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Is the Foreign Office fit for purpose? [1]

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Six years ago Keith Boyfield and I wrote a report for this Institute showing that both the EU options then under discussion, exit or accepting the EU as it then was, were sub-optimal. Since then both those options have worsened. We called the paper ?EUtopia [3]? and painted a picture of an EU that would be better for the members as a whole, better for the UK and, at least in our view, achievable over a longish process of charm, leadership and negotiation. The report was well received especially by the man who is now our Foreign Secretary.

While the report was still in draft, we had a meeting with the then chief of EU matters at the FCO. The person concerned was, as one would expect, both charming and intelligent. We asked about the FCO?s vision for the EU and the UK?s place within it and about the strategy for achieving that ideal. This was greeted with astonishment. The FCO, we were told, had not such forward plan, indeed no planning of any such sort, and should not be expected to operate in that way. The FCO, and the government on the FCO?s advice, purely reacted to events.

We pointed out that the French strategised their goals and worked purposefully towards them. That was why the EU worked so well for France. That cut no ice and the meeting broke up.

Talking with senior politicians, albeit not FCO civil servants, it seems little has changed. Indeed it may have got worse as the UK?s room for manoeuvre has reduced and we are more and more seen as sulking in a corner. Apparently, the FCO today thanks that no strategy for the EU is required because it is more or less right as it is. The FCO, after all wrote many of the rules including the Lisbon Treaty. For ?FCO? today read ?Brussels Fifth COlumn?.

Lib Dems apart, few others take that view: not politicians, not business people, and not the electorate. Doubtless the FCO justify their lofty view by claiming to be better informed than the common people. The reality is that these civil servants have forgotten the meaning of the word ?servant? and that we pay their salaries.

We need an FCO that can visualise an EU that is best for the EU as a whole, best for the UK and achievable and then create a plan to achieve it. The UK has plenty of potential allies. Most member states should applaud a reduction in governance costs and accounts that auditors can approve. French peasant farmers could be brought back to the barricades to fight against EU farm subsidies going to the huge agri-corporations, not the small farmers. The biggest sufferers from the idiotic EU fish policies are the fishermen themselves. The German on the Hauptstra?e likes being a main contributor to the EU budget as much as we do.

Contrast that with sitting on the sidelines and being isolated as Mr Grumpy. The Eurovision song contest tells us all we need to know about how many votes the UK attracts in the modern Europe. Using the veto merely adds to the antipathy.

In short, the Foreign Office is not up to the job. We would probably be better off if we did not have one at all but that is not realistic. It should be replaced by an FCO that understands what the UK needs and wants and can create the charm offensive needed to achieve it.

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