



Bravo, Britain

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Margaret Thatcher on Europe



'We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels. Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country; for these have been the source of Europe's vitality through the centuries.'

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Those are the words with which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher set in motion the lunge for liberty that Britain has just taken. She was speaking, in September 1988, to the College of Europe at Bruges. Those who were in Belgium then will never forget it. Yet the mandarins of Brussels ignored her warnings, condescended to those who shared her concerns, and took Great Britain for granted. How we wish the Iron Lady could have been alive to see the vindication Britons have just delivered.

The vote to exit the European Union — to declare British independence — was unambiguous. Those who wanted to remain in Europe, pleading for permissions from un-elected commissars, lost by more than a million votes. In the privacy of the voting booth, Britons placed their bet on the “sunlit meadows”

of freedom evoked by Brexit's most eloquent champion, Boris Johnson (who came to his views in respect of the EU the same way the editor of the Sun did, by covering it for a newspaper).

Britain's gamble is all the more remarkable for coming, as it did, in the face of what has become known as "project fear." That is Prime Minister Cameron's campaign to tilt the referendum he himself had called and to which he could have played neutral host. He tried to tilt it against, in Elizabeth II, his own sovereign, who stands at the head of a monarchy that has been sovereign for a thousand years. There are not as many molecules in a jackass as there proved to be editorials in the Financial Times warning against independence.

No doubt some will attempt to write off this vote as the fruit of xenophobia and bigotry. We wouldn't gainsay the suggestion that these strands exist (elsewhere than in Britain, too); yet we doubt Brexit would have prevailed had that been what it was about. This triumph began to take off precisely when Mr. Johnson and the Tory minister of Justice, Michael Gove, as well as leaders like Lord Lawson, Thatcher's chancellor of the exchequer, began pushing to the fore the principles of liberty and property and sovereignty.

What a sad thing that President Obama joined the campaign against British independence. He blundered in threatening that a vote for Brexit would strand Britain at the "back of the queue" for an American trade agreement; imagine FDR saying something like that to Churchill (not to compare the EU, even at its worst, to Hitler). One of the greatest advantages Brexit offers is the logic of an expanded special relationship with America, the vast British Commonwealth, and the entrepreneurial nations.

What an opportunity for America — and for the Republicans. Hillary Clinton trundled in behind Mr. Obama against the idea of an independent Britain, and the Democrats are going to have to deal with that. Donald Trump conducted himself far more wisely, saying that he would "personally be more inclined to leave" but stressing that he was not a British citizen and the vote was up to them. Let him and the Speaker, Paul Ryan, waste no time in pursuing a strategy to move Britain to the front of the queue for an American trade deal.

Finally let us spare a thought for Europe. It is involved in its own great struggle, and in the face of a revanchist Russia. And there has always been a danger that the Brexit vote could be interpreted as disunity in the West (a point that was made this week in the New York Post by one of America's finest young journalists, James Kirchick). Yet it would also be a mistake to suppose that unity can be imposed on Europe by a socialist camarilla sitting in Brussels. The best defense for Europe is the kind of liberty for which Britain has just stood.