Les jeux sont faits, rien ne va plus? Has the Tory Party finally chosen between Europe and America?

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Abstract

When Andrew Gamble’s Between Europe and America was published in 2003, the Conservative Party was in deep trouble—a victim, he claimed, of its own success under Margaret Thatcher in destroying ‘the post-war compromise’ that had kept the United Kingdom together, allowed it to participate, albeit reluctantly, in European integration, and helped it cope with imperial and economic decline. Yet, getting on for two decades later, the party appears to have regained the hegemony that then looked lost. Moreover, by leading the country out of the EU, the Tories seem finally to have made the choice between the two relationships and the two models of political economy that, according to Gamble, they had long attempted, however uneasily, to reconcile. When we look more closely, however, at trade, at foreign and defence policy, and at the Johnson government’s economic policies, it looks as if the Conservatives—for all that the majority of their MPs can be classified as Brexiteers, as Atlanticists, as neoliberals, and therefore as Thatcherites—continue to hope (not necessarily irrationally) that they can have their cake and eat it too.

Keywords: Conservative, EU, political economy, neoliberalism, trade, foreign and defence policy

WRITING NEARLY two decades ago in his brilliant take on the past, present and future of British politics, Between Europe and America, Andrew Gamble argued that Margaret Thatcher, particularly after she had departed Downing Street, had

legitimated opposition to Europe in a way which the [Tory] leadership had hitherto successfully avoided. She suggested that there was an alternative—the English adventure was not over, provided English sovereignty was not given up. Priority should be given to America over Europe, because this was the guarantee of preserving an open seas, open trade policy, cultivating links with all parts of the world ... True internationalism, she argued, meant avoiding entanglement with a protectionist, inward-looking, interventionist, high cost continental economy.

The two continents, Gamble stressed, were not merely geographical locations or geopolitical powers; they were profoundly different economic models: one apparently alien and ill-suited to a ‘world island’, as well as increasingly sclerotic and ill-equipped for a globalised future; the other deemed altogether more dynamic, yet also comfortably familiar—an extension of the ideas and practices that had once allowed the ‘union state’ that was Britain in its heyday to bestride the globe like the proverbial colossus. The contrast between them was also, via what Gamble labelled ‘Anglo-America’, inextricably bound up with a more obviously cultural imaginary of England (and by extension Britain) as ‘a land apart, somehow cut off from Europe and not fundamentally European at all’, as well as one distinguished by a commitment to parliamentary sovereignty rather than a codified constitution that might unduly constrain the power of the executive (in the UK’s case

1A. Gamble, Between Europe and America: the Future of British Politics, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2003. p. 178.
‘the Crown-in-Parliament’). And, not surprisingly, there were defence and foreign policy implications too, fusing postwar Atlanticism with an older, Tory ‘national imperialism’ which, from Salisbury onwards, has seen ‘England’s interests as best served when the focus is on securing immediate national interests, and safeguarding the spheres of influence which it has established around the world’, in later years seeking to ‘support those areas of the world … linked directly to Britain though arms sales and other business connections, but to limit involvement elsewhere, especially where no direct interest is at stake’.

In the thirty years following the end of the Second World War, Britain may well have lost an empire but—those who governed it hoped—it had eventually found what passed for a role. The UK, they argued, was now a leading European power, helping to build bridges between the USA, with which it still claimed a ‘special relationship’, and the European Community, which it had finally joined in 1973—a decision confirmed (seemingly for all time) by an overwhelming victory for the ‘Yes’ side in a referendum held two years later. True, it was far from smooth sailing on occasion, as Thatcher’s own hard-fought battle for a rebate on the UK’s budget contribution amply illustrated. But any losses, even she was convinced (at least while she was Prime Minister), were outweighed by the gains—the prospect of increasingly free trade with a vast market on our doorstep that was also a Cold War bulwark against the Soviet bloc.

Soon after her forced departure from Downing Street, however, Thatcher, and the many Conservative politicians still devoted to her, began voicing considerable misgivings. With the collapse of communism, the security calculus had changed. But more than that, it was clear (at least to them) that the EU was hell-bent on a federal future, spearheaded by its leading European power, helping to build a continent whose ‘distinctive collectivist and interventionist programme’ had been key to the electoral and ideological hegemony the Conservative Party had enjoyed for most of the twentieth century. Furthermore, by achieving four electoral victories on the trot between 1979 and 1992, the Conservatives had, in effect, also become victims of their own success, helping to turn Labour into a moderate, business-friendly party which, as long as it could continue to preside over low unemployment, low inflation and reasonably strong growth, was likely to satisfy middle England, as well as Scotland and Wales, for some time to come.

As a consequence of all this, argued Gamble, the Tories were in deep trouble. He even asked, in the wake of Labour’s landslide victories in both

2Ibid., p. 111. On Anglo-America in particular, see pp. 83–107.
3Ibid., p. 81.

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1997 and 2001, and with a grassroots and parliamentary membership apparently ‘unwilling to take the steps [away from Thatcherism] needed for recovery … Will the Conservatives survive as the main opposition force and alternative government in British Politics?’ At the same time, however, Gamble was canny enough to remind his readers of the ‘protean nature’ and sheer adaptability of the Tory Party. Just as wisely, he noted that Labour’s grassroots’ ‘aversion to America, but also a scepticism towards Europe, and a hankering after national sovereignty and British socialism’ could well see it refuse to commit itself fully to continental integration and, in so doing, throw away what was surely a golden opportunity ‘to consolidate its position as the natural governing party’, after which ‘internal splits will destroy it and … it will be swept away by a revived Conservative Party.’ Arguably, although not explicitly, he even predicted, if not the holding of the 2016 referendum, then at least Leave’s victory, observing that

Many of the tensions in British politics, and the travails of its political parties, are because Britain has been drawing ever closer to Europe, but this has been resisted by a significant part of the political class which prefers America, and also by a large part of the electorate, which is hostile to both Europe and America and would prefer to remain detached from both. This option is unlikely to be a British choice, but it might be an English choice.

Moreover, whatever what might be decided by what is by far the largest of the UK’s four nations, Gamble pointed out, would be crucial ‘in helping to determine whether or not the other nations want to continue to be part of a shared British project’.

Almost two decades later, now that the UK—governed once again by a Tory Party enjoying not just a fourth successive term in office but also a substantial parliamentary majority—has left the EU largely as a result of English votes, while nationalists in Scotland and Northern Ireland campaign to break away, Gamble’s words seem incredibly prescient. But what about the choice that he suggested was facing the country in general and the Conservatives in particular—the choice, be it geopolitical or a matter of political economy, between Europe and America? Has it finally been made? The answer, it turns out, is not quite as clear cut as Brexit might at first glance make it appear.

(Not) defying gravity: UK-EU (and US) trade post Brexit

For a start, even the hard Brexit that the May and Johnson governments were determined to pursue can hardly be said to represent a ‘clean break’ with the EU and its twenty-seven member states. True, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) signed on Christmas Eve 2020 may be far from perfect, sacrificing market access and increased prosperity (or at least a non-trivial quantum of future GDP growth) for increased sovereignty (at least as defined by Brexiteers, who see sovereignty as zero-sum rather than something that can profitably be pooled). Nevertheless, the agreement envisages a close, tariff-free economic relationship with what will clearly remain, in the short-to-medium term anyway, the UK’s biggest overseas market, even if it is difficult to assess right now the impact on services, which were largely excluded from the TCA despite accounting for the bulk of Britain’s economy.

That said, early hopes that the signing of the deal would at least get the relationship off to a relatively amicable start have rapidly faded. It is difficult to know whether the UK government, and Unionist politicians in Northern Ireland, were genuinely spooked by the EU’s announcement—rescinded within hours, mind—that it would consider invoking its right, under Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol, to limit the flow of Covid-19 vaccines from south to north. Whatever, that announcement provided Brexiteers with yet another excuse to whip up a campaign against Brussels, with the apparent aim (at least on the part of the Unionists if not the government) of ripping up the protocol and getting rid of the (officially unacknowledged) border down the Irish Sea. And matters were only made worse by the decision of the UK government unilaterally to extend the grace period during which checks on exports from Great Britain to Northern Ireland would be lighter than allowed for under the protocol—a move (and one only

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9Ibid., p. 161, p. 15.
7Ibid., p. 230, p. 161.
8Ibid., p. 231.
9Ibid., p. 5
made more provocative by the aggressive non-chalance with which it was shrugged off by David Frost, appointed to handle Cabinet relations with Brussels by Boris Johnson which immediately prompted the EU to threaten legal action.10 Yet whether this potential burning of the bridges with Europe built by the TCA means the UK will really move closer to America is highly debateable. Indeed, the Johnson government’s apparent willingness to break international law has, it was widely reported, caused considerable concern in the new administration in Washington, headed as it is by a proudly Irish-American President and supported (if only in this respect) by a bipartisan (and therefore powerful) Irish lobby in Congress. On the other hand, Biden went no further than (albeit, perhaps, pointedly) issuing a joint St Patrick’s Day statement with Irish Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, in expressing support for good faith implementation of the peace accords and other international agreements pertaining to Northern Ireland. Warnings from Washington that the UK government’s actions may make a comprehensive trade deal with the US more difficult have so far been confined to individual legislators. But given that any such deal would need to be ratified by the two later in a section titled (as if to lend credence to the presidentialisation thesis put forward by many political scientists) ‘The Prime Minister’s vision for the UK in 2030’ the review went on to insist that, ‘[a]s a European nation, we will enjoy free to tread our own path, blessed with a global network of friends and partners, and with the opportunity to forge new and deeper relationships’. And, although a page or two later in a section titled (as if to lend credence to the presidentialisation thesis put forward by many political scientists) ‘The Prime Minister’s vision for the UK in 2030’ the review went on to insist that, ‘[a]s a European nation, we will enjoy constructive and productive relationships with our neighbours in the European Union’, this was immediately qualified by stressing that those relationships would be ‘based on mutual respect for sovereignty and the UK’s freedom to do things differently, economically and politically, where that suits our interests.’ To critical commentators, indeed,

Still a middling power: defence and foreign policy

So much for trade, what about defence and foreign policy? Given the (relative) weight already placed by the UK, and (at least since Margaret Thatcher became its leader in 1975) by the Conservative Party, on the special relationship, is there really much scope for the UK to move further toward America and away from Europe in this regard? The government’s recently published integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, Global Britain in a Competitive Age, may provide us with an answer, albeit one that, admittedly, currently lives more in the realm of intentions than actuality.12

At first glance the answer would seem to be yes. For instance, Boris Johnson in his foreword, claimed that ‘[h]aving left the European Union, the UK has started a new chapter in our history’ where we were now ‘free to tread our own path, blessed with a global network of friends and partners, and with the opportunity to forge new and deeper relationships’. And, although a page or two later in a section titled (as if to lend credence to the presidentialisation thesis put forward by many political scientists) ‘The Prime Minister’s vision for the UK in 2030’ the review went on to insist that, ‘[a]s a European nation, we will enjoy constructive and productive relationships with our neighbours in the European Union’, this was immediately qualified by stressing that those relationships would be ‘based on mutual respect for sovereignty and the UK’s freedom to do things differently, economically and politically, where that suits our interests.’ To critical commentators, indeed,

Notes

10D. Frost, ‘Brussels needs to shake off its remaining ill-will and treat Brexit Britain as an equal’, Sunday Telegraph, 6 March 2021.

11See ‘Joe Biden’s pick for trade envoy wants to “review” negotiations with UK’, New European, 26 February 2021; https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/brexit-news/joe-biden-post-brexit-trade-negotiations-7792434 and UK-US Free Trade Agreement, UK Department of International Trade, 2020, pp. 56–7; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869592/UK_US_FTA_negotiations.pdf (both accessed 26 April 2021).

12Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, UK Government, policy paper, 16 March 2021; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy (accessed 26 April 2021).
‘the review’s underlying purpose was to justify turning our back on the continent we share. There is, therefore, a hole in the middle where Europe should be. The continent is treated as a security commitment, largely for NATO-related reasons, but it is not treated as important in any other context. The policy towards Europe is one of flat denial. In the recesses of the review, it is true that there are some brief sections about parts of Europe—a paragraph about France, another about Germany, a third about Ireland. But in more than 100 pages, there are only a handful of references to the EU, without which these bilateral relationships cannot be easily understood or developed. Spain is mentioned once. Belgium, for whom Britain went to war a century ago, not at all.13

Predictably enough (although quite what the impact of a second Trump term might have been on the review, who knows?), rather more space was afforded by the government to the USA, our relationship with which was described in suitably gushing detail.

The United States will remain the UK’s most important strategic ally and partner. The heart of the relationship is a human one: the flow of people and ideas between our countries, our shared history, and a common language. Almost a million British and American nationals live and go to work in each other’s countries each day. Our relationship is also one of common values—a shared belief in democracy, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. As a result of these foundations, we cooperate to an unprecedented degree. Across the full spectrum of defence, intelligence, cyber power, counter-terrorism and nuclear, the US-UK partnership underpins our security and saves lives. We will continue to deepen our relationship, including through the Carrier Strike Group, joint work on emerging technologies, and collaboration on our future nuclear deterrent. The US is the UK’s biggest single bilateral trading partner, accounting for over £230 billion in trade, almost 20% of UK exports and the largest single source of FDI in 2019. We will seek to grow this further through an FTA, which will help both our economic recoveries from COVID-19 and aid our shared ambition to level up, setting a new bar for trade deals of the future in digital trade, in the protection of intellectual property and in accelerating efforts on the low-carbon economy.

But, for all the media spin about a so-called ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’, the review itself also made clear that, although Brexit gives the UK the chance ‘to mark a distinctive approach to foreign policy … we will work with the EU where our interests coincide—for example, in supporting the stability and security of the European continent and in cooperating on climate action and biodiversity.’ Moreover, it stressed again and again that ‘[t]he Euro-Atlantic region will remain critical to the UK’s security and prosperity’. And it noted that ‘beyond the immediate European neighbourhood will also remain important. Russia will remain the most acute direct threat to the UK, and the US will continue to ask more from its allies in Europe in sharing the burden of collective security.’ Not only were bilateral relationships with various EU member states mentioned, but so too were interoperability and participation in the Joint Expeditionary Force (comprising the UK, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). Furthermore, although the greatest emphasis when it came to multilateralism was on NATO, mention was also made of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe. Whether, of course, any of this can prove sufficient to restrain a revanchist Russia, especially in Ukraine, will have to be debated elsewhere.14

No one is denying, then, that critics who focus on what they see as the review’s rather desperate attempt, across a range of areas ranging from defence, cybersecurity and sanctions, to paint the EU qua EU out of the picture (not, incidentally, something that NATO itself does) have a point.15 Yet, it would be stretching things far too far to present such a tentative document as some sort of grand ‘Goodbye to Europe’—the

13M. Kettle, ‘Like Brexit, Boris Johnson’s vision for “Global Britain” is an idea not a policy’, The Guardian, 17 March 2021; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/brexit-boris-johnson-global-britain-defence-review (accessed 27 April 2021).

14See, for example, G. Walsh, ‘The Integrated Review’s tilt to Asia could leave us vulnerable closer to home—and Putin’, ConservativeHome, 18 March 2021; https://www.conservativehome.com/thecolumnists/2021/03/garvan-walsh-the-integrated-reviews-tilt-to-asia-could-leave-us-vulnerable-closer-to-home-and-putin.html (accessed 26 April 2021).

15Relations with the European Union, NATO, 19 April 2021; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics-49217.htm (accessed 26 April 2021).
moment at which the UK made an irrevocable choice in favour of America or even, for that matter, ‘Global Britain’. Certainly, the review is unlikely to have the kind of momentous impact that, for example, the Wilson’s government’s 1968 announcement of Britain’s withdrawal from ‘East of Suez’—a paradigm-shifting decision that, unlike the 2021 review, had the unusual merit of, for once, not assuming that the country must live beyond its means in order to punch above its weight.

Britannia not quite unchained: political economy

Talk of the public finances brings us finally to political economy. If the UK isn’t entirely escaping Europe and embracing America when it comes to free trade and foreign and defence policy, surely, at the very least, Brexit means that the Conservative Party is finally preparing to purge the country of any last remaining vestiges of continental social democracy so it can hare off in pursuit of full-blown, Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism? After all, as is often pointed out by opponents as well as proponents of leaving the EU—quitting the single market and the customs union would be pretty pointless unless it provides the UK with the opportunity to escape the regulatory clutches of Brussels and so become leaner and meaner, the better to compete in overseas markets, old and new. There is plentiful evidence, too, that Tory MPs are not only eurosceptic, but also economically ‘dry’, while those who have now risen to ministerial office include Kwasi Kwarteng (Business Secretary), Priti Patel (Home Secretary), Dominic Raab (Foreign Secretary), Liz Truss (International Trade Secretary), responsible a few years back for writing Britannia Unchained—the ne plus ultra of twenty-first century Thatcher fan-fiction.16

And yet, and yet. While Truss remains very much a true believer, trumpeting each and every rolled-over trade agreement she signs with non-EU countries as proof positive of the mouth-watering new opportunities made possible by Brexit, Kwarteng cuts a rather more measured figure these days—so much so that, just a few weeks after he was promoted, the Telegraph, still very much a bastion of free-market fundamentalism, was expressing its disappointment that his tenure as Business Secretary had ‘been marked by a U-turn on job market deregulation, planning a new business subsidy regime and proposing tough new rules for company directors’... [W]hen, it plaintively cried ‘did Britannia’s liberator become her gaoler?’17

Clearly none of the measures Kwarteng has so far declined or decided to take deserves to be filed under F for ‘Fuck business!’ But they do fit with a rather more nuanced approach than those who feared a swift move towards a more American political economy might have imagined. And that approach, like the notorious expetitive itself, clearly comes from the top. Inasmuch as Boris Johnson has ideas about what sort of country the UK should become, they do not so far seem to include paring back employment rights, freeing British firms from corporate responsibilities, slashing taxes, and generally preparing for a race to the bottom. Indeed, the opposite is arguably the case: he and his advisors seem to have bought into the idea that the state has a role in building infrastructure and seeding innovation in strategic sectors where the country may have (or hopes to have) a comparative advantage. Moreover the Conservative Party’s new electoral coalition—built, it is vital to recall, not on Brexit alone, but on the promise that Brexit will mean greater public spending aimed at ‘levelling up’ left-behind parts of

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16See T. Heppell, ‘The ideological composition of the parliamentary Conservative Party from Thatcher to May’, in A. Mullen, S. Farrall and D. Jeffery, eds., Thatcherism in the 21st Century: the Social and Cultural Legacy, London, Palgrave, 2020, pp. 15–34; and A. Wager, T. Bale, P. Cowley and A. Menon, ‘The death of May’s Law: intra-and inter-party value differences in Britain’s Labour and Conservative parties’, Political Studies, 2021; https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/003321721995632; on Britannia Unchained, see T. Bale, ‘Here’s Tory Brexiters’ real plan for 2019: a leaner, meaner Britain’, The Guardian, 13 July 2018; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/13/tory-brexiters-plan-2019-britain-conservative (both accessed 26 April 2021).

17T. Wallace, ‘Kwasi Kwarteng: from “Britannia Unchained” to shackling business’, Telegraph, 6 February 2021. See also L. Clarence-Smith, “My plans will not stifle our entrepreneurs”, Times, 18 March 2021, and S. Swinford, “Town centres will evolve with people living on the high street”, Times, 6 March 2021.
provincial England—will make it difficult, whether Tory MPs outside the so-called Red Wall like it or not, to restart and roll forward the Thatcherite revolution. Indeed, at this very early stage anyway, and notwithstanding the creation of free ports and the provision of so-called ‘super-deductions’ for companies keen to make capital investments, the model looks as much like Munich as it does Memphis, Milwaukee, Modesto or Miami.

We need to be very careful, however, before buying wholesale into Johnson’s characterisation of himself as ‘basically a Brexity Hezza’—eurosceptic, but comfortable with government intervention to kick-start economic growth via infrastructure projects and the like. It may well be the case that Conservative MPs, having achieved Brexit and realising that levelling up (since it provides reassurance that industrial and residential development won’t take place in their wealthier constituents’ backyards) might play as well in the south as in the north, are prepared to cut the PM some slack—especially if he keeps winning them local and national elections. But this hardly constitutes a full-blown conversion on their part (or indeed his) to centrist, corporatist Christian democracy, albeit one shorn of its enthusiasm for subsidiarity, for social partnership, and for ‘turning strangers (be they immigrants or other European nations) into friends’. And no one could possibly swallow whole the promises of ‘the end of austerity’ made by both Johnson and his predecessor Theresa May. In May’s case, whatever intention there may have been to remove or even reverse public spending cuts in order to tackle some of what she called ‘the burning injustices’ in British society was soon buried under Brexit. In Johnson’s case, there is no doubt that the 2019 manifesto did contain a number of eye-catching pledges to increase expenditure, particularly on the NHS and on policing. But did anyone seriously believe that the then Chancellor Sajid Javid—a politician with a portrait of Margaret Thatcher hanging proudly on his office wall—was the kind of Conservative happy to turn the taps on and to leave them on? Likewise his successor, Rishi Sunak, who, while he may have been forced to do exactly that in the face of a global pandemic, was at pains to insist at the end of 2020 that he regarded supposedly unsustainable government borrowing as ‘morally, economically [and] politically’ wrong.18

Indeed, once the smoke began to clear from the highly-polished mirrors of Sunak’s Budget speech a few months later, it became increasingly obvious to independent observers that, for all the talk of taxing big business, far from embarking on a post-Covid spending spree in order to ‘build back better’, the Chancellor was actually planning yet more cuts to so-called ‘unprotected’ departments—a move that, once again, will see local government in particular struggle to make ends meet without cutting vital services to some of the poorest people in the country.19 And hopes that some of that pain may be mitigated by targeting infrastructure spending at those regions that supposedly need ‘levelling up’ are probably misplaced, since the early signs are that funding will be awarded—with a shamelessness that may have taken even Margaret Thatcher’s breath away—on electoral grounds rather than objective criteria.20 Nor does the Treasury’s evident reluctance to make permanent any increase in social security payments (already amongst the lowest in western Europe), or to extend free school meals into holiday periods, suggest any fundamental change in the Tories’ attitudes to welfare described by Gamble and a host of other scholars over the years. With the partial exception they now routinely grant to the retired, who in recent years have voted for them in such great numbers, most Conservative politicians continue to express more concern about dependency and disincentives than they do about adequacy or take-up.

18K. Balls and F. Nelson, “It’s not morally right to keep borrowing at these levels”: Rishi Sunak’s plan to fix the UK economy”, Spectator, 19 December 2020.
19B. Zaranko, ‘The Chancellor’s spending plans are even tighter than they seem’, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 18 March 2021; https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15365 (accessed 26 April 2021).
20See A. Bounds and A. Smith, ‘Levelling up fund bias in favour of Tory seats “pretty blatant”’, Financial Times, 5 March 2021. See also C. Hanretty, ‘The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund’, The Political Quarterly, vol. 92, no. 1, 2021, pp. 7–13; https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12970 (accessed 26 April 2021).
‘There is never one pre-ordained future’

So said Andrew Gamble in his conclusion. And he was, and is, clearly right—even when it comes to the choice he himself posed so starkly. In reality, of course, that choice never was, nor ever will be, quite as binary as his deliberately provocative title suggested. Those Tories whom Gamble labelled ‘the free-market nationalists’ may have managed to persuade, first, themselves and then a slim majority of voters of the viability of their alternative vision. But a middle-ranking island nation situated just off the north west coast of the European landmass—and one whose glory days are, sadly or otherwise, very much behind it—can neither deny nor defy the realities of geography and the laws (such as they are) of economics. ‘Gravity’ means that the EU is likely to remain the UK’s most important trading partner. And the threat posed by Russia means that the UK will always need to look first to the defence of the continent of which it is a part, even as it continues—not altogether irrationally—to take an interest in matters further afield. Meanwhile, both the evidence of what works, and a population that has grown to expect the state to provide more than a mere safety net, renders further (neo)liberalisation economically and electorally risky—even for a party stuffed full of those who, at least in their dreams, might advocate it.

But just because Britain, post Brexit, has little choice but to continue to sit and sometimes to oscillate between Europe and America, does not mean that the British Conservative Party has somehow strayed from the path Margaret Thatcher set it on over forty-five years ago. Indeed, if anything, that path—even if still needs to lead across both the Atlantic and the Channel—sometimes seems straighter and narrower than ever. Certainly, anyone who thinks that the populist attitudes struck by the party since Boris Johnson became its leader are wholly novel, would do well to re-read Gamble’s brilliant book. As he noted nearly two decades ago now, ‘An unwillingness to be bound by precedent and convention was characteristic of the Thatcher Government … [O]n many occasions it showed itself not prepared to work within existing constraints where these were blocking the kind of reforms it wanted to enact.’

Less, perhaps, a case of les jeux sont faits than one of plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?

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21 Gamble, Between Europe and America, p. 184.