11 Heirs to Blair and 'Brexiteers', 2007–17

Introduction

The relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which dominated British politics between 1997 and 2010, was dogged by two major misunderstandings. The first was created by the protagonists themselves at a meeting before the party's 1994 leadership election. Brown had been persuaded not to stand, despite his superior claims on paper. He was convinced after the meeting that Blair had promised to step down as party leader after a limited period and would do his best to ensure that Brown would succeed him. All one can say about this much debated incident is that a promise of that kind could hardly be considered to be binding regardless of circumstances – which, indeed, would have been absurd in a country where political fortunes could be transformed in the course of a few hours – and that Blair acted in future as if the 'deal' had been a guarantee that Brown would enjoy considerable influence over domestic policy, rather than an agreed leadership transition.

The second misunderstanding affected media pundits and Labour supporters who were not close associates of either Brown or Blair. These observers tended (especially after New Labour took power in 1997) to relate the ill-concealed estrangement between the party's dominant figures to an ongoing ideological debate. In short, Blair and his supporters were identified with New Labour (vaguely 'progressive' but strongly supportive of free-market economics), while Brown was seen as the natural leader for the remaining advocates of 'old' Labour (suspicious of capitalism, committed to wealth redistribution in the interests of equality). In reality, although Blair and Brown did disagree over policy (notably, in relation to the desirability of adopting the euro), their feud was primarily personal. Certainly, those who hoped that Brown's (long-delayed) accession would produce a dramatic change in British foreign policy could only do so if

they chose to overlook Brown's apparent determination to associate himself with Blair's various initiatives. After all, while Blair has been dubbed an 'Accidental American' (Naughtie, 2004), Brown's love affair with Britain's transatlantic ally was a matter of conscious choice. In any case, his brief spell as Prime Minister was bound to be coloured by the legacy of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq; the fact that these momentous issues were rivalled by the global financial crisis which began in 2007 served to prevent Brown from establishing a new foreign policy line, whatever his intentions.

Timeline of domestic political developments

August–September 2007 First symptoms of effect of global 'credit crunch'
May 2010 Inconclusive general election: formation of Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government under David Cameron
January 2013 Cameron's Bloomberg Speech signals capitulation to right-wing press and Conservative Eurosceptics and acceptance of referendum on EU membership before 2017
August 2013 Government loses House of Commons vote on military action in Syria by 285 to 272
June 2015 General election: Conservatives win a majority of 12
September 2015 Labour leadership election won by Jeremy Corbyn, vociferous critic of War on Terror and opponent of nuclear 'deterrent'
June 2016 'Leave' narrowly wins referendum on UK membership of EU
June 2016 Cameron resigns as Prime Minister; succeeded by Theresa May on 11 July
June 2017 May's Conservatives lose overall majority in snap general election

No Prime Minister is an exact replica of his or her predecessor, and this chapter will explore differences between the foreign policy outlooks of Blair and Brown. However, it would not be fanciful to characterise Brown as the 'heir to Blair' in this field, due to a continuity of constraints. In 2010 Brown's party was defeated at the polls and was succeeded by a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The coalition Prime Minister, David Cameron, had actually claimed the mantle of 'heir to Blair' in an unguarded conversation with journalists before winning the Conservative leadership in 2005. It has been reported that, long after public support for Blair's foreign policy had dissipated, Cameron continued to seek his advice (Oborne, 2015). Again, the contention that Cameron's foreign policy showed considerable continuity with that of Blair will be explored in this chapter.

One point of similarity can, however, be established at the outset. Blair and Cameron both became Prime Minister without serving a ministerial apprenticeship of any kind; and before rising to the leadership of their respective parties neither had served as Shadow Foreign Secretary. By contrast, as Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1997 and 2007, Gordon Brown obviously exerted considerable influence over the *implementation* of foreign policy decisions – all too often, his critics alleged, by denying adequate resources to Britain's armed forces. However, influencing policy from the outside is very different from taking direct responsibility for the policy itself. The classic illustration is the case of Harold Macmillan, whose view of the Foreign Office and its decisions underwent a sudden transformation when he left it for the Treasury in December 1955.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude on this basis that aspirant Prime Ministers were no longer interested in foreign policy. Rather, if anything it suggested that the post of Foreign Secretary had slipped from its presumed status as one of the great offices of state, whose tenure made the incumbent an obvious candidate for the biggest job of all should it fall vacant. Long before the advent of Blair, the 'Presidentialisation' of the British system gave the Prime Minister considerable potential to take the leading role in foreign policy – indeed, if a Prime Minister was reluctant to do so, pressures from the media and other sources would force her or him to push the Foreign Secretary into the background. Learning, as Foreign Secretary, to play second fiddle in one's area of policy responsibility could not be considered to be sound training for a subsequent leadership role. Margaret Thatcher had sensed the institutional weakness of the Foreign Secretary and made life almost impossible for the occupants of the office after the resignation of Lord Carrington in 1982. John Major, who knew something about the FCO, tried his best to delegate decision-making to Douglas Hurd (with whom, in any case, he tended to agree). Blair and his heirs reverted to the Thatcher model, with results which will be explored in this chapter.

The Brown interlude

The chances of New Labour maintaining its winning electoral streak would have been enhanced if Gordon Brown had used his belated accession as an opportunity to make a quick and clean break from his predecessor's foreign-policy commitments. Of the two major conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter was the more deeply unpopular in Britain; and Blair had already announced plans for a phased withdrawal. However, Brown knew that he would face pressure from key allies to maintain Britain's presence in the Basra province, where existing instability was likely to increase. Given the state of domestic opinion, the only viable option was to act in a way which, while satisfying no one, was likely to cause the minimum damage. Accordingly, Brown expressed a willingness to

learn from the mistakes of 2002–3, and in 2009 he established an inquiry, under the distinguished former civil servant Sir John Chilcot, with broader terms of reference than the previous Hutton and Butler reports. British combat operations in Iraq ended in April 2009. Brown's assertion that 'we leave Iraq a better place' was highly questionable, but it was difficult to see what else he could say (Watt, 2008).

Afghanistan was even more problematic for Brown. Initial British involvement had been far less controversial; and, although no one could claim that the intervention had been an unqualified success, it was easier to identify some positive results. However, Brown became Prime Minister at a time when Iraq and Afghanistan were beginning to merge in the mind of the average voter, producing a general feeling of war fatigue even among those who had once been enthusiastic about both ventures. This mood was accentuated in 2009, when more than a hundred British service personnel were killed in Afghanistan – only slightly fewer than the total British death toll during the whole of the country's involvement in Iraq. The following year was almost equally bad, and, aside from fatalities, more than 2,000 service personnel were wounded, often being maimed for life by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) which, rather than Saddam's WMDs, were a constant source of danger. Brown was heavily criticised for the government's failure to protect soldiers adequately against these weapons – an allegation which stuck, since he had carried the ultimate responsibility for defence spending throughout the period since 9/11. In November 2009 Brown announced that British troops would stay in Afghanistan until the security situation in the country was sufficiently stable. At the end of 2010 there were still around 9,000 British soldiers in Afghanistan.

Brown's dilemmas concerning Iraq and Afghanistan added to a natural interest in the fate of the 'special relationship' in the wake of the feverish encounter between Blair and Bush. In November 2007 Brown assured an audience in the City of London that:

> We will not allow people to separate us from the United States of America in dealing with the common challenges that we face around the world. I think people have got to remember that the relationship between Britain and America and between a British prime minister and an American president is built on the things that we share, the same enduring values about the importance of liberty, opportunity, the dignity of the individual.
>
> (Reynolds, 2007)

The emphasis on moral values in this speech was characteristic of Brown, who presided over a period of increased tension within the UK and (not least because of his own distinctive British/Scottish identity) was anxious to establish a coherent sense of Britishness on the basis of a shared ethical outlook. However, in

foreign policy terms – and especially in the context of the 'special relationship' – this preoccupation raised serious questions. Neither Britain nor the US could persuasively claim that its actions during the War on Terror had been based upon an unshakable adherence to 'liberty' or 'the dignity of the individual'. At Guantanamo Bay the Americans had showed a willingness to deviate from these supposedly 'enduring values'. Apart from instances of misconduct by individual soldiers, the British had collaborated in the practice of 'extraordinary rendition', whereby terrorist suspects were transported to locations where they could be interrogated without the protection accorded by countries which recognised 'enduring values'.

The other arresting feature of Brown's speech was his presentation of the 'special relationship' in personal terms, as if the interactions between Presidents and Prime Ministers were indeed the key element in an alliance which, in reality, was based on multi-layered cooperation. Brown's choice of words can only be explained by his anxiety to move away from the mood-music of Blair–Bush. Bush, indeed, had been warned about Brown's personal idiosyncrasies before the 2007 transition. Anyone in Washington who longed for a continuation of the good old days when Blair and Bush had burbled happily about their favourite toothpaste was quickly disabused when Brown eschewed Christian names at press conferences and referred to his fellow leader as 'Mr President'.

Just before stepping down as Prime Minister, Tony Blair had signalled his acceptance of Brown as his successor by referring to his 'clunking fist'. In his diplomacy, however, Brown's chief characteristic was his cack-handedness. His unsubtle exhibition of personal coolness towards George Bush was echoed in his attempts to appear semi-disapproving of China's human rights record (by failing to appear at the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics then materialising for the closing ceremony) and to avoid the public signature of the EU's Lisbon Treaty (he was the only one of 27 European heads of government to find an 'opt-out' from the ceremony, appending his name later, in very unsplendid isolation).

These maladroit genuflections towards public opinion apparently justified the misgivings of Labour strategists who, back in 1994, had identified Tony Blair rather than Brown as their party's best hope. Brown's supporters could continue to argue that his problems were chiefly presentational and thus superficial, at a time when the world was in desperate need of leaders who could provide real *substance*. Unfortunately, rather than treating political spin with the contempt it deserved, Brown seemed to rival Blair himself in his obsession with presentation; it was just that he was very bad at it. Like most British Prime Ministers of the post-war period, he did not bring all of his misfortunes on himself. If Hillary Clinton had succeeded George W Bush in the White House, for example, Brown might have been able to establish cordial relations. As it was, for various reasons Barack Obama (who beat Clinton to the Democratic nomination for the 2008 election) treated his country's continuing alliance with Britain as a regrettable

historical hangover. After visiting Washington in 2009, among other gifts Brown presented Obama with a pen-holder carved from the timbers of a ship which had been used by the British in the nineteenth century to extirpate the slave trade. In return, Obama bestowed on Brown a collection of 25 DVDs, which the British Prime Minister could have acquired at any car boot sale in his homeland.

This deliberate snub was all the more piquant because by 2009 Brown could claim more constructive achievement than Obama was to manage in his eight-year Presidency. Within weeks of Brown's ascent to the top of Westminster's 'greasy pole', evidence emerged of pressure on Britain's banking system. The problem had originated in the US, whose financial institutions had offered housing loans with insufficient attention to the likelihood of repayment. In the ensuing financial crisis banks across the world were reluctant to extend credit either to each other or to their clients. This was the kind of problem which played to Gordon Brown's strengths; while other world leaders dithered, he argued forcefully for a programme of global reflation, and his intervention was applauded both at the time and in hindsight. In the *New York Times* the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman wrote that Brown and his Chancellor Alistair Darling 'have defined the character of the worldwide rescue effort, with other wealthy nations playing catch-up' (Krugman, 2008). However, even those who claimed to understand the complexities of the world economy were divided in their assessments of Brown's performance during the crisis; and since this constituency was thinly represented among the British electorate, the Prime Minister was never likely to gain much tangible benefit. Among Britain's post-war Prime Ministers, only Gordon Brown could have turned the episode into a humiliating gaffe, when in a garbled response to a Parliamentary question in December 2008 he apparently claimed credit for 'saving the world'. In fact, while Brown had certainly proved his mettle in his response to the economic crisis, his policies had helped to ensure that the crisis was particularly damaging for the UK. Not only had he lightened the regulatory load on British banks while he was Chancellor, but he had openly boasted about this irresponsible approach.

Some admirers of New Labour might still wonder 'what might have been' if only Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had been able to control their personal animosity. However, if one accepts that in 1994 these two ambitious politicians had decided to carve up future government policy, so that Brown had ultimate control of the domestic front and Blair had a free hand elsewhere, the only conclusion is that they proved equally adept in throwing away their advantages. When Brown became Prime Minister he had to clear up the foreign policy mess left by Blair and then was forced to address the consequences of the mistakes he had made as Chancellor. In domestic terms the various problems bequeathed by Blair and Brown to each other meant that the 2010 general election was a good contest for Labour to lose. But, contrary to the usual swings of the British electoral

pendulum, there was no outright winner this time. Instead, Brown's government was succeeded by a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, headed by David Cameron.

The foreign policy of 'liberal Conservatism'

When senior Conservatives and Liberal Democrats began to negotiate a coalition agreement in the wake of the inconclusive 2010 general election, it was easy to suppose that foreign policy would provide a major stumbling block. After all, the two parties had been on opposite sides of the debate over intervention in Iraq, and, arguably, the critical stance of the Liberal Democrats had been the main reason why, after the 2005 general election, the party could begin serious preparations for taking part in a British government for the first time since 1945. Cameron, by contrast, had voted for war – albeit 'grudgingly, unhappily, unenthusiastically' (Cameron, 2003).

Since then, however, the Conservatives had accepted that their support for the war had been based on flawed intelligence. In any case, the withdrawal of British forces from Iraq in 2009 effectively neutralised the issue. The 2010 Conservative manifesto described the continuing mission in Afghanistan as 'vital to our national security'. For their part, although the Liberal Democrats expressed a desire to end the mission before 2015, this objective was dependent on the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and Iraq inevitably raised the question of the 'special relationship', and here the two parties could be expected to diverge. Certainly, the rhetoric was different. Addressing the British–American Project on the fifth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, David Cameron denounced anti-Americanism and expressed an attachment to the Atlantic alliance that was both 'instinctive' and 'passionate'. For their part, in their 2010 manifesto the Liberal Democrats referred to 'the dangers of a subservient relationship with the US that neglects Britain's core values and interests'. However, after affirming his belief in the 'special relationship' Cameron had cautioned that:

> we will serve neither our own, nor America's, nor the world's interests if we are seen as America's unconditional associate in every endeavour. Our duty is to our citizens, and to our own conception of what is right in the world.
> (Cameron, 2006)

Although the 2010 Conservative manifesto included the phrase 'special relationship', it did so in reference to India rather than the US.

In any case, by 2010 the relationship with America was far less controversial in Britain, and the occupant of the White House, Obama, was as anxious as

Cameron and the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, to bring a satisfactory end to the adventurism of Bush and Blair. In the published Coalition Agreement – an unprecedented document, essentially a manifesto for an election which had already taken place – the two parties spoke of maintaining a 'strong, close and frank relationship with the US'. The agreement also covered the subject of nuclear weapons, which had always been highly controversial among Liberal Democrat activists. The coalition reached a compromise on Conservative terms; the 'deterrent' would remain, and Trident would be renewed with due attention to 'value for money'. Liberal Democrats would be free 'to make the case for alternatives' (HM Government, 2010, 20, 16). In practice, during the coalition period this 'freedom to differ' meant that Liberal Democrats accepted Trident but argued that the submarine fleet could be reduced from the existing four vessels.

The really awkward area for the negotiating teams was always going to be 'Europe'. Unlike their two main rivals, the Liberal Democrats had always been positive about European integration, to the extent that many Conservatives regarded them as 'Eurofanatics'. This was in keeping with a general trend in Conservative politics, traceable to Mrs Thatcher's 1988 Bruges Speech, to regard anyone who was prepared to acknowledge positive features in the EU as 'unBritish'. Cameron himself was a genuine Eurosceptic, i.e. consistent with his pragmatic approach to most questions, he was prepared to base his decisions on the likely practical consequences of a proposal, whether or not it emanated from Brussels. However, in order to win the Conservative leadership in 2005, and to secure his position afterwards, he had made promises which were calculated to mollify members of his party who saw the EU as a conspiracy to diminish Britain's influence in the world, if not to destroy its identity. Thus Cameron had promised not to accept the Lisbon Treaty unless authorised to do so by a referendum. This 'cast-iron' pledge had to abandoned when the 27 EU member states ratified the treaty (after Ireland, which had rejected Lisbon in a 2008 referendum, reversed this decision in 2009). Cameron had to content himself with the fulfilment of another promise, this time to pull Conservative MEPs out of the main centre-right EU grouping, the European People's Party (EPP), on the grounds that it was insufficiently 'sceptical'.

On taking the leadership in 2005, Cameron had burnished his anti-European credentials by bringing the former Conservative leader William Hague into his team as Shadow Foreign Secretary. Hague had won the party leadership in 1997 thanks at least in part to strong support from Lady Thatcher, and in the 2001 general election campaign he had made antipathy towards the EU, rather than the domestic issues which mattered most to voters, a central theme of his speeches. However, by 2005 Hague – now, at just 44 years of age, considered an elder statesman – was far less pugilistic and could be considered, along with Cameron, as an unusual example of Conservative Euro-pragmatism. Insider accounts of the coalition talks suggest that the European issue was easily dealt with, but this

should not obscure its importance to the overall deal. The Liberal Democrats were well aware that their adherence to the coalition would help Cameron stand up to the irreconcilable elements within his own party, and to that extent they were indispensable to him. On the other hand, if the Liberal Democrats refused to join a coalition and the eventual outcome was a minority Conservative government, Cameron might be forced into populist measures regarding the EU, causing lasting damage to Britain's (already uncertain) status within it. Thus, on European matters, the Liberal Democrats needed Cameron as much as he needed them; and the painless negotiations on the subject seemed to reflect the mutual recognition of these facts.

This amity on key foreign policy issues was underpinned by a considerable element of ideological convergence. Indeed, in his 2006 speech to the British–American Project Cameron had seemed to anticipate the possibility of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats by outlining a 'liberal Conservative' approach to international affairs, explaining that:

> I am a liberal conservative, rather than a neo-conservative. Liberal – because I support the aim of spreading freedom and democracy, and support humanitarian intervention. Conservative – because I recognise the complexities of human nature, and am sceptical of grand schemes to remake the world.
>
> (Cameron, 2006)

The pragmatic (or 'conservative') part of this formula might have been regarded with distaste by idealistic Liberal Democrats. However, the unusual circumstances of the Iraq War had turned many idealists into Realists, i.e. those who would have rejoiced if Iraqi citizens had truly been liberated from tyranny opposed the war because they deemed that Western-led action was unlikely to have that effect. In reality, Cameron's declaration of scepticism was designed to distance himself from the neo-conservatives who had imagined that the removal of Saddam would have triggered a series of benign, democratic revolutions throughout the Middle East.

Cameron's 'liberal Conservatism' suffused the relevant section of the 2010 Conservative manifesto – although, true to form, this appeared at the end of the document, under the impeccably Realist heading of 'Promote our national interest'. However, the manifesto referred to '*enlightened* national interest', which would provide justification for Cameron's promise to fulfil the long-standing UN target of spending at least 0.7 per cent of GDP on overseas aid. More generally, in the manifesto the Conservatives claimed that '[o]ur approach to foreign affairs is based on a belief in freedom, human rights and democracy'. This was considerably more laconic than the Liberal Democrat statement that '[w]e believe in freedom, justice, prosperity and human rights for all and will do all we can to work towards a world where these hopes become

reality'; but it seemed to amount to pretty much the same sentiment. Above all, the wording of the manifestos implied that Cameron was trying to persuade his party to take a more 'liberal' view of the world, while Clegg, hoped to induce a realisation among his own party's supporters that power would necessitate compromise as well as providing an opportunity to promote radical change at home and abroad. Thus from very different points of departure the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats had arrived at something like a philosophical consensus on foreign policy. This was probably just as well, since Clegg could be pretty sure that, under the coalition, effective control of key foreign policy decisions would lie with Cameron and Hague; as Deputy Prime Minister, his own sphere of influence would be in constitutional matters.

A 'networked world'

The emphasis on values, particularly concerning human rights, was identified by commentators as a new feature in Conservative foreign policy, suggesting that Cameron and Hague had been influenced by New Labour's approach (Beech, 2011). This certainly seems to be the case in respect of humanitarian intervention, which the 2010 Conservative manifesto endorsed 'when it is practical and necessary'. This, of course, was a direct echo of Blair's 1999 Chicago speech (Chapter 9), which had laid down a series of requirements before intervention could take place. Over Iraq, Blair had deviated from his own advice. It remained to be seen whether Cameron would be more prudent.

If New Labour's foreign policy record had been dominated by the War on Terror, Robin Cook's reference to an ethical dimension to foreign policy was still remembered as an expression of the government's initial aspirations. Subsequent developments made it unlikely that a Conservative would use that form of words, but senior figures in the party seemed to endorse the underlying sentiment. For example, in a key speech within weeks of taking office as Foreign Secretary, William Hague noted that:

> It is not in our character as a nation to have a foreign policy without a conscience or to repudiate our obligation to help those less fortunate. Our foreign policy should always have consistent support for human rights and poverty reduction at its irreducible core and we should always strive to act with moral authority, recognising that once it is damaged it is hard to restore.
> (Hague, 2010)

Although apparently more nuanced and carefully crafted than Cook's ethical dimension, this formulation furnished even more hostages to fortune. Moral

considerations were now the 'irreducible core' of British foreign policy. In reality, Hague, like Cook, had merely given more explicit articulation to a theme which had been present since 1945, i.e. that whatever its relative hard power at any given time, Britain had always pursued the path of righteousness. As we have seen throughout this book, that claim was difficult to substantiate – not necessarily because British policy makers were more wicked (or even hypocritical) than the norm, but because all too often the pursuit of the perceived national interest had prevented the ethical dimension from playing more than a secondary role.

Why, then, did William Hague choose to make his own version of Cook's promise? The answer was suggested by the title of his July 2010 speech. In a 'networked world', transformed by a multitude of developments which could be designated by the umbrella term 'globalisation', Britain's good name was more important than ever. But it was also more vulnerable. Countries like the US and China could still hope to get away with actions which defied the moral conscience of the international community; but even they could not conduct their affairs without attracting notice in a world where, thanks to new technology, millions of people had become potential television journalists. In terms of international opinion, Britain (unlike its banking sector) was no longer deemed 'too big to fail'. Even if the 'moral' post-war narrative had once been an option – to console the British public for their country's relative loss of hard power – it was now a compulsory feature of ministerial rhetoric.

In fact, the majority of Hague's speech reflected the latest blow to Britain's traditional sources of power – the economic crisis which began in 2007 and which, according to Conservative propaganda, had been caused by the Brown government rather than developments in the 'networked world'. Apart from its general impact on Britain's diplomatic position, the crisis had a direct effect on the FCO, which was one of the main targets for government savings, being asked to absorb a 24 per cent budget cut over four years. Unabashed, Hague devoted most of his speech to the various ways in which Britain could use its privileged position in the 'networked world' to recover from its latest setback, so long as its diplomatic endeavours were sufficiently 'agile and energetic'. Multilateral institutions like the G20 and the UN were still important to Britain, which would play its full part. But New Labour had neglected the chance of strengthening bilateral relations with emerging superpowers like Brazil, India and China, not to mention Turkey and Indonesia.

Hague's mouth-watering menu marked the point at which the Conservatives finally abandoned the Churchillian perspective, in which the world was bounded by the three concentric circles of the US, the Commonwealth and Europe. According to Hague, New Labour had failed to capitalise on its relationship with the last two of these; and the Commonwealth, in particular, should be cultivated. But in a networked world Britain should develop a truly global gaze to further its

national interest. The main target in Hague's sights was, of course, China. He could argue that this was no sudden infatuation – Britain, after all, had recognised the People's Republic (despite considerable American displeasure) in 1950. Sixty years later, Britain would still have to tread carefully in case friendship with China jeopardised the 'special relationship' with the US. There was also the question of human rights in China, which had improved markedly since the days of Chairman Mao but which still presented obstacles to a country which placed such considerations at the 'irreducible core' of its foreign policy. Accordingly, while the 2010 Conservative manifesto included a promise 'to seek a closer relationship with China', this course would be pursued while 'standing firm on human rights'.

Even without the advantage of hindsight, it was possible to detect features of the Conservative manifesto which could prove problematic. It was as if the party had studied New Labour's mistakes and committed itself to repeating them in a way which was a little less damaging to Britain's international reputation. On the one hand, the position on humanitarian intervention was insufficiently circumscribed: despite all the qualifying language, a party which favoured 'supporting human rights and championing the cause of democracy and the rule of law at every opportunity' would come under pressure to intervene in civil conflicts overseas whenever the arguments were finely balanced. On the other, there was ample evidence in the manifesto, and in Hague's subsequent speech, to suggest that economic self-interest would be a key driver of foreign policy decisions after 2010 – that whenever morality and materialism came into collision the latter consideration would prevail. These dilemmas, of course, were not unprecedented for British policy makers since 1945; but the Conservatives had spelled them out even more starkly than New Labour had done, and the cost of miscalculation was arguably greater after 2010 than it had ever been before. The hazards were given a cruel (if not crude) illustration in 2012, when Cameron's agreement to meet the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, triggered a lengthy diplomatic *froideur* in which China displayed a level of arrogance worthy of Britain itself in its nineteenth-century heyday.

If Cameron's foreign policy approach contained novel features, he was also prepared to innovate in institutional terms. The 2010 manifesto proposed the establishment of a National Security Council (NSC) 'to coordinate responses to the dangers we face'. Beginning its work immediately after the election, the NSC included several Cabinet ministers, including both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary. As well as reflecting the new and greatly enhanced security dimension of foreign policy, this new body promised to remedy the ad hoc decision-making which had preceded the Iraq War. On the face of it, William Hague's unruffled response to this reform was a surprise; the Foreign Secretary would obviously attend the weekly meetings, but there was a risk that he or she would be there to receive instructions rather than to offer advice, especially since senior figures from the military and intelligence communities would be present

when relevant, bringing specific expertise and insights which not even the best informed Foreign Secretary could match (Chapter 2).

The Arab Spring

In his 'networked world' speech, Hague had asserted that '[t]he country that is purely reactive in foreign affairs is in decline' (Hague, 2010). Before the end of the coalition's first year it had been forced into a 'reactive' position by events in North Africa and the Middle East; but, then again, the 'Arab Spring', which began in Tunisia in December 2010, caught most governments by surprise. The unrest spread to Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step aside in February 2011, after three decades in which he had been regarded as a dependable ally by the West. As if to demonstrate the thin line between 'enlightened' and 'selfish' national interest, David Cameron became the first Western leader to visit Egypt just a few days after Mubarak had been toppled; but this was a hastily arranged detour from a long-planned Middle Eastern trip during which the Prime Minister had hoped to promote the sale of arms to equally unsavoury regional regimes. In this context it was interesting to note that while the 2010 manifesto had promised that human rights would not be overlooked when Britain dealt with China, no such pledge was made when the party expressed its intention to 'elevate our relations with many friendly nations, including in the Middle East'. Whatever one might say about Britain's relations with Gulf states like Bahrain, they certainly could not be considered to be 'elevated' from the moral perspective (Controversy 11.1). And yet the Gulf featured in the manifesto immediately below the reference to human rights in China.

Cameron arrived in Cairo as civil strife was erupting in Libya, and he denounced the Gaddafi regime's repressive response. However, if Britain's previous relations with Mubarak's regime would look awkward to anyone who cared to look closely, the Gaddafi problem was even less edifying. In March 2004 Tony Blair had met the Libyan dictator and hailed him as a reclaimed sinner, whose return within the fold of civilisation should be chalked up as a major success for the West's strategy in the War on Terror. Knowledge of this uncharacteristic example of Blairite realpolitik seemed to make Cameron all the more anxious to obliterate Gaddafi from the wallchart of world leaders. Along with France and the Lebanon, Britain took a leading role in the promotion and passage of UN Resolution 1973, which called for an immediate ceasefire in Libya and imposed both an arms embargo and a no-fly zone. Gaddafi's regime was accused of human rights abuses, possibly amounting to 'crimes against humanity' (Vickers, 2015, 232). In March 2011 a coalition of countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Italy, Norway, Qatar and Spain, as well as France, the US and the UK) embarked on military action to enforce the UN resolution, as Gaddafi's forces attacked the city of Benghazi. In July Britain recognised the opposition National Transitional

Controversy 11.1 Bahrain, human rights and the return to 'east of Suez'

Bahrain, an oil-rich archipelago located just off the east coast of Saudi Arabia, had been a long-standing focus of British interest for several decades before it became a Protectorate in 1892. Just before the First World War Britain obtained exclusive rights to oil reserves, which began to be exploited in the early 1930s. In 1971 the state was granted independence, and (consistent with the commitment to withdraw from its bases east of Suez (Chapter 6)) the British Navy, which had made Bahrain its main Middle Eastern station in 1935, pulled out.

The government of Bahrain – which became a kingdom in 2002 – continued to value its close relationship with Britain, and commercial ties remained very strong. The War on Terror produced a step change in relations, and a series of agreements was reached in areas such as intelligence sharing and military training. However, Bahrain exemplified the politico-religious tensions which were helping to fuel general unrest in the Middle East, with a government dominated by Sunni Muslims denying full political rights to a population with a Shi-ite majority. During the Arab Spring of 2011 protestors demanding greater political freedom were attacked by troops, including a contingent from Saudi Arabia. Thousands were arrested, and allegations of systematic torture used by the Bahraini authorities were subsequently confirmed by independent investigators.

Far from persuading British ministers to distance themselves from Bahrain, this episode seems to have cemented the relationship. In 2015 work began on a new British naval base in Bahrain – the old one having been taken over by the Americans. Most of the cost, of around £15 million, was being met by Bahrain's royal family. Critics alleged that this was a gift to the British as a reward for their indulgent approach towards the regime's human-rights record. The stated purpose was to help defend Britain's allies in the region, rather than marking a resurgence of imperialism. Nevertheless, the Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, was clearly delighted by this development, which had symbolic significance as well as being a practical projection of British power at a time of economic austerity at home. In addition to the promised naval facility, a squadron of British Tornado fighter planes was stationed at the al Minhad airbase in neighbouring Dubai from 2013.

Council as the legitimate Libyan government. By the end of October Gaddafi had been captured and killed. Enthusiastic crowds in Tripoli hailed Cameron, along with France's President Sarkozy, as Libyan liberators. Sarkozy had been the first Western leader to call for Gaddafi's deposition, while Britain's initial

response had been uncertain; in the light of subsequent events, the British premier would have been well advised to let Sarkozy take the plaudits on his own.

Britain's role in the fall of Gaddafi was the first item in the list of achievements paraded by the coalition government in the foreign policy section of its mid-term review and presumably was seen as the main justification for the headline boast that the country was once again 'standing tall in the world'. By that time, however (August 2013), it had become much more difficult to regard the Libyan intervention as an unqualified success. In hindsight, the obvious criticism against Cameron is that he engaged British forces against the Gaddafi regime without developing a workable strategy for the aftermath of an intervention which was clearly designed to effect regime change in Libya. As such, it seemed that Cameron had repeated Blair's misjudgements in advance of the 2003 Iraq War. However, Cameron can be regarded as more culpable than his predecessor, since (unlike Blair) he knew in advance that a miscalculation could have disastrous effects in Britain itself, as well as the area in which British forces were deployed. The most egregious mistake would be for Britain's Prime Minister to have authorised military action on the basis of over-optimistic assumptions concerning the true nature of the uprising in Libya and the Arab Spring as a whole. Yet this is precisely what David Cameron had done, according to a highly critical report published by the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs in September 2016 (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

In September 2011 Cameron used his first speech to the UN Assembly to reflect on the Arab Spring. Presumably, his intention was to inspire national leaders to provide economic assistance to the countries which had undergone recent revolutions; hence his characterisation of the Arab Spring as 'a massive opportunity . . . only if we really seize it'. By 'seize it', Cameron could not have meant armed intervention in other states in order to spread Western values; he disclaimed any mission to impose such values by force, although he signalled his support for interventions when they were 'necessary, legal and right'. However, Cameron interpreted the Arab Spring as a sign that the people of the Middle East could 'do it for themselves'. After all, they had made their aspirations clear:

> They want transparency and accountability of government. An end to corruption. The fair and consistent rule of law. The chance to get a job and to have a stake in how their country is run. The freedom to communicate and the chance to participate in shaping society as citizens with rights and responsibilities.
>
> (Cameron, 2011)

If Cameron had referred back to the 2010 Conservative manifesto before delivering this speech, he would have been reminded that liberal Conservatism meant that '[w]e are sceptical about grand utopian schemes to remake the world. We

will work patiently with the grain of other societies'. Instead of working 'with the grain' of Egyptian, or Libyan, society, Cameron had emulated American neo-conservatives who imagined that the Middle East and North Africa were swarming with individuals who were desperate for the chance to implement liberal democratic institutions. Among other things, the logic of this position constituted a heavy indictment of outside forces which had helped to prop up undemocratic states throughout the freedom-thirsty Middle East. These states included Bahrain, whose repressive regime was conducting business with British firms at the time that Cameron was delivering his moral message to the UN. In ideological terms, the left hand of the British government was acting (and speaking) as if its right hand was immobile. In reality, and in conformity with the programme sketched out in the 2010 Conservative manifesto, the right hand was energetically at work. The dissonance in British policy was sufficiently marked to endanger any gain in soft power which might have accrued from London's successful staging of the 2012 summer Olympic Games (one of the few positive legacies which Cameron had inherited from his New Labour predecessors).

A year later, when Cameron addressed the General Assembly once again, his remarks were more chastened. He acknowledged that some people now took the view that the Arab Spring was 'in danger of becoming an Arab Winter'. However, the establishment of liberal democracies was bound to be halting and gradual, and there were signs of progress in many places. There had been elections in Libya, for example, and in Egypt 'the democratically elected President has asserted civilian control over the military'. Maybe the verdicts of the ballot box were less than optimal from the viewpoint of Western governments – in Egypt, for example, the new President, Morsi, had been a key figure in the radical Muslim Brotherhood – but Cameron declared that 'nothing in the last year has changed my fundamental conviction [that] the Arab Spring represents a precious opportunity for people to realise their aspirations for a job, a voice and a stake in their own future' (Cameron, 2012).

Cameron also referred to the view that while some countries were beginning to benefit from the Arab Spring, its impact on Syria had 'unleashed a vortex of sectarian violence and hatred' which could plunge the region into turmoil. A 'political transition' in Syria was obviously needed, based on 'mutual consent'. However, he referred to atrocities which were 'a terrible stain on this United Nations' – particularly on those members (e.g. Russia) which 'aided and abetted Assad's regime of terror'. If the UN Charter was to have any meaning, its members should cooperate to provide the Syrian people with 'a future without Assad' (Cameron, 2012).

However, the 'rapid transition' which Cameron sought did not materialise, and a year after his emotional appeal Assad was still in place, using chemical weapons and barrel bombs against his own people. President Obama had

declared that the use of such weapons would mean that the Syrian dictator had crossed a 'red line', entailing 'enormous consequences'. By stepping across the red line Assad had given Cameron the green light to step up his personal pressure on Obama. For understandable reasons, neither partner in the 'special relationship' was prepared to take military action without guaranteed support from the other. Cameron took the initiative, recalling Parliament from its summer recess on 27 August 2013 in the hope that it would provide the necessary authority. However, whatever his personal views, Labour's leader Ed Miliband knew that his MPs would not vote to provide Cameron with a blank cheque. Since the coalition parties themselves included potential dissenters, the Parliamentary motion was watered down to an invitation to endorse the possibility of military action, which could not proceed without a further vote. Ministers were evidently calculating that if Parliament could be made to agree on the principle of action, any subsequent vote was likely to be a formality. The opponents of British intervention were well aware of this, with the result that many of them persisted in their obstructive attitude despite frantic lobbying by Cameron himself (Ashcroft and Oakeshott, 2015, 443–4). The coalition duly went down to defeat, by 285 votes to 272. The majority of Labour MPs were joined by 30 Conservatives and 9 Liberal Democrats in the 'No' lobby.

In itself, this would have been a notable event in British political history – the first time that the executive's foreign policy had been negated by a Parliamentary vote since the eighteenth century. Among its penitent responses to the Iraq War, the Brown government had opened the possibility that British forces should not be committed to action in future without explicit Parliamentary approval. The Syria vote had no specific constitutional force in itself, but it seemed like a good way to establish a conventional practice and was by any standards a nasty blow to the power of the executive, which had interrupted everyone's summer holidays only to be humiliated. Labour's position could also be regarded (and denounced, predictably, in some quarters of the media) as a rare breach of the political consensus which is supposed to apply to significant decisions in foreign policy. The vote certainly took US officials by surprise; but things had changed since 2002, when the Bush administration felt strong enough to hint that it would go ahead with its Iraq adventure even if Blair was unable to enlist British support. Far from spiking Obama's guns, the Syria vote gave the President a plausible pretext for laying down his unloaded weapons. The Syrian crisis had proved that the 'special relationship' could still be useful but not in a way which was particularly flattering to the junior partner; it suggested that the US only liked the guarantee of a supportive partner in circumstances where it felt strong enough to act alone.

Immediately after the rejection of the government's motion, Ed Miliband challenged Cameron to pledge that he would not use the royal prerogative in order to evade Parliament's decision. In response, Cameron acknowledged that

MPs had reflected the views of the British people: 'I get that, and the Government will act accordingly' (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 29 August 2013, Vol. 566, col. 1555). Yet it was clear that nothing he had heard during the debate was going to change his own view of the need for regime change in Syria.

Attitudes began to change when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Da'ish) organisation began to add territorial gains in Western Iraq, notably the country's second city of Mosul, to the areas of Syria already under its control. Since Da'ish was fighting Assad, British action against the Syrian regime would have helped its brutal campaign. The argument that Da'ish and other fanatical factions in the area were ultimately the products of Assad's own tyranny was hardly relevant in this context; apart from raising the possibility that the 2003 Iraq intervention was actually the main source of the trouble, the question now was not where Da'ish came from but how it should be dealt with. A humanitarian catastrophe was unfolding in Syria, as millions fled in terror at the prospect of further Da'ish advances. In September 2014 Cameron recalled Parliament again, in response to a request for military assistance from the government of Iraq. This time MPs gave overwhelming approval for air strikes, although more than a hundred withheld support (including the future Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, along with six Conservatives and a Liberal Democrat).

By this time British foreign policy concerns were divided between the rise of Da'ish and the resurgence of Russia, which had seized the Crimea from Ukraine in February 2014. The coalition responded with vigorous rhetoric and support for economic sanctions, specifically aimed at the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, and his closest associates. Tony Blair had tried to cultivate Putin, on his usual assumption that once he had established a rapport with world leaders they would continue to prioritise the maintenance of this personal friendship over the perceived interests of their nation states. Unsurprisingly, the divisions between Britain and Russia over Iraq had proved more powerful than the relationship between Blair and Putin, which in any case was strained by the fact that Britain had given refuge to a number of exiled Russian dissidents (repeating the favour which it had extended to Lenin and others before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution). Putin's agents seemed to have a longer reach than their tsarist forebears. In 2006 one prominent dissident, Alexander Litvinenko, paid an ill-advised visit to a sushi cafe and subsequently succumbed to poisoning by the radioactive compound polonium-210.

It was obvious to all except pro-Russian conspiracy theorists that an unfriendly foreign power had been involved in an incident which – among its numerous astonishing features – could be considered a gross infringement of British sovereignty. Yet this was never going to be a subject on which Parliament would be asked to support military reprisals. If Britain looked impotent in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, at least it was not alone. The crisis had been

generated by the prospect of an 'association agreement' between Ukraine and the EU, which Putin regarded as unacceptable. France and Germany were equally wrong-footed by the Kremlin's encouragement of Crimean separatists. Yet at least those countries took the lead in the search for a peaceful solution, in which the British government was conspicuously absent. Rather than being a country that punched above its weight, Britain now looked as if it was happy to act as a playground bully until a really big kid turned up, at which point it discovered that this was someone else's quarrel. Cameron, the 'Libyan liberator,' had suffered an abrupt transformation into a Crimean capitulator.

A month before the 2015 general election the *Economist* magazine characterised Britain as 'a shrinking actor on the global stage'. Harsh words were being uttered about Cameron and his coalition by retired British soldiers as well as US officials. Britain looked set to spend less than 2 per cent of GDP on defence, despite Cameron's emphasis on this minimum figure at the 2014 NATO summit. Britain had been a guarantor of Ukraine's territorial integrity in 1994, when that country agreed to relinquish its nuclear weapons. Yet Cameron, the *Economist* felt, had 'been not so much cautious as apathetic, ineffective and fickle' in his response to Putin's aggression (*Economist*, 2015).

While the *Economist* concentrated its fire on the Prime Minister, its article was intended as an indictment of the coalition as a whole. In defence of their record, ministers could reply that their main task when assuming office in 2010 had been the restoration of their country's finances, without which no future British Prime Minister would have enjoyed the option of looking 'apathetic', 'ineffective' or 'fickle'. However, at the outset the coalition had talked as if Britain's global standing could be improved *despite* the context of austerity, and the government's programme of spending cuts had turned out to be less drastic than initially expected. The *Economist*'s critique attributed the coalition's failure not to the need to save money but to its inability to make the most of its position within the EU.

The coalition and 'Europe'

The coalition government was unlikely to repeat all of New Labour's offences with regard to the EU, but its dominant Conservative members had already shown a clear propensity to offend. David Cameron might have abandoned his 'cast-iron' promise to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, but he had concealed his tactical retreat under a covering fire of rhetoric which implied that he would seize any plausible opportunity to obstruct European business.

In a concession to 'openness', the coalition had promised that if petitions published on the government's website (www.gov.uk/petition-government) won the support of 10,000 signatories, they would receive an official response of some kind; if they reached 100,000, their subjects would be considered for Parliamentary

debate. A petition calling for a referendum on EU membership was duly started and quickly attracted the requisite support. The debate was held on 25 October 2011, on a motion which envisaged a referendum offering three options: that Britain should stay in an unreformed EU, remain a member subject to renegotiated terms or withdraw. Cameron imposed a three-line whip, which was never likely to deter the dissidents on his own side. In total (including the two tellers), 81 Conservative MPs voted in favour of the motion, and there were around 20 abstentions (Cowley and Stuart, 2012). This rebellion topped the Maastricht record by some 40 votes, although the survival of the government was not even remotely in question this time, since a cross-party combination ensured the motion's defeat by 483 to 111 votes. Even on the most imaginative construction of the voting, this implied that MPs were out of line with the majority of their constituents, since polling now suggested a clear majority for withdrawal from the EU (Ipsos MORI, 2016).

Fortunately for Cameron, an opportunity to appease the public mood – and his own troublesome backbenchers – was at hand. At a meeting of the European Council in December 2011 he refused to endorse a treaty amendment which would introduce new rules relating to the eurozone. The fact that Cameron had made use of Britain's veto gave the Eurosceptic press a rare opportunity to use language it expected its readers to understand. In gratitude, the *Daily Mail* applauded 'defiant Cameron' for resisting 'Euro bullies'; to complete the Prime Minister's new Churchillian image, the paper exulted that he had ordered 'a full English breakfast' the next morning (Chapman, 2011).

For anyone with memories of the 1992 Maastricht negotiations, the reaction to the 'historic' veto was unsettling. On that occasion the press had been briefed to say that it was 'game, set and match' for Britain – a phrase which aroused considerable irritation in European capitals. This time the London Mayor Boris Johnson helpfully suggested that the Prime Minister had 'played a blinder'. What Cameron had really done was to stipulate that Britain's financial institutions should not be affected by the eurozone rules. This had proved unacceptable to other EU leaders – particularly Cameron's former friend President Sarkozy, whose wrath, apparently, came close to provoking a physical confrontation. Having failed to protect crucial British interests through persuasion, Cameron really had no choice but to apply the veto. Subsequently, a French official summed up the controversy in a simile which would resonate with many tabloid readers, in Britain and beyond, claiming that Cameron had behaved 'like a man at a wife-swapping party who refuses to bring his own wife' (Chapman, 2011).

Conservative Eurosceptics were too well informed to fall for simplistic headlines which titillated the rank and file, but they could draw plenty of comfort from the details. The incident was a crushing blow to the coalition's plan for a constructive EU role; as the *Guardian* newspaper correctly predicted, it would increase Britain's isolation and thus enhance the case for complete withdrawal

(in the end, only the Czechs followed Cameron's example by withholding support from the Eurozone reforms: Traynor *et al.*, 2011). The veto was likely to be unpalatable to many Liberal Democrats, bringing closer the prospect of an end to another dubious union – the coalition itself. Initially, Nick Clegg endorsed the use of the veto, albeit with reluctance. However, the furious response of his Parliamentary colleagues induced a rapid rethink. In a television interview Clegg revealed that he was 'bitterly disappointed' by the veto. His feelings were expressed in a physical form, though not the pugilistic variety which Sarkozy had allegedly attempted. When Cameron reported on the summit in the Commons, Clegg refused to sit next to him (Goes, 2013, 9–10).

Whatever the effect of his conduct on the audiences that really mattered – the British tabloid press, the Conservative Party and other EU leaders – Cameron really had 'played a blinder' *vis-à-vis* his coalition partners. In the initial stage of his game plan he would propitiate the real enemy – his own backbenchers – at the expense of his Lib Dem friends. However, once the hubbub had subsided, he could make concessions to Clegg which would create barely a ripple outside the 'hardest' of Eurosceptic households. Thus, just a month after his heroic stand, he agreed to empty much of its significance by conceding that the European Court of Justice (ECJ) could enforce the revised fiscal rules. As Cameron presumably calculated, this quiet climbdown could not be translated into screaming headlines unless the tabloid press was prepared to explain the complex procedures of the EU to its readers – a task which it was notoriously reluctant to undertake. As a result, Cameron got away with his tactical ploy – for the time being.

Almost exactly a year after the Conservative rebellion on an EU referendum Cameron's internal critics struck again, and on this occasion they had Labour's support. Indeed, it was Labour, rather than a Conservative backbencher, which provided this opportunity for revolt. The Opposition forced a vote on a real-terms cut in the EU's budget for 2014–20 in place of the planned 5 per cent increase; the coalition had been arguing for a real-terms freeze. This cynical ploy attracted the support of 53 Conservative MPs, leading to a government defeat by 307 to 294. Presumably, Labour's strategists calculated that although its proposal would cause annoyance within the EU, European leaders would still prefer to do business with Ed Miliband than David Cameron after the next election. If so, their tactics were too clever by half. Cameron might have alienated many of his partners by casting his veto over fiscal reform, but some of them (including Germany's Angela Merkel) recognised the publicity value of an EU budget cut at a time of austerity. In February 2013 Cameron was able to hail an agreement to reduce the 2014–20 budget; and although the British contribution would rise, he was able to blame that on concessions which New Labour had agreed back in 2005.

Before then, however, Cameron had decided to face up to the logic of his circumstances, both domestically and within the EU. The balance of opinion within his own party had forced him into a self-defeating scenario where every

concession won through hard bargaining would merely serve as the prelude to more unrealistic demands from Conservative backbenchers, until every last objectionable power had been 'repatriated' to Britain. This process could only end in a row and a rebuff which would be taken as proof by members of the party and their media supporters that the EU was not susceptible to reform and that British withdrawal was the only sensible option.

On 23 January 2013 Cameron delivered a speech at the London headquarters of the US-based financial institution Bloomberg, in which he accepted the case for a referendum on EU membership. However, this was not a belated acceptance of the Liberal Democrat policy of 2010, in which an in–out referendum could only be triggered by a significant EU treaty change. Cameron was arguing that a referendum should be held whether or not a new treaty was being proposed. However, the vote would not take place immediately, since this would deny Britain the chance to explore possible reforms which would make it more likely that voters would opt for Cameron's own preferred option of continued EU membership. Indeed, the full text of the speech must be rated as one of the best expositions by a British leader of the 'case for the defence', when so many of Cameron's predecessors had chosen to pay lip-service to the prosecution argument. In view of Britain's role in Iraq, as well as Libya's ongoing descent into anarchy, it was perhaps unfortunate that Cameron should tell his audience that 'in any emergency you should plan for the aftermath as well as dealing with the present crisis'. However, Cameron outlined five principles which should guide the EU in the twenty-first century; and although some of the suggestions (particularly those relating to economic competitiveness) would have reminded his listeners that the Prime Minister had once anointed himself 'the heir to Blair', no one could doubt his constructive purpose (Cameron, 2013).

Nevertheless, the inevitable headline arising from the Bloomberg speech was that Cameron had finally caved in to his Eurosceptic critics and accepted that long-suffering Britons should finally get the chance to throw off the EU yoke. Tactically, his timing was excellent as usual; the pledge would keep his Eurosceptic critics (fairly) quiet until the next general election, and an announcement which would have wrong-footed any Labour leader, however gifted and far-sighted, was not calculated to make life any easier for Labour's Ed Miliband, who was struggling to win a reputation for statesmanship. Last, but not least on this occasion, whatever their private feelings, Cameron's Liberal Democrat partners were unlikely to lodge a vehement protest, since the logic of their previous policy suggested that 'the people' had every right to pronounce on 'Europe', so that the calling of a referendum on the subject was now a matter of timing rather than of principle.

However, even if the Bloomberg speech made a favourable impression in European capitals, Cameron managed to dissipate its effect through his attempts in 2014 to thwart the nomination of the former long-serving Prime Minister of Luxembourg Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission President. As if to

compensate for his previous run of luck, Cameron's persistent and high-profile campaign to contest Juncker's appointment was an almost incomprehensible blunder. Juncker, after all, was virtually guaranteed the Presidency as the nominee of the EPP, which commanded a majority in the European Parliament; and any influence Cameron could have hoped to exercise over this grouping had been jettisoned back in 2009, when he ordered Conservative MPs to abandon the EPP in favour of more exotic company. Cameron was not entirely devoid of support. Sweden and the Netherlands were sympathetic, and Germany's Angela Merkel was also reported to have private reservations about a 'federalist' candidate. Ominously, though, some of Cameron's own backbenchers were hoping that Juncker would prevail, since 'this would have a positive effect in accelerating a British exit'. 'You can find a lot of people [in the Tory party] who think he will be very helpful', commented Charles Walker, who, as Vice-Chairman of the 1922 Committee, was in a good position to gauge Parliamentary opinion (Helm, 2014). Perhaps it was Cameron's awareness of this Machiavellian line of thinking that prompted him to use up remaining political capital in Brussels by urging the case against Juncker long after it seemed certain to prove unavailing. A more immediate consideration was the perceived threat from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which topped the poll in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections and was now emulating the destructive effect on the Conservative Party that the Militant Tendency had wreaked on Labour for much of the 1980s.

Conforming to the party's usual practice, the section on 'Europe' appeared towards the end of the 2015 Conservative manifesto. It reiterated the referendum pledge and promised that before the poll was held (no later than 2017) '[w]e will negotiate a new settlement for Britain'. The negotiations would result in an EU 'that helps Britain move ahead, not one that holds us back'. Readers were reminded that 'David Cameron vetoed a new EU treaty that would have damaged British interests' – 'the first time in history that a British Prime Minister has done so'. Whatever the result of the referendum, a Conservative government would honour it – even if the voters were silly enough to opt for withdrawal from an association which kept on producing treaties which 'damage British interests'. The implicit message of the manifesto was that only the Conservatives could be trusted to give the British people the chance to make the wrong choice.

Bring on the 'Brexiteers'

Before the 2015 general election David Cameron revealed that, whatever the outcome of that contest, he would not fight another one as Conservative leader. Following the creation of the US-style NSC, and New Labour's introduction of a Supreme Court, this was another sign that the UK's political system was morphing into an imitation of its former colony. Since Cameron was still relatively

young and vigorous (certainly when judged on his performances at Prime Minister's Questions), his decision to step down suggested that Britain, like the US, should restrict its heads of government to just two terms in office.

In reality, Cameron's main motivation was to assure the sharks circling in Conservative Party waters that he would be dead meat before 2020, thus giving them every incentive to give the appearance of loyalty through the 2015 election campaign and a suitable ensuing period, after which they could begin to deliver codedly critical speeches. At the same time, Cameron's 'inadvertent' announcement conveyed a degree of confidence that his departure would be voluntary, rather than being enforced by the impending decisions of British voters. He managed to overcome the first obstacle – the general election of 2015. Despite opinion polls which suggested another 'hung' Parliament, the Conservatives secured an overall majority of 16 seats. Cameron had some reason to feel that his leadership of the party had finally been vindicated, since he had led it to victory and was clearly an electoral asset rather than a liability. His post-election euphoria was probably enhanced by the media's near-universal presentation of the result as a personal triumph for Cameron against impossible odds. In reality, the media were taken aback because they had been misled by the opinion polls; if none of those imperfect surveys had been conducted, hardly anyone would have been very surprised by the Conservative victory, since the main opposition parties (which now included the Liberal Democrats) had done little to invigorate even their most devoted supporters.

For Cameron, the real message of the 2015 general election was that his party's overall majority was too slender to cushion him from the Parliamentary rebellions he could expect from MPs who, judged by their rhetoric, had only sought election in order to liberate Britain from the EU. Once this harsh reality had registered with Cameron, he decided that the referendum should be called sooner rather than later, to make the most of any enhanced prestige the election result might have brought him in Brussels, along with a 'second honeymoon' with British voters. The problem for Cameron was that the rationale for this accelerated timetable was likely to convince other European leaders that the case for continued British membership of the EU would prevail even if they refused to make significant concessions on key issues, such as the principle of free movement of people between member states. This showed the folly of Cameron's decision to agree that a referendum should be held *without* significant EU treaty changes; in that instance, the task would have been the familiar one of reassuring British voters that the reforms were not very important after all, whereas in 2016 he had the far more onerous problem of proving that he had persuaded his EU partners to make changes which really were significant. This would probably have overtaxed the powers of any British Prime Minister since the 1986 Single European Act revived the process of deeper integration. Cameron, however, gambled that he could present his inevitable failure as a kind of success.

After all, he had presided over two referendums (on a change to the voting system for general elections (May 2011) and Scottish independence (September 2014) which had resulted in victories for the status quo. In February 2016 he announced that a referendum on EU membership would be held in June.

Any observers who were hoping that this crucial decision would be informed by a debate which included a thoroughgoing assessment of Britain's role in the world since 1945 were predictably disappointed. The case for leaving the EU was dominated by the issue of immigration. On this subject the most eloquent contribution was made not by any speech but by statistics released in late May which showed that net migration to Britain over the previous year had been 330,000 – the second highest figure on record. The magnetic attraction of the UK for migrants (from the EU and elsewhere) was due, in large part, to the popularity of English as a second language – the very factor which provided the country with a reliable source of soft power, whatever its economic or military prowess. However, the anti-European press had played on the idea that migrants from countries like Poland and Romania hoped to exploit the country's welfare system – which had not been particularly generous by European standards even before the advent of austerity. In parts of the UK migrants were indeed straining some aspects of the welfare state, particularly in education, since so many were couples with young families. However, the press focused on the effects on the National Health Service (NHS), which in reality was facing a funding crisis because retired people were staying alive for much longer despite chronic (and very expensive) health impairments. Unprepared (and perhaps unwilling) to spell out the realities behind the stark immigration statistics, the 'Remain' campaign was unable to make significant headway through its urgent warnings about the likely economic impact of withdrawal. Indeed, these (well-funded) interventions became increasingly shrill and counterproductive, giving the impression that the political 'elite' was having to resort to scare stories because it lacked any positive arguments.

As in the previous referendum campaign of 1975, the governing party was divided and the Prime Minister suspended the convention of collective Cabinet responsibility to allow a majority of ministers to campaign on either side. In another repetition of 1975, the majority of ministers favoured continued membership; and the 'Leave' campaign was dominated by controversial characters. In 1975, however, the main opposition party had, if anything, been even more active on the side of membership than the Labour government, whose leader, Wilson, had been lukewarm. In 2016 the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn made Wilson look like a Eurofanatic; and his party's campaigning effort seemed half-hearted even after the assassination, during the campaign, of pro-Remain Labour MP Jo Cox. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats, whose Liberal forebears of 1975 had been popular with voters even if their Parliamentary contingent was small, had been discredited by their participation in the coalition government. The most powerful pro-European voice was provided by the leader of the

Scottish National Party (SNP), Nicola Sturgeon; but it was doubtful whether her advocacy made a positive impression in England, where the newspapers which bellowed for British independence from Brussels were equally vociferous in opposing Scottish separation from London.

Overall, then, the political impetus behind the 'Remain' campaign was much weaker than it had been in 1975. In numerical terms, its representation among the 'elite' was not much reduced; but it carried far less *weight*, reflecting the diminution of respect for politicians in general since 1975. Against this background, it was more difficult to undermine the 'Brexiteers' by referring to the obvious ambition and personal indiscretions of the leading 'Leave' campaigner, Boris Johnson, since the public seemed satisfied that all politicians were seriously flawed. Johnson – unlike Tony Benn, who had played a similar role in 1975 and had been subjected to vicious abuse for his pains – enjoyed considerable support from the media, especially sections of the 'popular' press. This, it seems, was the decisive difference between 1975 and 2016. On the former occasion almost all of Britain's national newspapers had supported continued membership; in 2016 most supported 'Leave'. Apart from their coverage of the campaign itself, newspapers like the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and (especially) the *Daily Express* had attacked the EU for years, occasionally straying from strict verisimilitude in reports designed to please their anti-European proprietors. Even 'heavyweight' publications, like the *Daily Telegraph*, extended the sort of unsympathetic treatment to the EU which they had reserved for the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

The vote itself, conducted on 23 June 2016, produced a narrow victory (by 51.9 to 48.1 per cent) for 'Leave'. David Cameron immediately announced his intention to resign as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, presenting the result as a decisive rejection of the advice that he had given to the electorate. Evidently, Cameron was hoping to minimise any soul-searching or post-mortems, on the old Churchillian grounds that in any vote a majority of one is sufficient. Nevertheless, his attempt (echoed by almost every other senior politician) to portray the outcome as a reflection of unequivocal purpose on the part of the British people was so obviously misleading as to undermine his intention. For example, the four capital cities of the UK – Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London – had all bucked the overall trend by endorsing continued EU membership; and while they might seem unrepresentative of the UK as a whole for various reasons, it was at least arguable that they were 'different' because their populations were more dynamic (or, in common parlance, 'forward-looking') than the areas which voted for 'Brexit'.

Since the vote would affect young people more than pensioners, the narrow verdict was rendered even less satisfactory by the fact that the latter had provided 'Leave' with its key constituency, whereas a clear majority of 18–24-year-olds who bothered to vote had plumped for 'Remain'. The differential turnout between generations – around 90 per cent of those aged over 65 voted, compared to fewer

than two thirds of 18–24-year-olds – could, of course, be a testimony to the superior arguments of the 'Leave' campaign; more likely, though, it was just another manifestation of a demographic doomsday scenario, in which across a range of key government policies 'grey' voters enjoyed disproportionate influence merely because they had been brought up at a time when more people considered voting to be a duty. Subsequently it emerged that many people who voted 'Leave' did so either because they thought this was a costless protest, since 'Remain' was sure to win, or because they supposed (in accordance with the message of the tabloid press) that a vote to leave would be followed instantly by a painless liberation from the infernal EU. While 'Remain' campaigners had exaggerated the likely economic cost of withdrawal, their opponents had distorted the net cost of Britain's membership.

Since British referendums have no formal constitutional status and can be treated as 'consultative' exercises unless otherwise specified, taking all of the accompanying context into account the 2016 poll could have been interpreted as a dishonourable draw, leaving the country's Parliamentary representatives to decide Britain's future. After all, other EU countries with more clearly defined constitutions had held referendums which produced the 'wrong' result, and without undue embarrassment they had asked their voters to think again until they came up with a more satisfactory answer.

Why did Britain's elite capitulate in the face of such a dubious verdict? David Cameron's instant overreaction presumably reflected a sense of personal shock and humiliation. But others could have taken a different line, asserting that although the case for membership of the EU had suffered a serious setback, the war was not over. The fact that they spurned this course of action is partly explained by the weakness of the British political elite, which had been badly shaken by a 2009 scandal over Parliamentary expenses. The main reason, however, was that the 2016 referendum reflected the continued popularity of a narrative which the politicians had themselves promulgated, i.e. that despite the setback of the Second World War, Britain remained a great power. From that perspective, the notion that politicians or bureaucrats from other European countries – the states which Britain had rescued during the Second World War – could deprive the UK of control over its own borders was not just intolerable: it was unfathomable. Something underhand must have happened since 1945 to produce this state of affairs, and whether the chief culprits were based at Westminster, in Whitehall or in Brussels, a vote for 'Leave' would be a sufficient slap in the face to all of the above to make it worthwhile.

A mainstream politician like David Cameron could hardly say in the wake of the 2016 vote that it had all been based on a misunderstanding of Britain's global status. After all, he and earlier exemplars had brought the disaster on themselves. At regular intervals since 1945 opportunities had presented themselves for truly 'responsible' politicians to dissipate the post-war myths. In 1961, for example,

Harold Macmillan (so soon after Suez) could have told the British public that he was committing his country to EEC membership because its global role was 'played out'. Instead, he chose to emphasise the economic case for membership. After this missed opportunity, the main political parties tended to acknowledge in their election manifestos that Britain had declined; indeed, opposition parties were usually eager to exaggerate the evidence, so long as the deplorable trend could be blamed on the inadequate stewardship of their rivals. Even Edward Heath, who came the closest to giving the British public a cold dose of reality, was not immune from this electoral ploy. Some governments had the temerity to claim that their achievements had reversed Britain's decline, implying that the dominant post-war narrative had been inapplicable for a while but was now wholly revalidated. Such propagandists and their media allies regarded those who tried to base their assessments on careful evaluations of relevant evidence as tedious at the best of times and almost treacherous during more intense periods like the Falklands War and the 'Brexit' referendum.

On this view, it would be unfair to regard David Cameron as an inept performer who brought a promising act to a premature end. Rather, he seems like an inexperienced impresario who, at an awkward moment, was forced to ask the audience for its opinion of a long succession of conjuring tricks which had only ever seemed adequate because the audience had been willing the performers to succeed. The act had seemed transparent to well-informed observers within the UK, and it baffled external actors like US Presidents, who found themselves having to learn about something called the 'special relationship' every time they visited London or played host to a British Prime Minister.

An optimist could discern among the wreckage of the 2016 referendum the chance of a new beginning for Britain without any need to resort to smoke and mirrors. The possibility of a positive outcome was apparently augmented when Theresa May emerged as the new Conservative leader and Prime Minister ahead of some implausible rivals. May, who seemed to have arrived at a more stable and sustainable understanding of 'liberal Conservatism' than her predecessor, was a second-rate conjuror's nightmare; no British politician seemed better equipped to dispel the illusions associated with the great-power narrative, and on that basis she had decided to support 'Remain' while making no secret of her reservations in some of the EU's key policy areas. However, this entirely rational decision left her exposed to the view that a country which had just voted for 'Brexit' should not be led by a 'Remain' campaigner, however lukewarm. As a result, she felt compelled to genuflect towards the over-familiar post-war narrative on the day she took office, stating that although the referendum had created difficulties for her country, 'I know because we're *Great* Britain, that we will rise to the challenge. As we leave the European Union, we will forge a bold new positive role for ourselves in the world' (May, 2016). In later speeches she gave the impression of having warmed to oft rehearsed post-war themes.

Boris Johnson, May's new Foreign Secretary, had already proved his ability to merge the (over)familiar post-war narratives by declaiming that 'Britain is a great nation, a global force for good'. Ironically, this purple passage adorned an article which Johnson drafted before he had decided to campaign for 'Leave', and was meant to support the case for Remain'! (Shipman, 2017, 175–6.) Serious divisions were exposed by the 2016 referendum, but it would be a mistake to assume that delusions about Britain's recent history were confined to one side.

Unsurprisingly, then, during the campaign before the 'snap' general election in June 2017 Mrs May gave no indication that she was contemplating a re-examination of Britain's foreign policy in the aftermath of 'Brexit'. When Labour's Jeremy Corbyn argued that the terrorism which overshadowed the campaign had been inspired at least in part by foreign policy decisions, May and her colleagues were quick to seize on this plausible suggestion as evidence that Corbyn was unfit to hold high office. May had already demonstrated an iron determination to uphold the 'special relationship' despite the fact that the new US President, Donald Trump was a stranger to sentiment in the diplomatic sphere and showed a propensity to treat Britain like an insolvent business partner.

The ghost of Dean Acheson would have been astonished to see so much continuity between Britain's position in 2017 and the dilemmas he had identified back in 1962. Britain and the world had changed out of recognition since then, but while 'realities' were different, the old illusions apparently had retained their hold over the British imagination. There was even a chance that the voters had made the right decision in the 2016 referendum, although this would depend, crucially, on a judicious deployment of the country's overstretched diplomatic resources. But, even for an ardent Brexiteer in possession of factual information, at best it could only be regarded as an astute decision taken for inappropriate reasons; and, insofar as Britain's voters had decided to use the 2016 referendum as an opportunity to reaffirm their attachment to a story about the country's recent past which rarely trespassed on reality, the prospects were dispiritingly dubious.