

*Britain alone*  
*The Path from Suez to Brexit*

Philip Stephens

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**Simon Matthews**

**B**ooks on current affairs and recent history don't get much loftier commendations than this has. The dust jacket carries endorsements from Peter Hennessy, David Kynaston, Lawrence Freedman, Chris Patten and Timothy Garton Ash. Hennessy goes so far as to call it 'an instant classic'.

Author Stephens is Director of the Editorial Board at *The Financial Times* and a member of the Franco-British Council. More interestingly, along with Peter Mandelson and Dominic Grieve, he sits on the Ditchley Foundation Council of Management. Which might seem to indicate that the Ditchley Foundation take a dim and unified view of all things Brexit, until one realizes that their Governors include Michael Gove, Lord Johnson of Marylebone (brother of the PM), Lord Chadlington (President of the Witney Conservative association) and Lord Maude. They are certainly doing their bit for impartiality. As for his book, well . . . it's all here: a perfectly fair and accurate account of how the UK has fumbled many political and diplomatic opportunities since 1945.

As suggested in its title, this is the journey from Suez to Brexit, marked during that period by an increasingly dependent relationship with the US and, after a period of engagement, a gradual step by step separation from Europe. It didn't always look like this, of course. Macmillan, Wilson and Heath all came to the view that the UK had to join the Common Market. Delays in participating with Europe between 1946 and 1960, when the UK still considered itself a world power, meant that control over how the Common Market would evolve was ceded early on to its inaugural members. This tactic of trying to ride two horses at the same time caused De Gaulle to reject the first two efforts to join the Common Market, made by Macmillan and Wilson, citing in particular the odd arrangements the UK had made for its nuclear deterrent. But at least Macmillan, Wilson and Heath understood the issue: namely that the UK's economy benefitted much more from its trade with Europe than its dealings with anywhere else. Today both Wilson and Heath are underrated PMs, written off as vacillating, indecisive and too keen to compromise domestically. But Wilson memorably declined to involve the UK in Vietnam, and Heath was the only UK Prime Minister to actively minimize relations with the US while

increasing them with Europe. By the standards of what came later, they look now like political giants, and both are surely due a reappraisal.

After joining in 1973, UK opposition to the Common Market/EU had become the default position by the time Thatcher made her Bruges speech in 1988. This was despite the lack of US support over the Falkland Islands in 1982. Blair broadly followed Thatcher's line, agreeing to maintain the Schengen opt out and failing to join (or rejoin) the Euro. By 2000 the UK was only part of a third of the EU's institutions. The 'tests' the UK set itself before it would consider swapping the pound for the Euro were devised in 1997 by Ed Balls,<sup>1</sup> and were worded in such a way that they could never be met. Assuming they thought about it, the creation of such pseudo-intellectual formulae, by an unelected adviser, was actually quite an insult by Blair and Brown to the UK's many natural European allies.

One of the book's endorsers, Lawrence Freedman, had a hand in devising the 1999 Blair Doctrine, which set out the rules for intervening in other countries: (1) be sure of your case; (2) exhaust all other options first; (3) ask if military operations can be 'sensibly' undertaken; (4) prepare for the long-term and identify if your interests are involved. Drawn up to facilitate action against Serbian-led genocide in the Balkans – where it was considered Russia would exercise a veto and prevent action by the international community – they were not unreasonable considerations to be born in mind before engaging in military action. They were only of value, though, if other nations agreed to abide by them. The US quickly showed it had zero interest in the Blair Doctrine when planning its attack on Iraq. It also turned out that Blair didn't have much interest in it either. Despite France and Germany urging compliance with on-going UN initiatives, all other options not being exhausted, no preparations for the long-term, and no significant British interests being involved, Blair told President George W Bush in July 2002 'I will be with you, whatever' and that ousting Saddam Hussein would 'free up the region' even if Iraqis might 'feel ambivalent about being invaded'. Blair also talked later of his belief that he had 'a duty' to support US. He would spend much of his time after leaving office in 2007 trying to explain that what he meant by 'I will be with you, whatever' wasn't what it appeared to mean to most people.

The material Stephens rehashes about the last couple of years, and the successful putsch by the right to get the UK out of the EU, has been the subject of much coverage elsewhere and, because of this, is of less interest than some of the specific episodes he mentions on the UK's accelerating journey to that point over 50 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1990 and 1994 Balls had worked at *The Financial Times* with author Stephens and it would have been good to have had a bit more detail about him and this episode.

The most curious of these is the extraordinary contortions the UK has gone through while trying to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent. From 1946 the UK built and successfully tested both atomic (1952) and hydrogen (1957) bombs respectively. Alongside these programmes it also commenced development of its own ballistic missile system. Named Blue Streak, this was supposed to be in service by 1965. This was very ambitious for a medium sized economy; it took France 15 years to develop a similar programme. In 1960, on the grounds of escalating cost – something that has not restricted other countries seeking their own deterrent – the Macmillan government cancelled Blue Streak as a military project, stating it would continue instead as the launch vehicle for a Commonwealth space programme.<sup>2</sup> This was never credible. Australia and Canada had no interest in such a project, South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961 and New Zealand could only make minimal contributions. By 1962 the UK had agreed that Black Prince (as the civilian version of Blue Streak was known) could be used by the European Launcher Development Organization (ELDO) as Europa-1, its first missile system. There were various test firings, some successful, some not, until by 1970 a replacement system, Europa-2 was ready. By that point the UK had resigned from ELDO (1969) and Europa-2, and its successors would be built jointly by France and Germany.

Meanwhile, as their replacement for Blue Streak, the UK military were told they would get the US Skybolt system. In late 1962, though, the US cancelled Skybolt, taking no notice of UK protests. At this point – with the UK seeking to enter the Common Market – France offered the UK the option of jointly developing an independent deterrent that would be entirely within the control of both nations, and not in any way connected to the US. Macmillan's response was to hurriedly make the Nassau Agreement with the US (December 1962), under which the UK paid to use US Polaris missiles. Citing this dependency on the US, De Gaulle vetoed the UK's application to join the Common Market in January 1963. Since then, UK Prime Ministers have patiently explained that they and they alone authorize the use of UK nuclear weapons. Actually, under the terms of the Nassau Agreement, the UK ballistic missile deterrent was placed under NATO control, and any UK use of such weapons outside of NATO required the agreement of the US. It has never been possible to imagine a

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<sup>2</sup> An exaggerated belief in the Commonwealth, as some kind of alliance of kith and kin, or even as a trading bloc (which it isn't) was relatively strong in the UK through the 50s and 60s. It tailed away when the UK joined the EU but re-emerged as a vague component of the Brexit campaign. Given that the Commonwealth failed to support the UK over Suez, this is curious. As noted in 'The Long March to Free Port UK' (*Lobster* 80), though, the majority of the world's tax havens are either current or former Commonwealth states or UK dependencies. The current endorsement of the Commonwealth should be seen in this context.

scenario that would see the UK attacking a third country, outside NATO, with nuclear weapons in the absence of a US agreement to do so.<sup>3</sup>

This was an astonishing surrender of sovereignty by the Macmillan government, particularly given their prior experience of US 'support' over Suez and the fact that De Gaulle had offered them a clear way out. The UK duly acquired Polaris, which was operational from 1967. The French equivalent was trialled in 1968 and in service by 1971. By then France had also taken over leadership of ELDO – later renamed the European Space Agency – following the UK's departure from that organization. In practical terms, for the sake of a delay of a couple of years (at most), the UK had traded away control over its nuclear deterrent and voluntarily opted out of a major space exploration programme.

Arrangements like these were so obviously at odds with what any other country would do (think here Israel, India, Pakistan, China and how they acquired nuclear deterrents) that one considers there must be something else at play – a psychological rather than a political, or economic explanation. Perhaps a form of Attention Deficit Disorder? The roots of the issue seem to be that the UK political class – and their mandarin advisers – took the view that the UK had to be able to prove to the US and Soviet Union that it was still a world power, even if no one else regarded it as such. In weapons acquisition, then, it *had* to be able to make its own nuclear weapons within the same timescale as the two superpowers. Unless it could produce what they had in the same timeframe (more or less) it wasn't worth bothering. To keep up with the US and USSR therefore, the UK kept its place 'at the top table' by arrangements like the Nassau Agreement, paying the US for the privilege of doing so, and submitting ultimately, to US control. Questions of sovereignty, the maintenance and expansion of a highly skilled manufacturing base, long term investment, control (the 'whose finger on the trigger' argument) and accountability were hardly considered. What also emerged in the years that followed was an extreme anxiety complex re: US Presidents. The most obvious manifestation of this is the UK maintaining . . . and hoping . . . that every newly-elected US President calls them first; the media quickly being given confirmatory evidence if they do so, with the UK's PM beaming as they take the

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<sup>3</sup> Post-1963 the UK continued to maintain a separate arsenal of home-produced nuclear bombs, designed to be delivered by the RAF. Thus, the UK could claim – just – to be an independent nuclear power outside of the Nassau Agreement. By 1998, however, these had all been withdrawn, ending for the moment any truly independent UK deterrent. It seems ironic that this took place under the Blair government, given that Blair once professed membership of CND.

call.<sup>4</sup>

One wonders if, for at least some of the people making them, the massively exaggerated arguments about sovereignty deployed during the Brexit campaign aren't an over-compensation for the abject relationship the UK has with the US.<sup>5</sup> Were the UK to wish to withdraw from that relationship, it would entail a considerable loss of face and significant additional costs should the UK wish to maintain a genuinely independent nuclear deterrent. The fetish about the UK needing the most up to date military kit *immediately* (rather than just paying for it gradually, as and when it can be afforded, like most other countries do) also plays into the fetish about it being a good thing to have a 'strong pound': a nice big, over-valued currency for reasons of 'national prestige'. Stephens discusses the habitual default of UK politicians to this belief, and in particular how the insistence on maintaining a 'strong pound', scuppered John Major's efforts to keep the UK in the Exchange Rate Mechanism, the forerunner of the Euro. The point is made that this attitude has caused continual trouble for the UK, notably for Wilson in 1967. But does anyone else do this? How many other countries fret about their exchange rate with the US Dollar (or Euro) to the extent that the UK does?

The rigmarole about 'defending sterling' is rarely, if ever heard about other currencies. Politicians elsewhere take the view (more or less) that their currency can float, within limits, provided that exports are not damaged, borrowing remains controllable and inflation stays at a level that doesn't capsize everything else. By contrast the UK approach to managing the pound – whoever is in power – seems to be a lot closer to maintaining a national belief that having a strong currency (which damages your ability to export) is comparable to being a strong independent nation.

Stephens could have given us a bit more background on the nuclear stuff, which is very revealing as an example of the smoke and mirrors deployed over a very long period of time by the UK political class. Similarly, he accepts rather too much of the standard narrative of other events. His account of the 1976 IMF loan episode, for instance, doesn't consider to what extent this may have been a largely engineered 'crisis' designed to embarrass a government that had just lost its Parliamentary majority. Certainly, neither Wilson nor Heath would have buckled in quite the same way that Callaghan did to bureaucratic and media pressure. He also accepts the 'declinist' context in which everything

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<sup>4</sup> In 2017 Trump called Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Japan, India, Turkey, Israel, South Korea, Ireland and Egypt prior to contacting Theresa May. In 2021 Biden called Canada and Mexico prior to speaking with Boris Johnson.

<sup>5</sup> Massively exaggerated in the sense that the UK is a party to 13,000 international treaties, in all of which a degree of shared sovereignty takes place.

supposedly happened in the 70s and 80s, quoting Callaghan as saying in his memoirs that he lost in 1979 because 'the tide of history had turned against Labour'. This is self-serving. Callaghan lost because he didn't go to the polls in the autumn of 1978, when strongly advised to do so. Had he done so in 1978, Thatcher would not have won. There may have been a hung Parliament, but Thatcher would have failed to oust Labour. Stephens also mentions that 'all Prime Ministers learn on the job'. That may be so now, but has it always been the case? Have all PMs been useless/clueless in the past? He certainly supplies us with a few choice morsels (attributed to 'private information' in his text) such as: Blair having no idea – literally no idea – why China regarded the handing back of Hong Kong in 1997 as the end of a national humiliation; European leaders being amazed that someone like William Hague still existed, saying privately that he was born a century too late (i.e. he should have been born in 1861, elected an MP 1889 and Leader of the Conservative Party 1897); and Boris Johnson putting his hands over his ears and singing the national anthem whenever civil servants try to give him advice he doesn't want to hear. All of this is merely by way of an introduction to the debacle of David Cameron: glib, entitled and, against advice from most of his colleagues, prepared to take irresponsible gambles with referenda.

What he doesn't address is the long-term impact on everyone in the UK of the right of the Conservative party and the left of the Labour party never coming to terms with EU membership. Although affecting both parties in different degrees in the last 50 years, its most powerful manifestation has been in the form of a Powellite worm eating out the Conservative Party from within. A modest grouping of them had coalesced by 1972, initially in anger at Heath's abandonment of free market policies, his return to Keynesian ways of managing the economy and his success at finally bringing the UK into the Common Market. By 1975 they had ousted Heath. By the late 70s they had captured the domestic economic policy of the Conservative party. From 1988, when Thatcher made her speech at Bruges, they were closing in on Europe. By the late 90s they had shown they could capture the leadership, initially via Hague (1997) and later Duncan Smith (2001), even if at that point they lacked sufficient Conservative MPs to enforce their writ. By 2010 this was no longer an obstacle and they were demanding, and were duly given, a referendum. By 2020 they controlled a majority Conservative government and the UK had left the EU.

This has happened alongside a coarsening and collapse of most of the UK media into a kind of right-wing mud-wrestling pit, into which even the BBC eventually tumbled with their ludicrous, and wholly disproportionate, ideas

about 'balance'.<sup>6</sup> Stephens doesn't really say very much about the context within which the decisions of the last 50 years, and specifically the last decade, have taken place. Nor does his book have any suggestions as to how to change any of this. It isn't a programme, or a rallying call to fight back.

And that is part of the problem. Today (April 2021) it feels as if the entire UK intelligentsia are producing book after book, article after article, post after post and tweet after tweet lamenting the state of the nation. From Paul Mason and Owen Jones, Phil Collins and David Aaronovitch, to centrists like Jenny Russell, Ian Lunt and Nick Tyrone, to rightists like Peter Osborne and Alan Duncan, a broad consensus emerges that things have gone badly wrong. Perhaps we should ask them when they first realized this. At what point did they notice that their weapons were useless? Is it just the case that they – together with Stephens and his various endorsers – were formerly influential people who have seen power and influence ebb away from them during the slow-motion collapse of social democracy that has happened in the UK between 2007 and 2019? If so, why don't they get together – or get as many of them together as possible – and organize something? Negotiate a manifesto for change and get the agreement of most of the UK's political parties to sign up to this?<sup>7</sup>

They need to be careful if they don't: history is written by the victors. Unless the left and centre get their act together, they – and the justification for social democracy in the UK itself – may end up being completely written out of it. In the meantime, we can read Stephens' book and alternate between being filled with rage and experiencing the farce of UK politics. Stephens concludes by saying for the moment it's now Britain alone, but might it soon be England alone? Time will tell. He has written a solid account of recent political and economic history; it will fall to others to try and remedy the state of the nation, whatever that nation may end up being.

Simon Matthews' book, *Looking for a New England – UK Film, TV and Music 1975-1986*, is published by Oldcastle Books.

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<sup>6</sup> The BBC remains enthusiastic about the use of 'vox-pop' (seemingly random members of the public putting forward their views) to ensure that all types of opinion are heard. Critics note that this usually produces a false equivalence: knowledgeable experts are obliged to debate on equal terms with contributors who reject factual information on ideological or political grounds. The extent to which the BBC remains relevant, though, given the establishment of Times Radio, GB News and News UK TV, must be debatable.

<sup>7</sup> They could do worse by looking at how others see the UK, notably Sylvie Bermann in *Goodbye Britannia* (2021) and Fintan O'Toole in *Heroic Failure* (2018), both of which comment on the elitist public school system, the absurd entitlement of the political class and the absence of constitutional balances and checks.

