissembling to the country, and progressively scuttling the nation. The national interest and the nation will rightly require the government to do better than this.

PASCAL Lamy makes a noise; a cross between a gurgle and a bark. It is the sort of noise you might expect to hear from a French paratroop sergeant on seeing a new recruit. It is a deep, dark sound; and for ten years, whenever they heard it in the corridors of the Brussels Commission, the officials would jump in their suits, and the photocopying would tumble from the trembling fingers of the typists. M. Lamy is laughing. 'Ha ha ha,' he says, and his spokesman, a black-haired young Englishman called Anthony Gooch, laughs too. 'Nafta! Ha ha ha!' they both say, rocking on the padded upholstery of the EU Commission office in Storey's Gate. 'Nafta is not a bloc. Let us be serious,' says Lamy. 'It's a free-trade agreement,' says the man who incarnates the French vision of a federal Europe.

For a decade the crop-headed Lamy was the chef de cabinet of the European Commission's president and he sat at the right hand of Delors. It was his *énarque* brain that controlled the network of largely French officials, who pushed through the single market, dreamed up Maastricht, and who finally succeeded in capturing the Bundesbank for Europe and for France. Now, after a spell in banking and an unsuccessful stab at politics, he is back, as EU trade commissioner, and he has come to London to strangle an idea at birth.

As readers of the last few pages will have discovered, the forces of moderate Euroscepticism have finally come up with a vision that is bigger, grander than anything currently being produced by Brussels. Yes, Britain's future may be in trade with Europe; but why not also with America? Why not have our cake and eat it?

Lamy seems to think the notion absurd, as is the US senator who has advocated a British link with Nafta. 'Phil Gramm is a joke! Ha ha ha.' Come on, Pascal, I say, why be so unimaginative? Why shouldn't we have an agglomeration of the EU and Nafta, with Britain in the middle?

'Because the EU is the way you get more of your influence. It's all a question of knowing which side your bread is buttered.' Lamy is the EU's trade negotiator, which means he has sole and absolute authority to cut deals — on behalf of Britain and all other EU members — with America, China and the rest of the world. 'If we want to punch our weight in the world, we have to be more cohesive on a number of topics. It's the old question of what European integration is really about.'

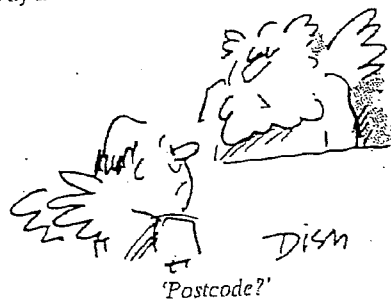
Yeah, but suppose British interests aren't the same as those of Continental Europe? I point out that in the last world-trade talks, Europe and America ended up in dispute about two areas, agriculture and Hollywood movies; and in both cases, Britain's real interest was with America, not Europe. Too bad, says Lamy. 'In order to get consensus, to reap the advantages of being together, you can't always stick to your own point of view. It's the whole. You sometimes have to compromise for the sake of the big game,' he says.

But how far are we supposed to go in laying down British interests? Lamy, like Delors, approves of an elected European president. 'It's a good idea,' he says, 'because it's trying to find an answer to democratic accountability in Europe.' Pascal, *mon brave*, I say, at the risk of sounding hysterical, this is a Euro-government you are proposing! Where is the democracy?

'Democracy has to live locally, regionally, nationally, at a European level, and at some stage it will have to live worldwide.'

But what's the point of electing MPs in Britain, if taxes are eventually to be decided by a majority vote in Brussels?

'But if you elect the British Parliament there is a majority and a minority,' he says. Er yes, I say, but the point is that the majority is British, and the minority accepts their rule. As far as I can see, there is no such acceptance that we should be ruled by



a majority of other European countries. Or perhaps we all need to change our mindset, and think of ourselves as European?

'Well you have a number of solidarities, and among those solidarities is that the nation-state in Europe will stay as it is. But when I was a child I happened to spend quite a lot of time in England in summer-time, and the first European militant I ever met — when I was eight, nine, ten, 11 years old — and who preached to me about European integration, was a British woman, Rosemary Smitherland, who was a good Tory woman in Godalming and Haslemere. The first adult I ever met who taught me about the United States of Europe was a Brit!'

Bien je jamais, I say: but not everyone feels the same as the good Mrs Smitherland. Isn't EU integration a bit dated, 50 years after the war? And what is Europe, anyway? What is its geographical logic? The trade commissioner thinks Romania is part of Europe. What about Moldova, just over the border? 'Don't know ... no ... I've no strong views about that because I've never been there.'

And there's another thing: according to Pascal, the paradox is that we are already breaking down trade barriers between the EU and the USA. Tariffs are tiny, he says, and 'in ten, 20 years' time we will have at the world level the same rule-based system that we have in Europe'. In fact, he goes so far as to predict a world-competition authority by 2020. In which case, why do we need all this political integration in Europe? Why give up our individual national sovereignty to Brussels, if free trade is to be guaranteed by global authorities?

'Because the British weight in these bodies will be extremely small. I mean, the EU is a grouping. It's like in everyday life. Unity makes strength, and more unity makes more strength. We need it because history and geography has made us small things in today's world. The Chinese are 1.3 billion people.'

But Pascal, be honest: is it really that you want a united Europe in order to have a powerful united voice in negotiations with China? Or isn't it really that you are a classic French *énarque*, obsessed with Anglo-Saxon dominance, and you conceive of a tightly unified EU as a way of sticking it to the Americans.

'Not me. Not me. It is nothing to do with that. ...'

Pascal Lamy has changed since he was Delors' *chef de cabinet*. He speaks English far more fluently, and he is clearly making a big effort to woo the hard cases of the Eurosceptic media. But, when we discuss his vision of Britain's future, we reach the bedrock of his assumptions.

'It's all about who do you want to side with, who do you want to share your destiny with, in order to keep your sovereignty?' In the case of France, he obviously thinks the answer must be Europe. In Britain's case, might there not be an additional destiny?

DID BALLIOL MAKE BILL A PRESIDENT?

Richard Jenkyns looks back at how their Oxford experiences may have moulded Tony Blair and Bill Clinton

SO Balliol College, Oxford managed to turn away both Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in the space of a few years. That raises some interesting questions. Why did Balliol feel it could manage without them? What difference would it have made if it had taken them? And what effect did their Oxford years have on either of them?

The two cases are rather different. Anyone who wins a Rhodes Scholarship has already achieved a huge success. At the time of Clinton's application, many more Americans picked Balliol than any other college; choosing between a lot of outstanding candidates is always a bit of a guess; and the Rhodes trustees like to distribute their scholars rea-

sonably evenly between the colleges. It is a pity that the word 'reject' is so often used of candidates not accepted; many candidates have to be turned away simply for lack of room. That Clinton missed Balliol was not much more than the luck of the draw.

Blair applied to read law but sat entrance papers in English. His elder brother was already reading law at Balliol. Tony's marks have, by chance, surfaced in the last fortnight and have been deposited in a library, for the benefit of future historians, but it is known that they were not much good. Blair did not shine at the interview with the law tutors. But he got an interview at another college, St John's, and was accepted.

Inside Opera

A NEW WAY TO LEARN ABOUT OPERA

Inside Opera is a unique new Sotheby's evening course that will focus on operas being performed in Britain during the 2000-2001 season. Each evening will be devoted to a single opera with distinguished guests, including Dame Janet Baker and Sir Charles Mackerras. Starts 26th September.

Other Sotheby's evening courses include Asian Arts, British Pictures, Contemporary Art, Continental Furniture, Decorative Interiors, English Furniture, Silver, Textiles, Wine.

ENQUIRIES:

Janine Rymer

Tel: 020 7462 3239

Fax: 020 7580 8160

janine.rymer@sothebys.com

www.sothebys.com



SOTHEBY'S

Institute of Art