

Monday, 21st March 2016

Dear Mustafa,

This is possibly my last visit to Brussels before we vote on Brexit and, standing on a street named Wellington (in Europe, heaven forbid!), a few thoughts come to mind...

Historically, Little England has been a key player in Europe, mostly on the side of the 'Little Europeans'. In the times of the Spanish Empire Britain supported the 'Little Dutch'; in the times of Napoleon we supported the 'Little Prussians'; and in the times of Germany we supported the 'Little French'. Britain has never really minded whom it has 'hung out with', but without our involvement at these critical times all of us would be living in a significantly different Europe today.

Britain in Europe has kept Europe evenly balanced and, because of this, a deep reservoir of goodwill resides; but today, as I write, this is running low. Europeans have sympathy with some of the UK's concerns, however, our timing is hurtful; Europe faces pressing issues on its borders and economy. Our Brexit vote is rattling the whole European project when it is at its weakest; friends should not undermine friends.

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When Scotland was voting on whether to stay part of the United Kingdom in 2014 there was a sense in England that really they needed to make up their mind...and if they wanted to go...go quickly! The shoe is now on the other foot.

As with Scotland, it again seems that staying together will be the better option. A Europe without Britain will be at the control of its strongest entity (it's the Germans, just in case you wondered). Some shall say that this is the way it should be - that smaller nations should get in line and we should sit out separately. But as a street name in Brussels testifies, Little England has, for 500 years, stood shoulder to shoulder with Little Europe. Our imprint on Europe is everywhere. I hope by my next visit here the reservoir is replenished, reinforcing what we share and not what sets us apart.

See you in London. Chris.