



Why is Britain in Eurogeddon? I blame Roy Jenkins

He saw the problems in 1977, but he did not outline the answers

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December 10 2011 12:01AM

Last night's events in Brussels set me thinking about the root cause of the whole European problem — namely, Roy Jenkins and his determination to leave his mark on history.

Let me be clear: I was and am a fan of Roy Jenkins. I admired what he achieved as Home Secretary in the Labour Government between 1965 and 1967 with his efforts to build what he called a “civilised society”. He should have been the leader of the Labour Party — not because he would necessarily have proved to be a better prime minister than Jim Callaghan, but because if he had stayed in Britain in the latter part of the 1970s, Europe would not be in the disastrous pickle it is in today.

To explain: the UK joined the EEC on January 1, 1973. In January 1977, Roy Jenkins became the first, and so far, the only British President of the European Commission. Having turned his back, at least temporarily, on British politics, he was determined to achieve success on the European stage. The overarching goal he set himself was to further the policy of European economic and monetary union. That would be his legacy. Jenkins was only 57 when he arrived in Brussels and only 61 when he left that city. He was not rashly impetuous. On the contrary, he was dedicated, charming and tremendously intelligent. With hindsight, we may argue that as far as Europe was concerned, that was the tragedy.

As a member of the first directly elected European Parliament, I can recall several occasions when Jenkins came to Strasbourg to make the case for parliamentary support of his brainchild. The European Parliament was at the time one of the Commission's strongest allies in the push for economic and monetary union.

How did it all go so wrong? If you re-read today the text of the Jean Monnet Lecture, which Roy Jenkins delivered in Florence in 1977, the underlying tensions are spelt out by Jenkins himself: how is fiscal and budgetary discipline to be enforced in eurozone countries without common institutional sanctions and penalties? What about the

“democratic deficit”? Where are the democratic safeguards for individual countries against the overweening powers of the Community’s institutions?

Yes, Jenkins saw the problems, but he did not in that Florence speech, or indeed elsewhere, outline the answers. And the reason for this is quite simple: the concept of European economic and monetary union was flawed from the start. If Jenkins had not been such an able advocate, it would have withered on the vine.

Can we turn the clock back to those balmy days in Brussels in the early 1970s when the EEC itself was little more than a loose customs union? As far as monetary policy is concerned, can we dismantle the eurozone and return to a state of prelapsarian bliss, where member states retain their own currencies and economic policies and, even more to the point, where national parliaments really do express the will of the people? I would argue that we not only can turn the clock back. We must. Given the scale of the Eurogeddon disaster that faces us, I would say that the “status quo ante” is the best possible option for Europe.

How ironic it is that the official policy of the coalition was actually to push the eurozone countries towards ever greater fiscal union, given that Britain has spent centuries trying to counter the accumulation of hegemonistic power in Europe, whether it be that of France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire or the Third Reich. In order to save our own economic skins (though it won’t anyway), we were willing to sell our continental brothers and sisters down the drain.

Last night’s quixotic decision by the 17-plus EU states, to pursue economic and fiscal union by an intergovernmental agreement outside the EU framework, only postpones the day of reckoning. The basic flaws of the currency union will still be there. Britain may not be a part of the new system, but we — and indeed the wider world — will not be unaffected by the chaos across the Channel as our former EU partners try to achieve an unrealisable goal.

I wonder what Roy Jenkins would think of it all.

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