Scottish Liberal Club's John G Gray Memorial Lecture, Royal Overseas League, Princes St, Edinburgh, Thursday 12 March 2015

Scotland, Britain and Europe - A sense of place

Thank you for inviting me to give your prestigious John G Gray memorial lecture. It's great to be back in Scotland and to be among you tonight.

I had chosen as the title of my lecture - 'Scotland, Britain and Europe: A sense of place?' The title comes from Douglas Dunn, one of my favourite poets, from whose poem Empires I recalled the lines:

> *To our forefathers it was right to raise*
> *Their pretty flags at every foreign dawn*
> *Then lower them at sunset in a haze*
> *of bugle-brass; they had no sense of place.*

However, when I came to check the poem I discovered that in fact it reads 'they interfered with place' which is even more powerful. So if you permit me a change to my title, let me call it **'Scotland, Britain and Europe: interfering with place'**.

I believe that to unshackle ourselves from the geography, the history and the culture that make us part of the European continent - even if it were possible politically - would be to interfere with place just as dangerously as did our forefathers with the pretty flags they once raised at every foreign dawn.

Empire was the status quo for four or five generations after the Napoleonic Wars. The military-industrial concept of the nation state which spawned it was at least as damaging to Liberal freedoms here as were its manifestations abroad. For the two generations since it ended, European co-operation has seemed the best option. Despite its failings the EU has been a prime agent in the entrenchment of freedom.

Douglas Dunn and John Gilmour Gray were contemporaries, though I have no knowledge that they ever met; or indeed that the dissolute, sentimental Paisley poet would have had much to say to the upright, pinstriped and bowler hatted Edinburgh lawyer, or vice versa, if they had. But there is no doubt they each had - as did many educated people of their generation - a sense of place. Indeed, John G Gray's attachment to Edinburgh was so developed that his Anthology of the South Side of Edinburgh devotes many pages of much laboured research to the districts and people of the city he loved and served.

I think, in my university years in Edinburgh, I never met John Gray. My friends the Aldridges were much closely involved than I in the life of the city. But naturally one heard of him; and his spirit inspired. He contributed in a real sense to the life of the city. (Indeed, I have it on reliable advice - though Elisabeth would be able to confirm - that he was even responsible for the appearance in Edinburgh of the wooden A-boards which advertise events and places of public interest.)

Like my poet, John G Gray was rooted in his community and contributed to its development. Yet he was also instinctively an internationalist. The social and religious problems in eastern Europe moved him to establish contacts in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. As one of the Scottish representatives of Aktion Suehnezeichen, he helped build bridges of reconciliation between Scotland and Germany. The Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society, of which he was for long a director, gave him an understanding of the tensions in the Middle East, both in committees here and in visits to the hospital in Nazareth. He was committed to freedom; and not just for himself but for others. His generosity of spirit both imbued and shone through his work.

He was in a Scottish tradition of local Liberal politicians with international reach: I think of Glasgow's Lord Bryce and Sir Daniel Macaulay Stevenson, who took an almost pacifist line in World War I; Lord Haldane, who was Lord Chancellor in the first Labour government of 1924 and also helped rationalise the UK's 'machinery of government'; international law's Professor Arthur Berriedale Keith; and the town-planning, sociological connections of Professor Patrick Geddes.

John Gray's international interests were of course nurtured by Edinburgh's geographical and international cultural reputation and influence, through mapmaking firms like Bartholomews, Nelson's or Johnston's. There was a time when Scotland was the great translating nation – Edwin and Willa Muir and Kafka, Thomas Common and Nietzsche, Charles Scott-Moncrieff and Proust – they inspired the interpreting and translating school at Heriot Watt university which is my alma mater. That generation found that they could tackle simultaneously the local and the global.

That man to man the world o'er should brithers be an' a' that was intrinsic to John G Gray's upbringing. Conscious of himself, his nation and the communities of nations of which he was a member, he had no problem with different dimensions or overlapping layers of identity. He had no more need of the trappings of empire than he had of those of the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of the City, which the pacifist in him refused to wear.

Where are the John G Grays of today? Have we lost the capacity to produce such men o' pairts, such fine legal minds with a broader interest in the humanities?

I believe the answer to that may be found in the comparison of two referendums.

The first, in September of last year, on whether Scotland should remain part of the United Kingdom. I think I know which way John G would have voted. His identity as a Scot would not

have been diminished one iota by his choice. But he too would have welcomed that the question be put. And would have been satisfied that a choice was made after adequate public debate, on the merits of the case and by the people of Scotland en pleine connaissance du cause. He would have fretted at the rise of a narrow minded nationalism, but would have sensed that this exercise would be looked upon by stateless nations across the world, from Catalonia to East Turkestan, as a triumph of orderly democracy.

The second, a referendum which may take place at the end of 2017 on whether the United Kingdom should remain a part of the European Union. SNP success in winning seats from Labour and Liberal Democrats in six weeks' time could ensure the Conservative victory at Westminster which would produce such a plebisicite. But can one be confident that there will be adequate public debate? That such debate will be informed by the merits of each case? That the electorate will understand the meaning, either of the status quo or of what to expect after a vote to withdraw? That the nationalisms unleashed would be tempered by informed opinion? Would such an exercise be looked up to as a model?

In a scurrilous rag called Liberator, some two years ago, a UK Liberal Democrat MEP speculated on how Prime Minister Boris Johnson might look back in 2020 on the 2017 referendum he now regarded as a foolish prank. Boris surveys the rapid decline in investment in UK manufacturing, the flight of the financial services industry and the return of 250,000 elderly UK nationals from southern Spain which followed the UK's decision to withdraw from the EU. (The article is a good read. I recommend it to you.)

In the next edition of Liberator (should it please the editor, for the author is no longer a holder of public office) an article may appear on why it would be rash for pro-Europeans to assume that such a scenario is unlikely.

The basis for my contention is that a majority of our people - even a majority of our educated people - perhaps no longer recognises the danger of interfering with place.

The way in which UK citizens have been reduced to the status of consumers in the forty five years I have been politically active (heaven forfend that you should draw a link between the two!) means that we have lost the civic power which once allowed us to control the social outcomes of millions of individual private choices.

Our people, particularly our younger people, no longer vote in impressive numbers in democratic elections. In assuming the easy mantle of the consumer rather than the more nuanced robe of the citizen they excuse themselves from any sense of civic duty, any participation in public life.

Many of those who do vote have little knowledge of what membership of the European Union means to life in Britain. And they've no clue whatsoever about the meaning of the alternative!

Their mindsets are still shaped by the overhang of Empire and the heroics of World War Two. (Perhaps this is hardly surprising in a country where, right up into the mid 1970s, television used to broadcast second world war propaganda films in the quiet periods, on Sunday afternoons for example, or late at night.)

The difference between Empire or conquest and the European Union may have passed people by. UKIP regularly describe the EU as 'rule from Brussels' and sometimes even as 'German hegemony'. But the EU is the first ever federation of countries in which all members joined voluntarily and are free to leave at will. And it works not by diktat but by a process of constant negotiation between its member states. The smaller members occasionally find it uncomfortable, if decisions have an impact on long standing practices; larger member states like the UK very rarely lose their battles in Council, Commission or Parliament. And where they do they often find redress in the Court of Justice, as was the case last week when the Court struck the ECB's not unreasonable desire to oversee the central counterperties involved in the trading of billions of euros in payment, clearance or settlement systems.

There are trade-offs, of course, as happens in politics at any level: but there are rarely losers. Partly because the market is the only battlefied on which both sides win; partly because the added security which comes from membership of a large community is something no amount of defence spending can buy.

The UK is not the only member state to suffer such woeful ignorance among its people, though statistical evidence shows public understanding of the EU here to be lower here than elsewhere. In Europe today, the idea of co-operation is oft contested and nationalist sentiment runs high. In the European elections last year fully 35% of voters in the UK, France and Italy voted for nationalist or populist parties. Protracted economic crisis and a fear of globalisation are changing peoples perspective. Increasingly they see sovereignty as empowerment and EU decision making as imposed or even undemocratic. Some member states believe unilateral action acceptable, though often, as with the UK, it is a right they reserve for themselves but do not wish to extend to others. They ignore the evidence that while they are independent they are also interdependent: that the plural of national sovereignty is communal anarchy

A clash between the two scenarios of sovereignty and common decision making is dangerous. Sovereignty does not negate interdependence. Whether we live in north west Europe or in south east Europe, in Britain or in Greece, we are all Europeans. 508 million of us have a common passport, shared opportunities and equal rights.

And sovereignty is an illusion whether or not we are members of the EU. We live in a world in which the contours of the global economy are shaped not in Edinburgh or in London but in the computer campuses of west coast America, in the call centres of India, in the factories of China or Brazil.

A world in which we face a constant challenge to survive and to prosper economically, but also three other great challenges in common:

- World population growth and Migration. In 1985 we had five billion fellow citizens, probably equivalent to the carrying capacity of our planet. Today there are over eight billion, rising fast towards nine. War, want, disease, environmental devastation and discrimination are pushing more of them than normal to emigrate in search of a better life elsewhere; just as the same factors in Europe pushed our forefathers to emigrate in large numbers to North America and Australia, starting 400 hundred years ago.

- Climate change, now having a serious impact, and energy security, where recent events have demonstrated our dangerous dependence on Russia for oil and gas. If the Russians turn off the gas taps to transit countries like the Ukraine hardly a single EU member state has adequate supplies of gas to last more than nine weeks without shortages, the UK included.

- Internationally organised crime, linked to terrorism. Some criminal gangs are now sometimes more powerful than some national governments. They make their money from the growing and processing of narcotic drugs in places like Colombia or Afghanistan (or Myanmar or North Korea, where the gangs are the governments themselves), from the trafficking of small arms or nuclear fissile materials, from the vile trade of trrafficking in people. So much that the Financial Action Task Force of the G20 estimates that up to four per cent of all the money passing through the world's financial systems is the proceeds of organised crime; and we are talking some five trillion US dollars.

If these challenges are sensed in our public debate it is too often through the prism of the Murdoch press. The Sun ran a headline in 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the world market crash, Gordon Brown saves the world. It was based on the UK prime minister's discussions with the Americans and the limited market intervention of the Bank of England. Nowehere was there mention that in the crucial third week of September 2008 a Mr Jean Claude Trichet, head of the ECB, injected over €100 bn in liquidity onto the financial markets every night for four nights to face down the speculators. The Bank of England had barely 15% of such firepower.

Gladstone defined Liberalism as 'Trust in the people, qualified by prudence'. No prudent politician would countenance a referendum on the UK and the EU in the current circumstances.

Allow me to sketch a scenario. It is December of 2017. Russia has fomented further anarchy which allows it to control Georgia, Moldova and much of the Ukraine and has military basis in Cyprus and Montenegro giving it reach in the western Med. Turkey has gone the way of Kazakhstan. Greece has left the euro: Spain, under Podemos, will shortly follow suit. Marine Le Pen is President of France and Matteo Salvini tops the polls in Italy. In Germany, anti immigrant Pegida rallies are held every week in many major cities. The euro area is is economic stagnation

while Britain enjoys 3.5% economic growth. Unable to secure an EU Treaty Revision, David Cameron has tried to use the UK Presidency of the EU to pull Britain out of all policies bar freedom of movement for goods, services and capital. And failed.

Britain goes to the polls. The hedge funds of the City of London put as much money into the Get Out campaign as the banks and the CBI can muster for the Stay In. The Times, the Express and the Daily Mail - and quite possibly the Herald or the Scotsman - run daily reports of chaos on the continent. While the BBC stays neutral, UKIP runs a social media campaign full of passionate intensity.

Though Gibraltar votes 90% to stay in, understanding only too well the consequences of withdrawal, England votes 70% to pull out. The slim majority of pro EU votes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not enough to swing the result in favour of continued membership.

Fantasy? I leave that to your judgement. Speculation on what happens then would be a subject for another memorial lecture.

It does not have to be that way. Ed Miliband, stiffened by the backbone of Douglas Alexander, says that a referendum is a Tory agenda, not Labour's. The UK could opt for a government which sees it as such. Nick Clegg, at an event in London earlier this week, advocated an internationalism which is rarely voiced in UK politics. And though I suspect he prefers to coalesce with a devil he knows, the leader of the largest party will be asked to form a government first.

John Gray, in his biographies of Ronald Campbell and Edwin Towill, emphasised the importance of what schools used to call Civics. He would have sought reform of the EU and probably welcomed the Commission's announcement last week that it will withdraw 80 legislative proposals, with 73 of them to be simply scrapped, three withdrawn and reproposed, three amended and one re-evaluated. But he would also have mounted, through the many forums in which he was involved, a campaign of public awareness of the benefits of the EU before it was too late. He might even have quoted Churchill, who spoke of 'a wider patriotism and a common citizenship for the distraught peoples of this powerful and turbulent continent'; though he would have pointed out that, as a Tory, this was in one of the many speeches Churchill made abroad but not at home.

Above all he would have organised, with the energy he maintained until his four score years, to open people's eyes to the issues at stake.

The best way to honour his memory is to do just that. As the African proverbs holds, the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now. END