

Historical Ignorance as Politically Disabling

Mr David Cameron's first few months in office give support to the view that knowledge of history in a statesman is not a sort of icing on the cake, but practically necessary for his sense of the possible, because the characters of nations are not distinct from their history. Mr Cameron's most memorable public saying in his first few months of office as Prime Minister came during his first visit to the United States. "We are the junior partner," he said. (That in itself was not very good diplomacy, even if it is true.) Mr Cameron went on, "We were the junior partner in 1940 and we are the junior partner now." 1940 *sic* not 1945 or 1956. A prime minister who does not know that in the summer of 1940 the U.S.A. was a neutral power (however benevolent) and that the British Empire was the only active antagonist of Germany, does not know the character of the country he governs.

Then came the military agreement with France, to share resources. Even an elementary knowledge of post-Second-World-War history would have made Mr Cameron aware that France is characteristically not an easy ally. If the idea is that we share aircraft carriers and a rapid deployment force, and it is the French turn to have an aircraft-carrier at sea when the Argentine again invades the Falklands, does Mr Cameron really think that he will be able to make use of the French carrier? And even if so, does he not know how effective were the Harrier jump-jets, now to be scrapped?

On Armistice Day, 2010, interviewed by the BBC (during his Asian trip as what used to be called a commercial traveller) about the storming of Conservative Party headquarters the day before, Mr Cameron said something like "Of course, protests have always been permitted in this country." *Always*? How far back in British history does *Always* go? Has Mr Cameron ever heard of the Riot Act and could he guess its date to within a century?

Then came the offer to lend nine thousand million pounds odd to the Republic of Ireland, the Chancellor of the Exchequer beautifully trusting that one day it will be repaid. We must help our old friends, said Mr Cameron, or some such phrase. If the Irish Republic is an old friend what do you have to do to count as an old enemy?

Ignorance of elementary history is one form that stupidity can take, and stupidity, the opposite of wisdom, is disabling in a politician—"morally reprehensible as well as dangerous", as we once put it.

Lord Ashdown rightly observed (BBC Radio 4, 1.00 p.m. 2 November 2010) that the French see international politics differently from the British. For them the agreement with Britain is another step towards armed forces that will be controlled by the European Union. (This is attractive to France where perhaps unrealistic notions of the predominant influence of France in "Europe" are still entertained.) The basic logic is itself now old: that the individual nations are too small to be major "players" in global power politics, and so Europe must pool its resources in order to be a power of the same consequence as the U.S.A. or China.

There is no good reason why either France or the United Kingdom or "Europe" should go on aspiring to be a first class power. Why is it *in the national interest* for the United Kingdom to pretend to be a mini-U.S.A.? It would have been all to the good if Mr Blair had been prevented from waging aggressive wars by lack of means. France has kept more of its empire (unofficially) than Britain, but why is it thought to be in the French or British interest to retain nuclear weapons? Morally they are always indefensible, and in terms of ordinary power politics they are also now

useless to us, and so extremely expensive that the armed forces we do need cannot be afforded.

The armed forces are for the defence of the realm and its dependencies, not, for instance, for missionary endeavours to impose western democracy on the Muslim world. In Iraq, the Western occupation is sometimes depicted as a new crusade. To the dwindling number of Iraqi Christians, tolerated under Saddam Hussein and now unprotected and subject to arbitrary violence, this must seem a savage irony. The crusade of a secularised world. Military policy should be based clearly on the national interest, that is, anything that can be included under *defence of hearth and home*: for which some understanding of the nation's history is required, and some sense of where hearth and home ends.

The UK needs armed forces capable of repelling attacks on Great Britain, and also special forces capable of combatting terrorist groups. (If the terrorist groups were being *supported* by the French it would be no surprise to anyone with any elementary knowledge of history.) If Argentina attacks the Falklands again, or if Spain attacks Gibraltar, or if the Republic of Ireland invades Northern Ireland, nuclear weapons will not be used, nor will any threat of them be invoked. We are not little Israel, surrounded by enemies against which the threat of nuclear retaliation is a comprehensible deterrent. Nuclear weapons were not mentioned during the Falklands war. But we do need a sufficiently large and properly equipped army, navy and air force.

To pool armed forces is not military alliance. It is the abandonment of the defence of the realm to overseas powers. In earlier, less enlightened, ages, this would have been treasonable. Have Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg ever heard of treason?

Is the present (2010, Coalition) cabinet the first in which *gunner* has replaced *going to* as ordinary English? If so has this any political significance? The connection of this question with the above remarks about the historical vacuum is *education*, and one opposite, ignorance. The British electorate, said Mr Cameron (20 November 2010) deserve to know when we are going to withdraw from Afghanistan. *Deserve?* What has it to do with our deserts? Does Mr Cameron know what *deserve* means? The diseducation of a party that offers THE BIG SOCIETY as its great election cry is of the usual form: would-be Americanisation based on ignorance of English. In English *big* is not the equivalent of *good* or *great*, one of which may have been intended. A big house need not be a good house, nor a big woman a good woman, nor a big picture a good picture. Why are the Eton-and-Oxford politicians so unaccustomed to the word *good*? Answer: because education is no longer to be found at Eton and Oxford. See, by the way, Duke Maskell, *Politics Needs Literature*.

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