



Dear Reader,

This prototype of *U.N.E. - a future history* is for private circulation only.

Please remember when you read it that any book you've ever read has gone through numerous professional edits to address its many imperfections, smooth off the rough edges and take arms against the writer's ego. This hasn't.

My ambition has been to create a provocative piece of speculative fiction. You will travel between the 2020s and 2050 and see what might happen in a post-Covid, post-Brexit world. I hope you enjoy it, and welcome any and all comments and criticisms, which can be shared via the novel's website: www.unethenovel.com/contact.html or Twitter: @UNE_IanPhillips.

If you think *U.N.E. - a future history* has been worth the read, please show your appreciation by donating a little something to FareShare, the charity that fights hunger, at <https://fareshare.org.uk/donate/>. It's supported by Marcus Rashford, and works with families like those in schools and colleges where I have volunteered over many years.

Thanks for the interest.

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October 2050

Foreword

Leiden University Institute for History, The Netherlands,
UNE

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

We are in the sixth year of the Union of the Nations of Europe, and see with clarity the truth of Antonio Gramsci's observation. The 'dying old' was the nation state; the 'unborn new' the coalescence of formerly sovereign, independent countries.

Now we can look back, for the first time, and watch a super-state emerge as a butterfly would from its fractured chrysalis. We see it take flight into the sunlight after the darkness of all those 'morbid symptoms': plague, environmental melt-down, mass migration, economic deprivation, rampant populism.

I could not have completed this history without many contributors, both on and off the record. My thanks go to them all; any omissions and mistakes are mine. I apologise in advance if my modest attempts to simplify complex and dense subjects have not succeeded, or if my paternally-inherited penchant for quoting the wisdom of others annoys anyone.

So, let us begin. And where better than the moment of birth?

Cornelius Huizinger, Lecturer in European History

Monday, May 8th 2045, 11:00 CET

Inauguration

The Ballroom, Palais Monnet, Brussels, Belgium

The Senior Judge of UneCorte de Justiça made one final adjustment to her scarlet robe, edged in gold brocade.

Holding the oath of office, Laura Codruța Kövesi, scourge of corrupt politicians across Europe and now performing her last duty before retiring, turned to face the man in the wheelchair.

In almost perfect French that only occasionally betrayed her Romanian origins, her tone was firm and formal.

"Please stand."

The audience held its breath as he activated the exo-skeleton using mind control. Those closest to him heard the soft whirring of the electronics that powered the hydraulic structure which drew him upright. When it stopped, he nodded his readiness.

"Repeat after me. I, Édouard Primo Ludwig de Rouffignac..."

"I, Édouard Primo Ludwig de Rouffignac ..."

"... do solemnly and sincerely promise ..."

"... do solemnly and sincerely promise ..."

"... to discharge with diligence, integrity, transparency and fairness ..."

"... to discharge with diligence, integrity, transparency and fairness ..."

"... the office of President of the Union of the Nations of Europe."

"... the office of President of the Union of the Nations of Europe."

As the President and Kövesi shook hands and leaned in to kiss each cheek, the ornate hall, packed with dignitaries from across the continent and around the world, shook with the eruption. Its rich interior, an opulent riot of velvet, crystal and wood, trembled with the sounds of

cheering, stamping and applauding, intermixed with the joyous tears of a long, storm-tossed voyage safely come to harbour.

After the lengthy ovation subsided, the first to hold the office issued another mental instruction and walked slowly to the lectern. It stood in front of a stage festooned with the UNE's new flag, an infinity symbol of gold stars sitting on a ground the colour of iridescent lapis-lazuli.

“Well, my friends, we made it!”

This time, the response was even more thunderous.

“Do you remember the naysayers, the doubters, the sceptics and the cynics? When the idea of what we have achieved first emerged, the multi-lingual chorus was deafening.

“Unmöglich.”

“Jamais dans l'histoire une telle chose n'a été essayée.”

“Våra skillnader är bara för stora.”

“And what do we say to them today?”

“Yes, it is possible.”

“And when in the whole of human endeavour has the lack of historical precedent ever been a reason for not trying?”

“Perhaps our differences are great – but not nearly as great as what we share.”

To record for history the full speech is unnecessary. Those who are interested can digi-stream¹. For our purposes, we will punctuate this narrative only with those sections necessary to explain either the progress or process leading to the UNE.

“Some might say I was born to this. And it would certainly be no exaggeration to say that my parents did me no favours with that ridiculous name. But, in their defence, my father was French and my mother Italian, and they shared a passion for art and music. They regarded boundaries only as things to be ignored, crossed or obliterated.

Hence their naming me for Munch, Levi and Beethoven, their favourite artist, writer and composer. Let me tell you. That's one enormous burden to live up to!

“And then, of course, there's my surname. I find it charming that a village, in many ways inconspicuous, is famed for its early examples of European culture. Glorious cave paintings that sound the voices of our ancestors as they ring down the ages.



“But Rouffignac has another, larger and much darker claim on my conscience. And it is one that has informed my passion to help complete this awe-inspiring mission which both ends and begins today.

“101 years ago my father's ancestors watched as their homes were destroyed by Nazi forces seeking reprisal for resistance action. I knew from the earliest stirrings of the great movement which culminates today that its most enduring legacy would be that never again would one European nation raise the hand of war against another. That the promise of the First World War being the war to end all wars would at last be kept, at least for the great land mass that stretches from the Atlantic to the Urals and the Arctic to the Mediterranean.

“This generation of leaders and citizens can stare into the eyes of history and declaim as loudly as possible and in all our many tongues: ‘We. Are. The. Peacemakers!’

“So it is by no means a coincidence that this ceremony takes place on the centenary of Victory in Europe Day. For today is truly a victory for Europe, in Europe, and of Europe. What we have done is truly historic.

“Never before have sovereign nations voluntarily agreed to merge to create a larger unit.

“Never before have leaders foresworn their personal ambition in the noble cause of a commonality of interest.

“And never before have so many people embraced the dream of a new world that changes all they thought of as fixed and immutable.

¹ See, for example, www.europe.une/archive/launch_materials/speeches

“While there is much work before us, many obstacles to surmount and challenges to face, it is not mere indulgence that lets me invite you to ponder the achievement that today signifies. It will stand us in good stead when we are confronted with difficulty to remember all that we overcame to reach this point.

“Friends, do you remember when all this started? Can you recall the forces massed against the movement to bring together Europe’s nation states? The mockery? The opprobrium? The rage? Much of this violent reaction withered in the face of logic, understanding and optimism. Most of it was shown to be the baying of a minority of vested interests howling impotently at the moon.

“But now we are here. And what a journey has brought us to this place, this time, this very moment! A moment when I, little more than a jobbing academic historian two decades ago, could take this high, honourable and ceremonial title. My parents would, were they here, shake their heads in disbelief.

“Who could possibly have imagined that the book which arrived from England more than twenty years ago would change my life? It set in motion a chain of events that brought us to this magnificent and beautiful old palace, newly named for Jean Monnet.

“They were his words over 100 years ago which were the star by which we navigated to this point. Whenever we doubt, whenever the path ahead seems unpassable, we should remember his great vision that peace, prosperity and progress in Europe could only be guaranteed by precisely what we have achieved today.

“For those of you who believe in such things, I am sure you can imagine him smiling down on us, questioning with a shrug why it took so long!”

Early-March 2025

The Book

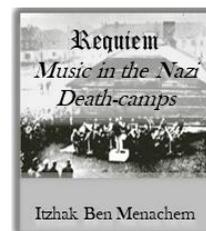
Arrived at the de Rouffignac home in Champfleury;
posted in England one week earlier

The book his friend sent him arrived unannounced, the postman’s rattling old bicycle as he whistled up the cobbled drive its only fanfare. And, in truth, Édouard wasn’t immediately drawn to *Requiem - Music in the Nazi Death-camps*.

The complex and paradoxical role of music in the Holocaust had been one of the more baffling aspects of that great catastrophe. Although the book purported to unravel the mystery, he’d already read several memoirs of those who had survived by playing in the orchestras of Auschwitz. While the book was germane both to his profession as an historian and his passion as a music lover, he wasn’t sure how much it would be worth reading a study by an author unknown to him.

The trouble was that Jacques Menard was an assiduous correspondent who would demand an opinion, so he had no option but to add it to a reading pile that was showing an increasing propensity to topple.

A few days later, he can’t be certain how many, de Rouffignac had finished marking papers and preparing for a lecture tour of some of Europe’s most venerable universities. Fancying a diversion, his eye was caught by the cover with its blurry black-and-white photo of the Men’s Orchestra playing outside one of Auschwitz’s wooden barracks-like blocks.



His basic reading technique was to scan superficially and see if there was enough to arrest progress and focus more intently. He quickly absorbed the interweaving of survivors’ personal accounts with analyses of repertoire, instrumentation, and performances. And with the discussion of the various players and other personnel came the capricious threads that tied each to their fate.

All this he gleaned with the practised eye of one used to perusing dense texts. Yet one section stopped him in his tracks: the second of four devices the author deployed to give pause to the intense narrative and reflect on aspects of the context.

This particular one sought to illustrate the emotive, oft-quoted, number ‘six million’, representing the generally accepted estimate of the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust. The writer settled on a beguilingly simple mechanism. He took an extended nuclear family of four grandparents, two parents and two children and placed their corpses on every day between 1 and 2000 AD (8 bodies x 750,000 days = 6,000,000).

But that of itself was not what was significant to de Rouffignac. What haunted him for days, weeks even, and would change his life, was the procession of two millennia of history which were then played out as an extended continuum to give weight to the number of dead.

Here is the particular example that triggered his revelation:

Driven by burgeoning populations and the ever-growing needs of an increasingly sophisticated populace, just watch the development of nations and super-nations, from what were once small towns to powerful city states and cantons, uniting by (frequently coercive) coalescence to become regions, then countries, all with their own emerging governance: monarchies, democracies, theocracies, autocracies.²

You see, academics tend to be flora-gazers. Their specialisms frequently prevent a view of the whole wood as they focus on a narrow footprint within it. Yet, for de Rouffignac, this writer, with no pretensions to academic or intellectual rigour, was setting out an entire teeming forest, a sweeping historical epic that, as with Seurat’s pointillism, revealed its picture only with distance.

It took a while for the truth to exert itself fully. He went about his daily business. Four hours of lectures a week, a handful of study groups and one-to-one sessions with some doctoral students. But the heart wasn’t in it. He felt somehow diminished, like after bad news that casts a shadow, even when you’re not actively thinking about it.

Some epiphanies are sudden. Others are not. Édouard’s appeared in slow motion as the worm of that paragraph bored its way into the deepest recesses of his brain.

Family, friends and colleagues became increasingly anxious. As his distraction grew, so too did his tetchiness. Even his appearance left the safe harbour of academic chic. Corduroy trousers, jacket with patched elbows, check shirt, off-centre bow-tie, suede shoes, they all ceded ground to the complete absence of a careful-curated ensemble, assuming a rather more dishevelled ad hoc flavour. This ‘new look’ was suavely offset by the scraggy beard that emerged from silver-flecked stubble, betraying the imminent arrival of his forty-fifth birthday.

Finally, Hector Guillemain, a fellow professor at the University of Reims Champagne, sat down in his rooms and confronted him.

“What’s going on, my friend? We’re all getting concerned.”

The response he got was hardly satisfying. Basically, the historian believed that the entire rationale behind his career was futile and, essentially, intellectually dishonest.

“We focus on minutiae, Hector. Look at me. I’ve carved out a reasonable reputation as an authority on French ecclesiastical history. I pore over original sources and the latest research. Then I produce papers on esoterica such as Philip the Fair’s relationship with Scotland, or the long-term impact of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. They’re published in learned journals, to be read by handfuls, if I’m lucky. But I now realise that this is essentially pointless. The cliché that you can’t learn anything from history is true only because of our approach to it.”

² “Requiem - Music in the Nazi Death-camps”, Intermezzo #2, Itzhak Ben Menachem, Northwestern University Press (2024)

Guillemain was baffled, a blank expression betraying a total lack of understanding, even when de Rouffignac read out the passage that had so stirred him.

“Sorry, Édouard, I’m not seeing it.”

“Let me try and clarify. This was a slow-burning fuse. It set me on a path which I am busy writing as a kind of philosophical piece.”

“Can you explain it to me yet?”

“I’d like to try, though it might be a tad premature.”

He poured them both a generous slug of single malt and they moved from his desk to large, battered armchairs beside the fire that crackled in the hearth. It was the only source of heat and light in the book-lined study, overflowing with piles of paper, half-read journals, and the forgotten remnants of several meals.

“Forgive me if this is all a bit garbled and rough around the edges, my friend. I don’t normally share stuff before I’ve put it to one side and tested with some distance whether I might, in fact, be wrong. But, anyway, here goes ...

“What this extract has forced me to think about is what I’m calling in my paper ‘Historical Meta-Narratives’. This means that, rather than focus on relatively narrow time-frames – Soviet or Nazi eras, Chinese dynasties, Spanish conquests in the Americas, whatever – we look at much longer arcs, rather more akin to evolutionary developments or geological eras. From these, we identify and isolate trends that can guide us on what might be the next era within that meta-subject. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Not really. But I imagine you might just have some examples!”

“If this has legs then I suspect many will emerge. But here are two that I’ve begun to contemplate.

“First is the fate of empires and civilisations.

“Have you ever pondered their lifecycle? Of course, they vary greatly in their length but, at the end, one of two things happens. Either they die,

only to be rediscovered by excavation or traced back through absorption into something greater. Inca. Aztec. Mayan. Phoenician, say. Or they atrophy, and suffer a millennial or more decay and impotence, before a slow and incomplete re-emergence. Egypt. Rome. Greece.

“And we see that the pattern is clear. They rot from their extremities as they have to grow to maintain power. But the further they expand from the heartland, the weaker the supply to the ever-distant frontiers. In short, they decompose. That visceral putrefaction either wipes it out completely or forces a prolonged, and very deep, freeze. And what happens to all those constituent parts? Without the centripetal force of duress, the whole enterprise fragments; some parts revert to their pre-existing state, others retain linkage to neighbours. The bottom line? Coercion is unsustainable.

“Strangely, I was talking to a business school professor and asked him about the fate of corporations that embark on acquisition-led, frequently hostile, growth. He pointed me towards a paper which suggested that organic-growth-driven companies are sustainable over the long-term, but that those pursuing take-overs as the main mechanism of expansion aren’t. It’s a phenomenon that is probably applicable in other areas. But as far as I can find out, no-one’s identified this in the geopolitical arena. You see, it’s only when you ponder the meta-narrative that the full picture emerges.”

A silence followed as his colleague let it sink in, unconvinced.

“Hmmm, I really don’t know. But you said you had two examples.”

“Ah, yes, I saved this one, because it’s huge. In fact, the author revealed it without appearing to appreciate its significance. I’m calling it ‘Constitutional Aggregation’.

“Ponder the growth of nation states. Every one that I know of is itself a coalescence of smaller parts. And each of these, in their turn, is the product of a coming together of lesser units, and so on, back into the mists of unrecorded history. Each cell at one time thought itself sovereign. This is not a Euro-centric position, although the individual countries of Europe are compelling evidence of this process. Think of myriad kingdoms of India or China, perfect exemplars of this process.”

“But surely this is well known? Isn't this what Harari was saying in *Sapiens*. We were all reading it a decade ago. I know you did. How come it never occurred to you then, Édouard?”

“Well, Hector, you're right that Harari talks about a cosmic spy satellite which can scope the millennia, and from that he does talk about coalescence. But, for all its greatness, show me how the book has changed anything. Here we are, fourteen years, *fourteen* years, after it was published. And what's different? Nothing.

“The weakness was, in fact, in the very brilliance of the book. It's too rich, too sweeping, too phenomenal. You remember Archilochus: 'A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing'. That's the point of where I'm heading. My one important thing? Identifying the trend and then suggesting its future direction. Tomes like *Sapiens* display their erudition by a mass of detail, accessibly, even eloquently, explained. And, while it is true that Harari does have some forward-looking aspects, I think they get lost.

“So I am looking only at this one aspect: to try and envisage how the meta-narrative will further evolve. I have to know how these things play out.

“And that means challenging received wisdoms and the assumption that the status quo is the eternal norm. Politicians disingenuously drone on about the permanence of change, but they actually look only to an ever-narrowing horizon that is the next quest for a mandate. There is a higher moral purpose that is the prize for historians.

“Merde, listening to myself, I realise this must really sound appallingly arrogant, as though I've discovered some holy grail and become the keeper of an everlasting truth that none before me has known.

‘But let me just read you the epigraph at the start of my paper where I've tried to capture the observation and the journey:

It is the instinct of every age to believe itself the perfection of evolution. It is the tragedy of every age that it is wrong. And it is

the duty of historians to explain the extended arcs of great and seismic change, and to shape a narrative of the future.³

“Oof, that's powerful. I get that!”

“Thanks, that means a lot, old friend. What these ‘great and seismic changes’ have told me is this: the assumption that the nation state is the culmination of the evolutionary process is indefensible nonsense. It is entirely illogical and historically illiterate.”

“Please. Édouard, this sounds like really dangerous territory, to me. You're talking about throwing over your career and getting into politics. What does Claudette think about it?”

“I haven't told her. She knows something's up, of course. But she's distracted herself. You know she's back studying?”

“Yes, I heard. Psychiatry, isn't it? That's pretty ferocious.”

“Particularly for her. I think you know her sister was killed by a drunk driver when she was fifteen. Claudette was only eleven but she remembers everything like it was yesterday. So she's planning to specialise in trauma recovery. It's a dark place for her, but she wants to bring some light to others.”

“I can't even imagine. Kids ok?”

“Yup, we're managing, though it's all a bit cox and box at the moment, lots of arranging to make sure one of us is there for them.”

“Well, if they're anything like mine, their resilience and insight is almost spooky!”

“Too right. Look, I know that most of the university seems to be speculating about what's up with me. But I'm not prepared to share it with her until the work is complete. And that's a long way off. Sorry, Hector, would you like something to eat? I think I have a *pain aux*

³ “Perspectives on History Quarterly”, Vol. 48, No. 2 Winter 2026/2027, p.7, Association Historique Européenne

raisins of uncertain vintage somewhere. Apologies for being inhospitable.”

“Tempting though that sounds, I’m fine, thanks. So, some examples?”

“Yes. Well, one really. It will be my contention that the nation state has enjoyed a short and undistinguished history. This is because, in many cases, it has been an artificial construct, perhaps a remnant of empire, victim of invasion, or the result of a marriage of convenience. More than that, it is a staging-post, a stepping-stone, to more logical constitutional agglomerations.

“I believe, though haven’t yet done the detailed work to back it up, that the great convulsions which have beset Europe – the wars of the middle ages, Napoleonic invasions, first and second world wars – these are all symptoms both of the essential fragility of the nation state and the action of this natural evolutionary rule – Constitutional Aggregation. I’m confident that treaties, alliances and ententes are explicit evidence that nations have far less room for independent manoeuvre and self-determination than our leaders would have us believe – or many of our fellow citizens yearn for.”

“Even if that’s all true – and I’m not saying I accept it – what does it mean from the practical perspective? I mean, to be blunt, ‘so what?’”

“As I said, the key thing is ‘Quo vadis?’. What does this process tell us about the future direction of our constitutional settlements? In other words, how will we be governed going forwards in order to deliver the core expectations of the people? And what all this tells me is a simple fact, but one with enormous consequences. We are on an unstoppable journey to a united Europe. The individual nations of Europe are going to form a union which will assume executive responsibility for a raft of essential policies. It’s the only logical deduction from what’s happened on the continent since the earliest stirrings of *Homo sapiens*. The only questions are: How? and When?”

“All this from one paragraph in a totally unknown work?”

“Well, at the risk of self-aggrandisement, Newton only had an apple and Archimedes a bath. The essence of epiphany is the sharpness of the clarity, not the agent of inspiration.”

Wednesday, November 11th 2026

The Paper

Published in “Perspectives on History Quarterly”

It took de Rouffignac another eighteen months to complete the paper that would ignite a furious debate across the intersecting worlds of academia, politics and the media.

The title, with typical academic opacity, was “Historical Meta-Narratives – Towards a Futurological Perspective”. The choice of title was a deliberate counterweight to the epigram already quoted and the provocative opening sentences.

Received wisdom about history is as contradictory as it is deceptive. Apparently this discipline, to which so many have dedicated their professional lives, teaches us nothing. On the other hand, those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Oh, and by the way, history does repeat itself, first as tragedy, then as farce.

Historians have been too passive, too comfortable within the womb of their particular – and frequently esoteric – specialities. The time is long overdue where we emerge screaming to claim a central, strategic position in the planning of policy.

This paper proposes just that, through the medium of meta-narratives.

The unwelcoming, obscure title was an intentional ploy to keep the paper within the academic community, even if the conflictingly populist opening tried to suggest that it was something both radical and far-reaching.

It failed. But only because his ivory-towered existence had led him to underestimate the insatiable planetary appetite for content, controversy and free copy. By the mid-2020s there was no longer any real notion of secrecy, confidentiality or contained debate.

Any hope for them had been annihilated by the combination of overwhelming government surveillance and citizens’ willingness to upload every minute detail of their lives to a multiplicity of platforms. Together, they had created a gravity-free zone where every bite of information floated into the orbit of everyone. Anything of innate interest could be grasped by someone whose curiosity was piqued and who could then amplify it through a myriad media.

There were many precedents for what happened. Newspapers, ravenous for stories with even a semblance of scientific veracity, would exploit robot searches and pounce on any new research that promised attention-seizing headlines or drove website traffic. Broadcasters, afraid of being scooped by more pedestrian media, adopted a similar lack of discrimination in running pieces to camera or microphone that smacked of little more than public relations. And the ever-burgeoning online world contrasted its sinister proclivity for personal exposure with the more benign facility of enabling anyone who so desired to shriek down a virtual megaphone at the whole world.

Into this seething cauldron, de Rouffignac gently lobbed a hand-grenade of near-nuclear power.

The main thrust of his argument was a rebuttal of Kierkegaard’s famous observation that life must be lived forward but could only be understood backwards. “This may be true for individuals but, as far as macro geopolitical arrangements we adopt are concerned, the argument is negated”, he wrote.

The line of reasoning was extended and copiously supported by the footnotes required in any academic treatise if it is to have defensible claims to authority. But it was also artfully written.

**Perspectives on
History Quarterly**

Volume 48, No. 2
Winter 2026/2027

Featured Paper:
“Historical Meta-
Narratives – Towards a
Futurological
Perspective”

Association Historique Européenne

“I invite readers – and here I make no distinction between professional or amateur across a wide range of disciplines – to close their eyes and let their mind wander over the whole of history.

“To make it easier, think only of the place where they are currently resident. I do not believe it makes any difference where it is. The first thing to say is that I do not propose to investigate the earliest archaeological records available. This is because these survive from early, prototypical cultures obliterated by climate change, disease and evolutionary dead-ends.

“I start instead from what I understand anthropologists generally accept is the point at which *Homo sapiens* and its direct antecedents established an unbroken line of existence that stretches from emergence to the present day. Give or take the odd millennium, this is about 10-16,000 years ago, depending on where you are reading this.”

De Rouffignac then painted the picture. He eschewed the teeming detail of a Bosch or Canaletto, constructing instead a giant impressionistic canvas where the grand sweep of all those years passed by, an ostensible blur but, from distance, vividly clear.

It started from a time where little was recognisable. No homes, no agriculture, no society worthy of the name. And yet even here he detected clear signs of Aristotle’s twin epithets of Man being a political and social animal. The notion of hunter:gatherers clearly denoted hierarchy, the abiding structure of all societies. It was reasonable to deduce by observation, say, of primates, that in those early æons, the very fact of survival and the kindling of progress testified to strong alpha-male-led grouping.

For de Rouffignac, this kind of deductive reasoning was the glory of meta-narratives. “The fact that a particular species has certain characteristics is now generally accepted as evidence of evolution. Most thinkers embrace this in the biological sphere, but it is equally powerful in understanding the development of social structures. Anthropology provides the hard evidence. History offers both the human context and the diagnostics for future policy planning.”

While they remained nomadic, it was effectively easy to meet other groups. This was essential to ensure the mixing of genes that powered the mutations which drive progress.

But when they started to settle, when the human brain learned to consider the notion of cultivation, of food on tap as well as running about on four legs or growing on bush and tree a distance away, then hierarchies became more embedded. The leadership of the pack, the tactician of the hunt, began to evolve into something different. He (and it was, of course, always a man) had to organise, delegate, order and judge. In modern parlance, he was the CEO (and probably with about as much interest in democracy as his contemporary equivalent).

The reason de Rouffignac allocated generous space on this proto-society is that it established the pattern which would cascade down the generations. His thesis was that Constitutional Aggregation is triggered by burgeoning populations with an ever-growing and insatiable sophistication of needs and wants. This essentially anthropological construct necessarily demands the development of more widespread and complex units of governance.

It was, to him, a simple equation. The larger and more diverse a populace the more intricate the issues of accommodating, regulating and managing the ways those individuals interact, behave and aspire.

This was the base colour of his canvas. The hue would underscore all the layers that history would paint. Sometimes it seemed obliterated by the cake of grime laid down thickly by time, events and the inexorable process of evolution. But, even then, the glimmer of those earliest flecks remained, perhaps unconsciously, in the mind, like some long-remembered cave painting.

From this seemingly insignificant departure-point, his brush depicted in vast, sweeping arcs how societies emerged through the coalescence of tiny communities barely worthy of the name into settlements whose own territorial footprint grew to satisfy its mushrooming population. And even where geographical distances ensured slow movement towards physical marriage, some intermingling is certain, often through trade, marriage or, perhaps, less benign forms of alliance.

It had the impact of one of those time-lapse films of a new building emerging from the ground, seemingly at break-neck speed. He showed how, for example, England emerged from local fiefdoms, ancient counties and kingdoms into larger units, pointing out that, as a single, stand-alone sovereign nation, it existed only from shortly before the eleventh-century Norman Conquest until it merged with Wales in the sixteenth, to be followed only two hundred years later by joining with Scotland. And for England's defunct Wessex, read France's Aquitaine. Or Spain's Galicia. Or Italy's Lombardy. Or Germany's Saxony. Or the individual states of the USA. Or the old kingdoms of India. Or the regional dynasties of China.

Of course, they all have their history. Varying vestiges of power and identity even echo down the years to the present day. But of the hulking beasts of sovereign independence, those indispensable symptoms of genuine self-determination, there is barely a sign. The ability to wage war. Control of economy and currency. Territorial integrity and border security. Energy independence. Environmental mastery. All the meaningful, rather than symbolic, levers of governance have been assumed by larger constitutional settlements.

At this point, de Rouffignac did something rather anti-academic. He claimed that Constitutional Aggregation as an example of historical meta-narratives was supported by overwhelming evidence. Consequently, he then stated baldly, to move through the constitutional settlements obtaining around the world at the time of writing was as unnecessary as it would be repetitive.

Dismissing the intricacies of academic research was entirely consistent with his deliberate breaking with what his career had thus far been. But it caused a firestorm. Faculty meetings were convened. First, in France, university présidents, recteurs, maîtres, doyens, directeurs – the entire panoply of academia's aristocracy – were deployed across the media and within universities to rage against this malign development. Quickly, it reverberated right through Europe's higher education community.

It was as if the controversy that, say, accompanied the arrival of revolutionary art movements – Impressionism, Cubism, Abstract

Expressionism – had been visited upon an entirely undiscovered universe which had remained essentially unchanged for centuries. The resistance of conservative elements – those who felt they had mastered their craft but suddenly seemed out-of-date and off the pace – was amplified by their self-centred fury. The evolutionary instinct that throbbed like a drum-beat throughout de Rouffignac's work from hereon had many manifestations, but the scorn cascading around him only served to reinforce his belief in all he wrote.

He realised that the danger to which his friend Hector had so clearly alluded was real. The risk of falling off the precarious historical log he was balancing on into a turbulent political stream was ever-present. And the moral pressure which he saw as the inevitable consequence of identifying meta-narratives built remorselessly.

One of the seductive attributes of meta-narratives was its conflation of time, setting what might at first glance seem long periods into their historical context, shortening them when laid against the whole of history. Of course, the timescales were as nothing compared with biological evolution and the millennia it takes for adaptations to occur. But the device was effective. People began to see their own era as part of a clear continuum, reinforcing the power of his epigraph.

The delusional fiction of stand-alone generations thinking only of themselves was irrevocably undermined. It was an argument of profound moral and political force, whose impact was an important, albeit unintended, consequence of the paper that we will return to later.

Monday, May 8th 2045, 11:15 CET

Inauguration

The Ballroom, Palais Monnet, Brussels, Belgium

“I wish to speak directly to our friends in England, if you will permit me.

“No, no. Please don’t jeer. We are set upon a noble path. I will not allow it to be undermined by even the hint of hubris. This is not what the UNE is about. We do not embark upon this venture with feelings of superiority. We do not mock. We do not prefer arrogance over humility, bullying over succour, conceit over concern.

“England is our neighbour. She stands at our frontiers with Scotland and, in due course, with Wales. And she is linked to us by sea, by tunnel, by history and by trade.”

It was the passage of his speech that had caused de Rouffignac the greatest difficulty.

He felt some guilt for what had befallen the once-great nation. If only the meta-narrative device had come to him a lot earlier, the departure of the UK from the EU and its subsequent disintegration might have been averted.

To some this hyper-self-criticism bordered on indulgence. But he was certain that, had the blindness which afflicted generations been cured earlier, the British people would have seen that an ever-closer union with its European neighbours was the safety net that would prevent it suffering the fate of every empire which had preceded it. And, of course, Europe would have moved far faster towards the goal now being celebrated by his inauguration.

“Let us be sympathetic towards our close neighbour. They never rejected our new Union. It was not mentioned as an option, even among those all-too-few ardent pro-EU advocates.

“We cannot retro-fit current wisdom into the past. But I could argue that the UNE would not exist but for Brexit. It was widely felt by the

federalist core across Europe that the UK would always be a dead hand on the acceleration of integration that today reached its logical culmination.

“Do you remember the reaction from the anti-EU brigade when the idea of a single European defence force was first suggested? It was as if they were being invited to be chemically castrated. Britain would always have vetoed. We know that.

“However, we cannot peremptorily turn our back on those who might envy what we have achieved.

“So I say to England simply this: if now you see the benefits of joining this great project, then please make it known soon. We closed the doors to build the new Europe. When they re-open, I cannot promise that they will remain so for ever. Your reluctance to participate in this new construction will need to be rectified quickly. Do not think you can stand on the side-lines while we strive to succeed, thinking that – once the heavy lifting has been done – you can swan in with the air of one doing us a favour.”

Another eruption detonated in the palace. Britain had traduced Europe almost from the moment it joined what was then the Common Market in 1973. Many leading politicians, cheered on by media proprietors focused exclusively on the conservation of wealth and influence, had waged a decades-long war of attrition. Its effect was the catastrophic referendum result in 2016 which initiated the extended withdrawal process.

Looking back, the ensuing fragmentation seems inevitable. One of the core drivers of the vote – border controls – eventually forced the unification of Ireland, as the consequences for peace and prosperity of a frontier between the Republic and Ulster were too dire to tolerate. The alternative – a frontier running down the Irish Sea – was, if anything, even worse, spelling the effective end of the UK as it had been constituted for a century.

“Let me be clear to our friends across La Manche. Ireland and Scotland are already in the UNE, and Wales is within the cohort of associate

members, part of the next group of joiners. England lags way behind and needs to apply soon if she is to join the second intake.

“You have tried being on your own. Our view from this side of the water is that it has not been a triumph. For over two decades you have tried to prove that a small nation can survive on its own. We have seen what has happened.

“It gives me no pleasure, I and my European colleagues exhibit no *schadenfreude*, when we say ‘Come home’. It is not secure for us to have on our borders a nation state unable to thrive.

“And I now address myself directly to the people of England. If it is security you crave. If it is economic safety you hunger for. If it is a clear and sustainable place in the world you want. Or if it is just an end to the nagging fear of being alone. Do this. Demand of your leaders that you join the UNE. We are not vindictive. We are not aggressive. We are not the enemy.

“Five hundred million people and their leaders have decided that we are better off together. We are not wrong.”

2027-2028

The Backlash

Responses from around the globe

Despite – or, perhaps, because of – the academic furore, the seeping of Constitutional Aggregation into political and social discourse was uncharacteristically rapid. This was particularly so where that dialogue was coloured neither by knowledge nor logic, but rather by unrestrained passion.

What catalysed the reaction more than anything else were the regressive and emotive responses from nationalists across Europe, and beyond.

When the history of the first half of the twenty-first century is definitively written, retrograde amnesia of the toxic effects of nationalism and populism will prove one of the more Gordian knots to unravel.

How could nations which had within living memory known the crushing weight of totalitarian oppression so lightly embrace leaders exuding the same poisonous gas?

Millions flocked to the ballot box to cast votes for ill-informed dabblers espousing obnoxious policies that pivoted around scapegoating outsiders and latecomers. Seductive nostrums appealed to base instincts. The hunger for easy solutions to a sense of diminishing hope, security and identity offered up fertile soil in which mind-narrowing policies could implant themselves.

Not only in Europe, but in vast lands like America, Brazil, China and India, demagogues rose to seize the reins of power. Astonishingly, Russia – a nation more scarred than, perhaps, any other by pan-European conflicts – moved to dictatorship masquerading as democracy, despite its blood-soaked relationship with tyranny throughout most of the twentieth century.

Whatever else divided them, they were tied together by an instinctive belief in the concept of ‘nation’. And Édouard’s paper threatened that existential connective tissue.

All of these parties, movements, single-issue groups and atomised loners had by diverse pathways come to the same theological creed: the nation state in which they had been born and which they regarded as their legacy was immutable.

The fact that history decisively disproved this was an unspoken heresy, one embroidered by the irrefutable truth that the past can never be repeated. De Rouffignac was, perhaps, a little too fond of quoting Pushkin: ‘The concept of a golden age is natural to all nations and proves only that people are never satisfied with the present and, having from experience little hope in the future, they embellish the irrecoverable past with all the colours of their imagination.’

The attacks on de Rouffignac came from a number of directions.

The least malign were from fellow historians and other academics. By roundly dismissing conventional approaches to history, he incurred the wrath of those who had built their careers on highly specialised areas of the broad discipline.

His core argument – that the moral duty of professional historians was to use meta-narratives as a diagnostic tool to be placed at the disposal of policy-makers – was an anathema to many. It demanded a wholly different approach that many felt was beyond them. His response that this was simply not true failed to mollify many.

After all, if you have raised up the edifice of your reputation and self-esteem on the foundation of unrivalled knowledge of, say, the Merovingians under Clovis I, the prospect of that mass of teeming detail being declared intellectually and philosophically irrelevant was, at best, unnerving and, at worst, a psychological time-bomb.

Extending that hypothetical illustrates the deep-seated irony in all this. The transience of the Frankish Empire, from which the Merovingian emerged before itself being absorbed, was a microcosmic proof-point of

Constitutional Aggregation at work, as expounded in “Historical Meta-Narratives”.

Apocalyptic essays were penned with emotive titles like “The End of Academia” and “Whither Research?” International symposia were convened to receive peer-reviewed papers showing that intellectual rigour only existed where all avenues of research had been exhausted.

But the genie had long left the bottle. And while Einstein and Russell’s similar paeans to the quest of knowledge echoed through the groves of academe, those who chanted them as if they were religious mantras resembled little more than diplodocuses grazing peacefully and ignorantly on the Yucatan peninsula as the fateful meteor burned through the atmosphere.

The campaign of peer-group vilification started slowly, with equal globs of condescension and pomposity in obscure corners of academia. Here is just one example, chosen at random, in this case, from an Italian academic journal.

Sir,

I beg the generosity of your learned publication to voice my disappointment at a disturbing ripple in the fabric of academic history and historiography.

Prof. de Rouffignac’s recent paper in “Perspectives on History Quarterly” (Vol. 48, No. 2 Winter 2026/2027, p. 7 et seq) betrays the deepest foundations we historians have been digging since Herodotus wrote *The Histories* in circa 440 BCE.

Since that moment, our honourable discipline has been proud to shine a light into the darkest recesses of human endeavour to illuminate the human condition by exposing to scrutiny Mankind’s deeds, both good and evil, through their research and exposition in the written word, the more factual detail the better.

But now along comes this new ‘theory’ of how we should practise our craft and what our *raison d’être* should have been all along.

Well, Sir, I for one reject his diagnostic approach as much as I do his *soi-disant* role as a moralist.

I know for sure that I am not alone in this, and my only regret is that it is unlikely I shall live long enough to learn what the historians of tomorrow discern from this sorry little episode.

Yours

Professore Armando dal Pozzo

Preside, Department of Historical and Geographic Sciences and the Ancient World, University of Padua⁴

For those unfamiliar with academic discourse, this was akin to an intemperate rant. It was echoed in dozens of similar journals right across the world of higher learning.

But their understated contempt was as nothing when set against the populist reaction.

First, the alphas piled in. In equal measure, strutting and preening, boring and boorish, their response was never rooted in logic or rational engagement with the substantive argumentation. It was, as ever, a knee-jerk reaction to perceived danger, an instinctive welling of fight-or-flight that brooked no retreat and demanded only the most aggressive attack. If the price was wilful ignorance of the core premise or a deliberate distortion of the facts, then so be it.

This, from the President of the USA:

I note that some *French* historian is casting aspersions on our great United States of America.

Folks, he’s saying that we ain’t big enough, that we’re going to have to grow some to stay ahead of the curve.

Well, I say, butt out. We know who we are, and where we’re bound. It’s only a year or so since we celebrated the Declaration of Independence’s 250th birthday. That’s how long we’ve been around and we sure ain’t going anywhere any time soon.

You could drain spaghetti through that many holes. But nothing mattered save the instant gratification from the moment of assumed triumph.

Much the same could be said for the violence of the reaction from the Hungarian prime minister, save that his was an explicit threat.

How dare some jumped-up teacher lecture we Hungarians on nationhood!

Does he not know the journey we have made to be where we are today? For a historian, he seems insultingly unaware of how we moved from one state of oppression to another, from one confused identity to none. And then, finally, to our own sense of oneness wrapped in the heritage of our shared suffering and the unifying struggle to be recognised as a nation in our own right?

Some educators need to be educated, to be taught a lesson they will never forget. So I instruct all Hungarians, wherever they live, to call out this person for the arrogant liar that he is.

Let him know we stand together, united under the flag by iron and blood.

The one thing that you can rely on with alphas – they lack all sense of irony, caring solely for their own world-view, shorn as it so often is of

⁴ ‘Nuova Rivista Storica’, CXI (2027), p.46, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri

anything resembling an objective, rational and balanced approach to a given situation.

But this was insidious, an unsubtly-coded stoking of fury and call to arms for those who marched with the PM. It was echoed right across the community of right-wing nationalists within Europe – and further afield.

Brazilian foot-soldiers from *Patriota* allied with born-again Evangelical Christian Republicans in the States. And in de Rouffignac's own country, the revivalist *Rassemblement National Populaire* rekindled the flames of Nazi collaboration. All of them, and many more besides, saw Constitutional Aggregation as irrefutable evidence of the Anti-Christ, and its author the Devil's disciple.

Taken together, all this gave unfettered licence to the psychos and saddos, the deluded and the disillusioned.

Looking back, the early digi-posts seemed almost laughably overblown, when not genuinely repulsive.

You're a nobody, I could crush you with my heel.

Recant, you can still save your soul!

Let me remind you, good sir, of the words of Oliver Cromwell's Letter to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.'

Hope you and your children die screaming..

Your idea stinks. It makes no sense. We are here, are we not? The long journey you talk about brought us to this point. Is it not just possible that this is where we are meant to be?

At first, he did try and engage. So, for example, the person who suggested that the evolutionary journey had reached its perfect end in the current disposition of nation states received the patient explanation that there was no logic behind the point. Unless population growth went

into reverse and governments could exert far greater control on pan-national issues than had hitherto been the case, the process towards greater unity was one-way – and remorseless.

But, in the end, the sheer volume militated against engaging. In any event, the very fact of reaching out only encouraged a dialogue that would inevitably prove futile. And it even led some to believe they had a personal relationship with him, a prospect the diffident de Rouffignac abhorred as much as he feared.

In any event, no academic or politician remotely objective had managed to dent the core premise of the theory and, in truth, he grew tired of repeatedly explaining it.

He explained this reticence in an interview: "In the end, I don't expect to change entrenched views that defy logic and rational thinking. If I explain patiently to an observant Jew or Muslim that it's perfectly safe – and, as it happens, delicious – to eat pig, I would have no ambition to see them sink their teeth into a baguette crammed full of jambon and brie. There's no logic to their refusal, merely anachronistic tradition. So, why bother?"

But things soon took a darker turn. Those who felt most threatened by the idea, mainly domestic politicians with state apparatus at their fingertips, let loose a barrage of black ops dis- and mis-information.

It was clearly a concerted campaign put together by an alliance of demagogues who had managed to conquer their local heights, but little more. And although they sought to distance themselves, later investigations would prove their complicity beyond the doubt of anyone but the most blinkered or retained follower. The evidence was incontrovertible: the attempt to destroy de Rouffignac was designed and executed across a number of countries whose leaders shared the same characteristics: arrogance, ineptitude, dishonesty, and entitlement.

The technology for co-ordinated subversion had been in play since the mid-twenty-teens. Compelling proof of democratic sabotage had been discovered from analyses dating back to the British referendum on Europe in 2016 and the US presidential election the same year.

These forces that acted at the behest of populist nationalists were now turned on de Rouffignac. The threats, previously so nebulous and pathetic, now became concrete.

At first it was doctored images delivered to his home and faculty. They invariably depicted family members, his wife and children mostly, but sometimes also his aged parents. Committing crimes, in flagrante, maimed, raped, dying, dead, always in the most explicit detail. Wordless. And anonymous.

Soon enough, the sky grew darker still. He came home one afternoon, before the children were back from school. As he parked his cycle, he turned towards the front door – and stopped. There, on the front lawn, the family dog lay. No bark. No leaping welcome. Vermillion grass, slicking glossy from her neck.

Claudette sat him down, her fury barely contained.

“This cannot go on. The kids are terrified. I’m terrified. How will this end?”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. But what am I to do? You can’t unthink an idea. It’s out there, with a life of its own. I wouldn’t know how to stop it, even I wanted to. And I don’t think I do.”

“Even at the expense of the children, me, our marriage?”

The ensuing silence was eloquent. He paced, the agitation in his body betraying the turmoil within.

“I can’t do this now, love. I need some space to think. You’re all going to stay with your parents. I’ll take a short sabbatical, get some distance, have time to work this out.”

Later, once they’d safely arrived, Édouard relaxed somewhat knowing his family was out of harm’s way. But the noise only grew louder, the invasions more intense.

Threats issued to the university brought about a public suspension, partly true, but mainly posturing, given his decision to have a break. Police guarded the house and, if he had to go out, shadowed him.

All the while, he struggled with the thinker’s dilemma. Do I try and unspeak the truth? Where is the moral balance between a dangerous idea and its repercussions? Is there any way to hold fast to that idea *and* distance his family (and himself) from the violence of those who found it an anathema?

In the end, you can only go through this labyrinth so often before a kind of torpor sets in and a breakthrough becomes vanishingly unlikely.

Sherlock Holmes called the particularly perplexing a ‘two pipe problem’. De Rouffignac found refuge and inspiration in the multi-layered textures and mathematical patterns of Bach’s music for harpsichord.

He retired to the converted barn in the field that ran from their old Champfleury farmhouse down to a tree-lined stream. There, among the overflowing bookshelves and state-of-the-art eight-speaker music streaming, he laid back in a battered old armchair and, with a couple of spoken commands, launched a single playlist.

The Goldberg Variations, Well-Tempered Clavier, Art of the Fugue, English and French Suites – and the rest; Bach’s entire keyboard output saturated the physical space surrounding him, blocking out everything as its cascades reverberated around the stone structure, bouncing and echoing off the walls and flying up into the gabled roof, where web-shrouded beams caught the sunlight through a small window. But, more pointedly, the hours of glorious music swarmed into his brain, forcing out the negativity and frustration, replacing it with the kind of serenity that comes all too rarely. Eventually, the therapeutic melodies and mathematically-ordered rhythms soothed him. And from this inner peace, clarity emerged.

Édouard recalled the story of an eminent rabbi who published a book in which he clearly stated that Judaism did not have a monopoly on wisdom. The bravery of such an admission evaporated when a reprint was made with the offending passage excised after a furore from fundamentalists. He had made the choice: position before principle.

De Rouffignac knew, in his bones, that he couldn’t do the same. To foreswear his core observation would, he felt, be like Darwin denying

evolution or Copernicus heliocentricity. He felt anxious elevating himself to such garlanded company, but it brought some solace to know he was travelling the same path as the Immortals.

The open letter came easily, once he got the first line. Sent to selected targets in the media and academia, it was a stark and uncompromising credo.

To those who would deny my freedom to think,

Stand back from your prejudices and intolerances. Put aside your long-held beliefs and mis-placed yearning for unattainable continuity. Embrace discomfort and welcome curiosity.

For all the criticism and abuse I have suffered since the publication of my paper, not one attempt to dislodge its core premise has been successful.

Never has the notion of Constitutional Aggregation seemed so compelling as when those trying to undermine it have come up, not just short, but woefully so.

I have always prided myself on being intelligent, at least in the Bertrand Russell construct (“The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.”) When I published my paper, a part of me expected it to be destroyed by minds more eminent and perceptive than mine. I thought this even though I was committed to publication. I saw no downside; either I would be vindicated, or emerge chastened but wiser.

But when the cacophony of flimsy criticism elided seamlessly into personal attacks, threats and action, I knew for sure that I had hit on something potent and irrefutable. I can join with Galileo – “*E pur si muove*”. And yet it moves.

So my message is simple. Feel free to destroy the argument by intellectual engagement. But do not expect me to deny what I

now know to be an accurate explanation of how societies evolve their governance – and what that tells of their future organisation.

I echo Martin Luther. “*Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders.*”
Here I stand. I can do no other.

Many regarded it as a summons to the barricades for all academia, a *cri de coeur* to repel the barbarians and defend objective rationality.

But others cleaved to their immutable beliefs, a creed immune both to the force of logic and the weight of evidence, entirely resistant to the moral imperative to amend often cherished views as the facts change.

And so he became something of a divisive figure, vaunted by the intelligentsia, demonised by the partisan.

It was in such a maelstrom that he embarked on a lecture tour of the USA.

The subject-matter for his lecture moved from Constitutional Aggregation as a concept to the necessity for intellectual freedom, unencumbered by a fear of expressing radical ideas.

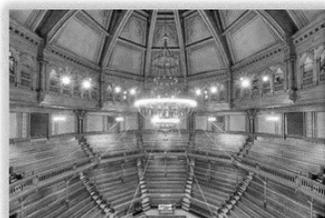
Of course, he described his idea. But the pivotal force was the litany of breakthrough ideas and insights that had, over the long run of history, challenged entrenched thinking and hegemonic power.

What he'd been through to get to this place radiated, not just in the words and phrases he deployed, but in the sincere passion with which they were delivered.

In truth, he'd never considered himself an orator. He thought his lecture style rather too dry, a view shared by many of his students in their annual reviews, posted with great zeal on various digi-streams.

But now he'd found his tongue, and its freedom was emphasised both by the importance of the topic and the vitriolic response from some of the world's more bovine leaders.

The culmination was the late-Spring address he would make at Harvard's largest space, Sanders Theatre. Even though he'd lectured in



some of the academic world's most hallowed halls, this felt different. It was as if the burnished wood that made up so much of the hall glowed with the fire of the myriad intellects who had graced it. The molten heat of their thinking seemed to have suffused the walls, the benches, the stage, with an intensity that made it appear

almost alive, a sense which was amplified by the pendulous chandelier that hung above the front stalls.

He started to speak. Freed by familiarity with the original script, he could relish his surroundings and the privilege of standing at the lectern.

"It is an enormous honour to stand before you in this legendary arena and follow in the footsteps of some illustrious forerunners.

"Unwittingly, I seem to have become something of an evangelist, not merely for academic freedom but, more profoundly, for the right to express our findings, thoughts and insights without fear.

"So to be here, in this sacred place dedicated to the free exchange of ideas, is a rare privilege.

"My friends, I've been to a dark place. One I have named the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt. It demanded of me that I question the intellectual foundation of my observation of Constitutional Aggregation. And then it required me to weigh the results of that questioning against my life and that of my family.

"The first demand I was happy to accede to. We should never assume that the fruits of our labour are beyond reflection and challenge. I read all of the objections and tests laid down by fellow historians, philosophers and other bona fide thinkers. I even dipped more than a toe into a cesspit of ill-thought-through and uninformed drivel. Like some bitter creature emerging from a stinking, unlit underworld, this ignorant outpouring emanated from those much happier indulging in

confirmation bias and resistance to new ideas than considering that they just might be on the wrong side of the argument.

"I emerged from that period of self-questioning even more certain that this idea of Constitutional Aggregation is not merely robust. As predicted in my paper, it is a tool by which governments can begin to strategise their long-term alliances and even plan to merge with neighbouring nations in order to coalesce mutual interests into single, trans-territory policy strands.

"But the latter part of my traversal of the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt was less easy. It caused enormous conflict between my adherence to the concept of intellectual honesty on the one hand, and my duty as a father and husband on the other.

"To prefer one over the other proved impossible. Either would require the negation of an essential part of me. So I doubled-down and reaffirmed my irreducible belief in intellectual freedom and the right of academics to articulate their findings without fear.

"We can, after all, only follow Polonius' advice to Laertes. "Above all, to thine own self be true." What sort of example do I set as a father if I buckle under pressure on a matter of the highest principle? How does my wife rely on me if I fold in the face of aggression from a bunch of people I don't know and who have no skin in the game, as I think you Americans like to say.

"This entire episode has led me to ponder deeply about our moral role in the modern world. What are our responsibilities? How far do we go to reach out from our hermetic existence when we make some game-changing breakthrough?

"How, in effect, do thinkers, inventors, innovators function in a soci...."

De Rouffignac never heard the first shot.

Wednesday, November 11th 2026

The Paper

Published in “Perspectives on History Quarterly”

It was the section entitled “Catalysts” that was the most powerful segment of his paper. Partly because it was couched more in the style of reportage than traditional historiography, and partly because it skilfully wove together historical fact and predictive conjecture.

It started with a beguilingly simple question. “Why should nations that perceive themselves as independent and sovereign voluntarily cede those attributes to a larger entity?”

And then its corollary: “What could possibly trigger such a transfer of power?”

The short answer was: one or a series of events and/or irrefutable data trends which reveal an essential and irreversible domestic impotence. This lack of power would prove beyond any doubt that the machinery of governance was no longer able to guarantee the core desires of its citizens: life, liberty, health and, above all perhaps, hope.

This Édouard demonstrated by examining known and imaginable incidents and developments which, taken together, might focus the mind on the nation state’s essential frailty and limitations.

He divided these triggers into two broad classes: the foreseeable (and therefore amenable to preparation and management), and the surprise (which tested resilience and responsiveness).

He invited readers, first, to consider the impact of just the most recent in the series of pandemics that have afflicted humanity since recorded time began. This was the coronavirus outbreak that ran initially through much of 2020 and resurfaced in lesser strength and lower morbidity for the next two years or so.

It was greeted initially by national responses of widely varying degrees of effectiveness. A poisonous mixture of braggadocio, bombast and bullshit

disfigured some countries, a number of which had leaders – not necessarily different from those who had mocked Constitutional Aggregation – who believed they could face down a virus with no instinct other than to reproduce as rapidly as possible.

But the wider issue was the vista of nations competing against each other – for medical equipment, protective garments, and even to produce treatments and vaccines. It created an unseemly picture of seeking to control a disease and manage its impacts within frontiers when the pathogen itself was incapable of recognising any boundaries.

Looking at it from a European perspective, when data became irrefutable, citizens right across the continent started asking questions.

“Why did our country see so many deaths among medical and care professionals?”

“How come our leaders failed to prevent the spread when other countries did so well?”

“What is it about our society that allowed so many elderly, poor and ethnic minorities to perish?”

“Tell us the truth. Why was our mortality rate so much higher than other nations?”

But other questions quickly surpassed these.

“Could we have slowed the spread if we had worked in concert with neighbouring states?”

“Would a vaccine have been more quickly available had all resources been poured into a single venture?”

“If the procurement, storage and replenishment of personal protection equipment had been centrally organised, would stocks have been adequate to see us all through without counter-productive competition?”

“If healthcare was planned on a pan-regional or federal basis, would the response have been better, whether defined in terms of fewer deaths, more efficient population control, less economic damage or faster exit?”

“Is it now possible to envisage a pan-European health emergency response force that is able to plan and implement a disaster avoidance or mitigation strategy? In other words, are we better fighting this kind of threat together rather than separately?”

Europe’s leaders belatedly realised that their initial indecisiveness was an act of self-harm. They set about rectifying it with a series of dynamic initiatives which had a transformative effect on perceptions of ‘Europe’ right across its membership. It also served to underscore the growing chasm between the EU and the UK by magnifying the benefits of interdependence and co-operative action.

Taken as a whole, these wide-ranging and radical innovations had the effect of drawing together a traumatised continent yearning for a new sense of dominion over the natural forces unleashed by coronavirus. For nothing says ‘impotence’ more than standing alone and powerless in the path of nature raging in its fullest force, be it wild weather, the howling inner earth, or rampant disease.

So Europe helped orchestrate the search for vaccines against the disease’s many and varied mutations, at the same time taking a pivotal role in global distribution to ensure worldwide immunity. This would liberate the world’s nations from a perennial threat, while inoculating the European economy against further flare-ups and shutdowns.

And it also came up with a financial rescue package which would provide a safety net for all twenty-seven countries in the EU, every one of which had suffered losses, though to differing degrees. These two projects were complemented by a third, more strategic, far-reaching and emblematic progression. The launch of EuroPandémie signified not just a step-change in pan-European disease control but a model for a new generation of agencies that would form the spine of the UNE. Chief among these, of course, was EuroDéfense – the single military and security body which would, above all others, signify the great evolutionary leap from multiple nations to single federation.

EuroPandémie united the regulatory bodies, research groups and manufacturers who, together, formed the engine room of medicine in

terms of drugs and equipment. The first line of its constitution echoed the Hippocratic Oath: “First, do no harm”.

EuroPandémie exists to prevent harm.

Its overriding purpose is to prepare signatory nations for pandemics and other widespread diseases that hold the potential to kill many and to derail the economy of the Eurozone and of the European Union.

By establishing partnerships with the World Health Organization and other global, national and regional associations, EuroPandémie will build early warning systems, devise rapid response protocols and ensure the adequacy of all supplies necessary to treat and fight disease and protect those who serve on the front line.

It shall do this in a manner that ensures equal access for all signatories and shall not discriminate in any way as between those signatories.

EuroPandémie is a non-profit-making co-operative venture predicated on the founding principle that a viral, bacterial or other pathogenic outbreak in one signatory is an outbreak in all signatories.

The sight of otherwise-sovereign nations pooling expertise and finance previously ring-fenced for their own citizens signified more than acknowledging the obvious fact that pandemics are immune to frontiers.

It was an explicit recognition that individual performance in combatting Covid-19 had been starkly variable. Nations like France, Italy and Spain had very high fatalities; Greeks and Danes were spared similar levels of tragedy. Understanding why was elusive, but leaders recognised that working together was the best way to achieve continent-wide health security.

And the population of Europe agreed. The collective memory burned with images of war-torn hospitals, care homes emptied by the virus, doctors and nurses hollowed out by fatigue and grief for fallen comrades. Even the most fervent nationalist found the logic behind EuroPandémie hard to fault.

But ‘Catalysts’ relied on much more than just the collective trauma of coronavirus.

De Rouffignac drew together two antagonistic trends from the largest economies in the world: the USA and China.

On the one hand, America had, since the start of 2017, embarked on an extended policy of distancing. Withdrawing from treaties under a banner of ‘America First’, it had unpicked much of the international order. Coupled with a propensity to ally itself with countries led by personalities of a similar stamp to its President, the process of disentanglement stimulated a rethink in many foreign ministries. Nations that had previously assumed some level of American support in a crisis realised they could no longer rely on that safety-net. A psychological wariness swiftly embedded itself in policy-making and diplomatic manoeuvres; reversing it would challenge several administrations.

On the other, the People’s Republic of China had complemented dynamic economic growth with an equivalent extension in diplomatic and political influence. Deploying its vast resources, it cultivated alliances across swathes of Africa, for example, by facilitating infrastructural projects that engendered long-term loyalty and dependency. Massive initiatives like its own Belt and Road westward expansion threw into high relief the exposure that smaller nations were increasingly feeling, pincered as they were between an old ally turning its back and a new power ploughing its own furrow.

As neither the USA nor PRC was minded to recalibrate the moral compass of their governments towards the collective ethos of Europe, the words of Danish Finance Minister Jensen became ever more resonant. In 2017, he said that there are two kinds of European nations: small, and those that have not yet realised they are small.

America averting its eyes from Europe had another unsettling effect which added to a growing, albeit still unstated, appreciation of greater cohesion.

The Russian invasion of the Ukraine in 2014 and its subsequent annexation of the Crimea brought to those countries on the eastern boundary of the European Union an uneasy remembrance of past catastrophes. The convoluted history of the arc from the Baltic to the Black and Aegean Seas seemed a permanent oscillation between independence and occupation, the many communities straddling that imaginary line enjoying only short-lived security.

Russia posed an existential threat to all those nations – from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania through Belarus to Ukraine. And even those nations that would border a westward-expanded Slavonic super state cast anxious glances in an easterly direction, realising that they would be badly exposed should their neighbours’ status change from independent country to client state or, worse, occupied territory.

So, surreptitiously, these countries, scarred as they were by recent enthrallment and determined to avoid it in the future, teased the strategic conversations with other EU leaders towards defence pacts and ever closer inter-reliance.

But it wasn’t only threats with external origins that catalysed integration.

The launch of the Euro as an active currency in 2002 had been envisaged by some of its architects as a mechanism by which to drive formal unification.

Domestic politicians still clung to the fiction that federation was not on the agenda, but it became clear in the early- to mid-2020s that the financial burden of the Covid-19 economic shutdown was unmanageably vast. Right across the European Union, national governments were oppressed by its weight.

A form of cataract increasingly blurred the sight of domestic politicians. Where previously they had eyed the imperative of certain expenditures

with indisputable clarity, now it became ever more difficult to discern the boundaries between the mandatory and the discretionary.

In particular, this magnified the growing unsustainability of the unchallenged truth that maintaining national control of defence systems brooked no challenge or alternative. Given the parlous state of national economies, this political ‘untouchable’ was increasingly fragile, its totemic value as a sign of sovereignty shredded by intrinsic unaffordability.

Off-the-record conversations were heating up as every political leader confronted the legacy of the myth that every nation could defend itself in the event of profound threat.

Not only that. The full cost of combatting climate change had added a wholly new priority to national financial planning. Moving to carbon neutrality was a systemic change unexampled since the industrial and technological revolutions, but this time amplified by its essential unavoidability.

All these forces were, each in their own way, exerting themselves on the collective psychology of the governments and citizens of Europe’s countries.

It awaited a champion, the one who would stand up and articulate a way forward, out of the morass and on to sunnier uplands.

As de Rouffignac explicitly acknowledged in the unorthodox conclusion to his paper:

Having lived with Constitutional Aggregation for a considerable period, I am convinced it sets out a meta-narrative of the future. But neither its rationale nor the catalysts for progress identified in this paper will of themselves be sufficient.

For nations to merge will require a potent cocktail of realpolitik and visionary leadership. As I write, I see the pressure building inexorably for reality to drive home unification as the solution to the myriad challenges facing the EU 27. What I do not yet see

is the strength of personality and tenacity of vision among the current crop of national or regional leaders.

The day will come, for it is inevitable. When it does, I hope Europe rises to the historic moment. As Shakespeare put it in ‘Julius Caesar’:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

It is my great hope that I live to see the great galleon of Europe set sail. And if I don’t, one day, perhaps, some will say: ‘Maybe that idiot French professor wasn’t such an idiot after all.’ Could anyone ask for more?

14th May 2028, mid-afternoon onwards

Massachusetts General Hospital

Trauma Center

The saving grace for de Rouffignac was that the closest emergency room was in one of the best hospitals in the country, affectionately known as Mass General.

The sleek ambulance, all piercing blue LEDs and sirens, sliced through the Boston afternoon traffic, overtaken only by news of the shooting, which encircled the globe at the speed of light.

It docked at the rapid transfer interface, the gurney sliding smoothly directly onto a travelator that led straight to Resus. From the dock to the high maintenance suite, a paramedic straddled Édouard, pumping his chest. He was greeted by the trauma team, hyper-tensed up by the reputation of their charge.

The well-worn process unfolded. First, the ambulance team reported, a staccato recital of Édouard's condition since the shooting.

“Semi-conscious at scene. Pupils responsive. Major blood loss from neck. Crashed during initial assessment. Intubated at scene.

“3 times 1 litre bags of plasma. Shocked twice - once on site, once en route”

“2mg fentanyl at scene. No more after intubation.”

Next, Doctor Anand, the ER consultant, went through the protocol, his calm demeanour camouflaging the inner strain of dealing with a high-profile patient and the certain knowledge of the intrusive scrutiny that would cascade about the team.

“Primary survey, please.”

A nurse read out de Rouffignac's vitals.

“Ok, thanks. So, blood pressure is not great. Apart from that, seems pretty stable at present. We'll maintain sedation for now. Injuries, please.”

“Three bullet wounds. Sniper rifle from around 100 feet. 7.62 calibre. One entered shoulder. Shattered joint. Appears to have spun him. Second lacerated neck. Significant vascular damage. Last penetrated lower back around L4 through S1. Slug embedded. No obvious internal damage. Negative for lower limb sensation.”

“Thank you. MRI, CT and x-ray, please. From mandible through pelvis. 360-degree. 3D. Black-and white stat; colour to follow.”

The medical team crowded into the viewing room, separated from Édouard and the scanner by thick glass. He slid into the tube, oblivious to the thrumming sound it made as magnets revolved around him. The bed to which he was fastened pivoted vertically and horizontally in a kind of dance, as they stared at the images appearing instantly on the large screens before them.

“Ok, so a plan” Anand demanded of the team. They knew the choreography; the demanding teacher expected each to contribute in turn.

“Shoulder needs replacement but it can wait.”

“Priority is to stem blood loss, so neck laceration should be closed immediately. Best to do that in theatre but there may not be time.”

“Now, the spine. Looks like a full transection. Might we do more damage if we remove the bullet? No obvious fragmentation so we're not looking at instability that will cause damage later.”

“Good work” he said, when they'd finished, before what would happen next.

“Get Neuro down for a consult but we're looking at, first, Lac closure in the ER and immobilisation of the shoulder, then surgery to stabilise the spinal cord, clean it up, and start rehab and prep for life in a wheelchair. Ortho to assess best case



scenario for the shoulder repair, depending on recovery from the neurosurgery.

“All happy with that?”

“Ok, I’ll speak to the relatives. Can someone get me a number, please? Thanks, everyone. Well done. Now we wait for the shit storm. Fasten your seatbelts. And let’s just remember – he’s just another patient. We do our best and pretend not to notice that the eyes of the world are watching. We’ve handled far too many patients with this type of damage to be worried by it. Right, let’s get to work!”

By this time, an attaché from the US embassy in Paris had arrived at the home of Claudette’s parents to liaise on behalf of the US government. They were arranging travel for her when the phone went. Major Jackson answered, putting it on speaker mode.

“One moment, sir, here she is.”

“Madame de Rouffignac?”

“Oui.”

“Do you speak English?”

“Yes.”

“I am Doctor Anand. I am looking after Édouard.”

“Yes?”

“He’s alive and in surgery.”

A short silence.

“But ...?”

“He has very serious injuries. These are almost certainly life-changing. I will explain in more detail when you are here but you should know two things. One, he will live. Two, life will likely be very different from now on. I can tell you more now, but I think it better to do it in person. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“No.”

“I will see you when you arrive and we can talk in more detail then. I’m sorry we will be meeting in these circumstances. I know you’re scared, but he’s in very good hands. Bon voyage.”

“Thank you for calling.”

The tears started as soon as the phone went dead.

Jackson got busy.

“Ok, ma’am. Let’s get packing. Clothes. It’s a warm spring so you’ll need ‘em light. Medications? You have enough? If not, we’ll sort it Stateside. Passport? Id? You get on to that, please. I’ll sort the transport.”

“And the children?”

“Best leave ‘em here for now, ma’am. Once you and your husband are ready, we’ll bring ‘em over, don’t you worry. But, with all due respect, I’ve been around soldiers with many kinds of serious injury and their families always need careful prep for the first meeting. We can talk about that later. I’ll be by your side the whole way, have no fear on that, ma’am.”

In the days and weeks to come, Claudette would reflect on the speed of it all, and the way everything happened without her recalling precisely how. One moment she was hearing of a potentially bleak future, the next she was being whisked through the phalanx of journalists and photographers that thronged the main entrance to Massachusetts General.

No public statements had been made on Édouard’s condition, so speculation had filled the void. Hospital policy was clear: no announcements until the family had been brought into the loop and any decisions to be made could be carried out in private. But impatience for news filled the very media that, until the shooting, had hounded him since his paper was first published.

Despite all the assurances to the contrary, speculation was rife that he was, in fact, already dead, but ‘They’ are pretending he’s not to smoke out those behind the assassination. It was a double conspiracy theory that sent those who love this sort of thing into a permanent orgasmic vortex where they abided most happily.

Some of his most trenchant critics in academia took a step back and hinted at a solidarity that had been, to say the least, scarce up to the point when three bullets tore through him. Whatever their views on his approach to history, there was a strong element of circling the wagons at a vicious assault on academic freedoms.

The unreconstructed populists doubled-down. In unison, they decried the shooting while making it perfectly clear that he’d brought it on himself and, in America specifically, the Second Amendment was there to prevent the tyranny of ideas such as his that threatened the very existence of the union.

Claudette was oblivious to any of this. The cocoon in which Major Jackson had swaddled her was strong enough for the journey, but it could not withstand the sight of Édouard in an ICU bed, enveloped in a chaos of drips, tubes and monitors.

Doctor Anand sat with her as de Rouffignac lay silent, unmoving. It took her a while to recover a semblance of composure but, when she had, he explained to her patiently but with an authority that brooked no contradiction.

“I know you’re a medical colleague. But it’s my experience that this is not always an advantage in these circumstances. So I shall talk as if this is all alien to you. This is not to patronise, just to ensure complete clarity. Ok?”

An almost imperceptible nod.

“Édouard is in an induced coma. This accelerates healing and guards against any swelling of the brain. It’s unlikely, but you can’t be too careful. In any event, we need to prepare to bring him out of it. I know all this equipment is scary, but it works for injuries like this.”

She had remained perfectly still, looking at her husband. “Injuries like what, exactly?”

“Ok, so there is one major issue, Claudette. Sorry, is it alright to call you ‘Claudette’?”

Her eyelids gave consent.

“As I said on the phone, his – and your – life will be changed from now on. I’m sorry, but you must assume he will never walk again. His spine was badly damaged and the cord compromised beyond recovery. There will be internal impacts, as well. All the processes below his abdomen will be compromised. We won’t know to what extent for a while yet, but there will almost certainly be life-long management of bodily functions.”

She was shaking by now, her face contorted in disbelief and shock, images of what was foretold flashing through her mind, a disconnected slideshow of harrowing possibilities. A multitude of questions formed in her mind, but died in her throat.

Anand pressed on, knowing she wanted to ask so much, hoping that he could save her the trouble.

“We are not devoid of hope. There are massive technological advances going on in this area. Gene therapies, suits that can operate as a kind of exo-skeleton controlled by the brain – and we don’t really have a clue what may come in ten or twenty years. But, right now, we must focus only on what we can do for him today. Do you have any questions?”

She tried to gather herself, some part of her shocked and annoyed at the want of composure. After what seemed an age, she looked up from her twisted hands, through eyes rimmed red.

“He has no idea?”

“None. He has been unconscious this whole time.”

“When do you think I might be able to take him home?”

“A good question. We’ll need to be sure that he can be somewhere that is kitted out for a paraplegic ...”

“Oh, God!”

“... sorry, an ugly word, but there is an entire new vocabulary you will have to learn and the sooner we start, the quicker you become fluent.

“As I was saying, we have prepared a timetable which has various options at various points. The first thing you have to decide is whether you wish to take the lead on your own, or wait until we wake him up and then discuss it together.”

“The latter.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do you know nothing about him? We’re in this mess not only because he’s so stubborn but because he likes to think everything through, sometimes many times over. No, we do it together.”

“Alright, then, Claudette. But let’s just talk about the treatment plan going forward, just so you can get your head around all that needs to be done.”

“Please.”

“So, you will have to review whether your home can be made suitable. Our physios and rehab people will advise you. And they will liaise with your nearest hospital so there’s continuity of care. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“As far as his injuries are concerned, the neck laceration is healing nicely but will need regular dressing until it is completely resolved. The stitches will be removed in a few days and we will keep a close eye on it, just to ensure there’s no infection. He will wear a collar for a couple of weeks to discourage sudden movement.

“The shoulder is a medium-term problem. It was, to all intents and purposes, shattered. Currently, it’s completely immobilised, and will need a total replacement in due course, but only when he’s strong enough. One of the things you’ll need to decide soon is whether to have it done here or at home. It’s a common enough procedure. The major complication here will be designing a rehabilitation programme post-op given his new physical constraints. Again, we’ll speak with your own

doctors to discuss what’s best. Regrettably, we do have rather more experience in managing the aftermath of shootings.

“I think that’s more than enough for now. There will be plenty of time to discuss all this in greater detail. I do think it would be helpful if you spoke to a counsellor who specialises in supporting people in your – and Édouard’s – situation. You’re in uncharted waters, and those who’ve guided others through them can be immensely valuable. Shall I set something up?”

Silence.

“Claudette?”

“Oh, what? Sorry. I was far away. But I was listening. A counsellor? Yes, that could, I think, be good. Ironic this, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Of course not. Why should you? Sorry. It’s just that my psychiatry practice specialises in trauma recovery. I started it because of what I went through as a girl when my older sister was killed.”

“I had no idea. My condolences. But you do know it makes little or no difference, being a specialist? If anything, it’s worse. You’ve been through it, had therapy, understand the journey. It’s not a benefit.”

She laughed quickly, bitterly.

“Perhaps a counsellor, but not just yet. When will you wake him?”

“Well, it’s a slow process. It can take a while. Let’s start first thing tomorrow. I think he’s ready.”

“May I sit with him a while? I do need to ring his parents and mine and speak to the children.”

“Of course. Oh, one thing more. We would like to put out another holding statement, just saying you are now here and we will soon begin to wake him up. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes. Thank you. For everything.”

“You are most welcome. I am sorry that we meet like this, but may I just say that I do greatly admire your husband. His stand for the freedom to think without fear was really moving.”

“Yes, well, I hope you’ll understand if I say that we are not, how do you put it, on the same page? In time, I’m sure, I will happily welcome back the man I love but, just now, I am having trouble containing my anger.”

“And that, Madame, is completely natural. Perhaps you might find some comfort soon in the words quoted by Abraham Lincoln: ‘And this, too, shall pass.’”

“Hm, well, let us hope so, eh doctor?”

She sat with him for a long time, in the company of Bach playing non-stop on the portable streamer she had placed tenderly on his pillow, hoping that it might penetrate the anaesthetic fog that shrouded him.

A couple of times, she moved to the far corner of the room to make the calls she dreaded. Both sets of parents reacted as you would expect. His, devastated for the blighting of their son’s life. Hers, for the burden that would inevitably fall upon their daughter’s shoulders.

As for the children, the words she chose were careful but required them to read between the lines.

“Dad’s still asleep. We’re all going to be fine, so don’t you worry about that. But things will change. I don’t know when we’ll be home, so you’ll stay with Grandma and Grandpa until we’re back. We’ll speak every day and you can tell me all about school. Make sure you do your homework without being nagged. I hope you can talk to Dad in a few days. Be good.”

The next day, the long trek back begun.

They slowly decreased Édouard’s anaesthesia, all the while monitoring his breathing and other vitals. For a while, little changed, the tube down his throat remained in place as the breathing machine was slowly dialled down.

The coughing started as his eyes flickered. With a smooth and practised choreography, the team surrounded him and extubated with minimal discomfort.

His disorientation was complete and immediate. Stammering hoarsely in broken French, he disjointedly asked the usual questions.

The team stepped away and Claudette moved forward to embrace him, tears rolling uncontrollably. Her French sang liltily as she gently explained everything.

“Cherie, we are in America. Do you remember?”

He shook his head in disbelief, eyes staring, lost.

“You were giving a lecture. At Harvard. No? You were shot. Three times.”

De Rouffignac was utterly adrift, with no recognisable points of reference. His mouth opened but nothing came out.

“You have been asleep for quite a while. But all is now well. We will survive. No, we will live a life far richer than we might ever have imagined. I know this. Now rest.”

She kissed him gently, lingeringly, on the brow.

He nodded, some flicker of awareness visible in his unfocused eyes. Speech would come over the following days as his voice recovered from the proximity of the tube and the dryness that comes with being in an induced coma.

The bulletin merely said that he was now out of danger and that a fuller explanation would be made once Professor and Madame de Rouffignac were ready. Until then, there would be no further announcements.

Over the next few days he slept for long periods while his body sought to repair itself, as least as best it could. And when the medics and Claudette felt the time was right and he was sufficiently alert to comprehend the news, they closed the door to his room and she took his hand, fixing his gaze with hers.

It only took a minute or so for the nurses' station, the police guards and other patients in the neighbouring rooms to be besieged by the howling. From somewhere hitherto untapped, Édouard brought forth a grieving song that he had never heard. It bubbled up from deep within, half-groan, half-scream as the clarity of his new reality assailed him. And the after-shocks rippled for the rest of the day, even as the intervals between them grew.

But even in these early hours of his second life, the former Édouard started to emerge, like some apparition through the mist of his melancholy.

The music helped. She'd chosen Schubert, his own selection from the huge output of hundreds of songs composed over that tragically short life. As he lay there, drifting, de Rouffignac was transported, away, far away, from that antiseptic room to places distant in both place and time. To boats bobbing gently on a lake. To an evening sky, with stars and a moon. To a tower in a convent outside of which a devoted knight looks up at his cloistered love. To a baby being lulled by a gentle song. To different seasons, and to brooks with fish. To the unrequited love for a miller girl and a forlorn journey through snow.

And while vignettes of the songs that he knew so well played in a receding background, his mind began to reorganise itself, to sift in some mystical way the teeming new details of his life, and of what it would be from now on.

After a few days, Claudette arrived one morning. She had felt his return was accelerating daily, and now immediately recognised the signs. His face was animated, the bright blue eyes on fire, the first time she had seen them like that since he first spoke to her of his determination not to step back. She knew what was coming. An avalanche of words tumbled from him, a perfectly constructed argument. And, as she listened, she fell in love all over again.

"So, I've been thinking."

"I would never have guessed!"

"I've organised my thoughts like a decision-tree. And you have to answer to navigate us down the branches. Ok?"

"Yes, Édouard, I do."

"Then we start. Do you want a divorce?"

"What? Are you mad? No, of course not!"

"I would understand completely if you did and you want to protect the kids and yourself from all this."

"Do you want one?"

"Absolutely not. But I would hate that you came to resent me, or the children get embarrassed by me."

"We love you. We all love you."

"But I am diminished. I'm no longer what you signed up for."

"I know already, my love, that in all the ways that are important, you are the man I married."

"Thank the stars for that. I'm not sure I can do all this without you."

"All what?"

"So, no divorce. Let's travel down the other main branch of the tree. Do we want to go silent?"

"Meaning?"

"Essentially, we have this key choice. We can just go quiet, return to France, get used to my new limitations and, in time, perhaps, I go back to teaching."

"Or?"

"We go loud and large."

"Sorry, love, I'm not following."

"My thinking is not exactly developed but it goes something along these lines. This is a unique opportunity for us to do something amazing. Rise above the crime. Rise above the damage. Show that paralysis is no

barrier to great and noble deeds. Above all, prove that violence is feeble when set against dignified ideas and impotent against virtuous ideals.”

“Merde, have you slept at all?”

“Fitfully, but – even then – my brain was at work. The nights are a cycle of doze, wake, jot – then repeat ad nauseam!”

“So, how would this work, precisely?”

“Don’t know exactly. But I want to build on all the stuff that’s happened. It just feels like an enormous opportunity. This could be the making of us. A whole new career that goes in a host of different directions. Books. Speeches. Who knows what else? Am I being insane?”

“Look, I think you’re high. They’ve dosed you up on a cocktail of pain-killers and steroids. I looked them up. They can make you hyper and really screw with your head. That’s not to say you’re wrong, only that it’s running before – sorry, I’ll do that a few times. But you know what I mean. We’ve many obstacles to overcome. And the big decisions must wait for you to come off the meds. When you do, you may well crash mentally, so we’ll only know your real state of mind when you’ve settled down. Remember what you kept saying to me when you were thinking through Aggregation and I was urging you to get it over?”

“Festina lente. You’re right, of course. I know that. But my mind’s on fire.”

“I can see that. How about this? Rest now. The whole world’s waiting to hear from you. Let’s plan a press conference for when all this medication’s left your system. There, you can make some sort of statement and take some questions. But only when the doctors say you’re up to it. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes. But I might need some help getting to sleep.”

“I’ll speak to the medics and see if we can’t start the weaning-off process. It can only be gradual, so patience is the watchword. For now, try and rest. Here, put your headphones on. What do you fancy listening to?”

“Let’s have some Gregorian chant. That normally works.”

Tuesday, July 4th 2028, 15:00h EDT

Harvard University

Sanders Theatre

It was Claudette’s inspired idea for the press conference to return to the hall where he was shot.

The story had captivated the world for a while, but the decision to go quiet until Édouard was ready meant that the news agenda had moved on by the time they announced the plan.

But choosing Independence Day in the States gave the event an added profile, and Harvard – mortified by the reputational stain caused by its failure to protect a distinguished visiting academic – had jumped at the chance for redemption.

Rather than the last time, when the hall was filled with students eager to hear the latest stellar academic, on this occasion the benches were crammed with media from around the world.

On the dot of the appointed hour, a side door to the stage was open and Édouard was wheeled to the table. The clamour of jostling photographers scarcely hid the gasps of shock at his appearance. Gaunt with the loss of weight, the strain of recovery and the anxiety of his first public appearance, his sallow, sunken face was accentuated by the white surgical collar that hid the neck wound. A dark blue sling was clearly visible across his chest.

The clothes were a doleful echo of his academic uniform – check shirt, sports jacket with one empty arm dangling, corduroy trousers – all draped loosely about his shrunken frame. He had retained the scraggy beard that had returned while he slept, rationalised bitterly by ‘The last thing I wish is to look good’.

Claudette took the chair on his left. The woman to his right stood, her medical coat gleaming beneath the chandelier with its pin-pint LEDs.

“Good afternoon everyone. My name is Renata Wilson. I am the CEO of Massachusetts General Physicians Organization, and I will chair this meeting.”

She fixed the assembled media pack with a steely gaze, addressing them with an authority that brooked no contravention.

“You will remember that Professor de Rouffignac has been through a great trauma from which he is yet to fully emerge. So, I ask you to wait to be called for your question and do not shout out. He is benefitting from vital-sign telemetry. If there is any indication of stress, I will have no hesitation to call a halt. His welfare is our only concern, our only concern. The professor would like to make a statement before questions. Professor.”

He started hoarsely, hesitatingly.

“Thank you, Doctor Wilson. And thank you all for coming. I apologise in advance if I am less than fluent – an attribute my students will probably recognise.”

The nervous laughter helped dispel the worst of his nerves.

“There are many people I need to thank and I hope it will not prove too monotonous. The fact is that I would not be here were it not for the prompt professionalism of many people.”

The first of frequent pauses gave him the opportunity to sip some water and lubricate his vocal cords.

“The two med students who rushed on to this very stage to tend to me displayed the healing instinct so central to being a great doctor.

“The official first responders and paramedics got my heart started and gave me a fighting chance.

“The medics in the ER and the surgery teams worked their magic and the staff in the ICU, whether consultant, resident, nurse or orderly – well, they all did the heavy-lifting – some of them quite literally – needed to get me through.

“I would, in particular, like to mention Maria and Rosita. They brought my food and cleaned my room. More importantly, their sunny disposition and willingness to chat helped me return to the real world. They even taught a smattering of Spanish! Gracias. Muchos gracias.

“Lastly – but most importantly – my beloved wife Claudette. She ... she has been a tower of strength and I love her more deeply than ever. She is my reason for living.

Another pause, another sip, this time to control his emotions and prepare himself for the next obstacle.

“Now I know there has been much speculation about my injuries. I’m grateful to Mass Gen for keeping this confidential until I was ready to share it. I have been advised to warn you that I will be graphic. So, here goes.”

The temperature palpably rose in the theatre as the journalists readied themselves.

“I was shot three times.

“One hit me here, as you can see. It sliced through the outer surface of my neck. This caused a lot of vascular damage and I lost a great deal of blood. Thanks to rapid intervention I didn’t bleed out. Obviously.”

Gentle snorts of appreciation rippled across the auditorium.

“The next bullet hit me here. It shattered my shoulder and I haven’t used the arm since. The entire joint will need to be replaced when I return to France. The prognosis is a complete recovery after surgery and physiotherapy.

“The last injury is the most serious. By far. As I was spun round by the force of the first two hits, a third penetrated my back and shattered my spine above the tailbone.”

He paused and took a breath. Any hesitancy was now controlled by short, sharp sentences, delivered with a rhythmic clarity and force.

“This damage is irreparable.

“I am now a paraplegic.

“I want you to understand precisely what that means.

“I am paralysed from the waist down.

“I will never walk again.

“I am doubly incontinent.

“And I am impotent.

“Thank you.”

The brutality of his honesty was greeted by a stunned silence. No-one expects this of patients. The careful orchestration amplified the power of the decision to be stark and unambiguous.

He wouldn't realise till much later the beneficial impact on the global community of the paralysed. Setting out so frankly the invisible, internal repercussions of spinal cord damage sparked greater sympathy and understanding towards survivors, while helping recovering patients realise they were not alone.

The sudden conclusion caught them all unawares. But he'd planned this carefully, confident that the real punch would come from the questions.

He signified his readiness for questions and Wilson called the first.

“United Boston Media, please.”

“Thank you. First, Doctor, is he completely out of the woods? And, second, Professor, do you envisage returning to academia?”

“So, before Édouard answers, I can say that, yes, we're confident that, from a medical perspective, there are no dangers ahead. All the bullet damage has been repaired, apart from the shoulder, which is pretty routine. There's a lot of rehabilitation and adjustments required to live the kind of life he now faces. I won't minimise that but, to be blunt, it is up to him and his family how effective that is.”

“Thanks. I can't wait to get back to the university. I love teaching, and hope I will be able to pick up where I left off before my lecture tour. But there are still many imponderables, so we shall have to wait and see.”

Doctor Wilson checked her list. “Can we take the question from CNN-ABC, please?”

“Thanks for choosing us. Professor, has what's happened to you made you rethink your stance on Constitutional Aggregation?”

De Rouffignac sipped some more water as he gathered his thoughts.

“Ok, so, I think what you mean, if I may, is ‘Has what's happened made me rethink my stance on academic freedom?’ No, it hasn't. I'm glad I was on my own so my wife was never in danger. And I will clearly have to recalibrate my attitude towards personal security. But, paradoxically, my confidence in the importance of not hiding away and standing up for the right to express ideas has actually been strengthened.

“Despite the loss of so much, in every important respect, I am not at all diminished. My brain is working fine and my conscience, if anything, has been strengthened by adversity.

“Ideas can't be killed by anything other than better ideas. They must be confronted head-on by intellectual engagement and tested in the crucible of objective analysis. Visions and words are stronger than bullets and bombs. I remember some powerful words by Zamyatin who compared books to dynamite. The only difference, he wrote, is that a piece of dynamite explodes once, whereas a book explodes a thousand times. Well, for books read ideas, read hopes, read dreams.

“I hope that, in a total rejection of my attacker's ambitions, there will be an increasing demand to hear, not just about Aggregation, but more about the indispensability of intellectual engagement.”

“Next, Freedom and Rights News.”

“Where do you stand on the Second Amendment and the inalienable right of Americans to bear arms?”

“Where do I stand? Where do I *stand*?’ What's the matter with you? Weren't you listening? No, don't mouth an apology, please. It would just reek of insincerity. The right to bear arms. What's my position?”

“Well, in common with, I think, the overwhelming majority of Europeans, your obsession with guns and the accompanying theologisation of the Constitution is utterly incomprehensible.

“My position doesn’t change just because I am now a victim. This might just give more moral force to my pre-existing antipathy – but that is only in the eyes of others.

“Fortunately, I was in a coma when the inevitable breast-beating and crocodile tears followed my shooting. At least I was spared that sickening spectacle. We all know, do we not, that the pro-gun lobby is never moved by dead schoolchildren, so it's hardly going to change because of one crippled French professor.

“Look, my views are irrelevant. It reminds me of that old joke about how many psychoanalysts does it take to change a lightbulb? One, but it has to want to change. Why do you care what I think? Until America wants to re-engineer its relationship with weapons, the heap of corpses and the number of broken bodies and minds will continue to grow. You couch that in terms of rights and freedoms. I regard the right of victims to freedom from death or damage to be, at the very least, of equivalent weight.”

A little more water.

“One more point, if I may, sir. The founding fathers were very wise. The Bill of Rights established the vital precedent that the Constitution is not sacrosanct and fixed in the moment. They realised it had to travel through time and reflect the shifting attitudes of society. To pretend somehow that the Constitution is amendable but its amendments are not is illogical. And, of course, not true. The prohibition amendment was, itself, abolished.

“You know, I am often asked, as an historian, if I had a time machine, what era would I go back to? Well, there used to be just one. Vienna 1818 to 1827, just to be around when Beethoven was composing his late works and when he died and the city stopped for his funeral.

“But now, I think I’d also like to go back to the framing of the Bill of Rights. I’d show them how publishing media and weapons technology

have evolved. And then I’d ask them how they’d draft the First and Second Amendments. That, I think, would be rather interesting, don’t you think?”

“And now, Washington Post and Partners?”

“Thank you, ma’am. Professor, it would be perfectly understandable if you vowed never to return to our shores. Your views on us Americans would be of great interest to our readers.”

“Thanks for your question.”

He gathered his thoughts, quickly, silently, confident in keeping them waiting.

“Well, one particular American has been in my thoughts. I have no idea what demons brought him to this place, fuelled by hate for someone he didn’t know. I cannot put myself in his shoes as he contemplated his intentions. Nor am I able to imagine the absence of doubt that enabled him to carry out his plan. I presume that there are those on both prosecution and defence sides of the forthcoming trial who will have psychiatrists poring over the complex workings of his mind. That is outside my sphere. I believe that only a very few shards of humanity are beyond redemption. So I say now, as I will say in any courtroom, that I hope this tortured person receives all the help he needs, and that the justice system is able to set before him a path from darkness into light.

“Whenever I think about all this, I keep returning to that extraordinary moment in Beethoven’s only opera when the prisoners are let out of their cells into the garden and sing rapturously of their joy. The voice of one of their number emerges from the chorus, with these beautiful words: ‘Die Hoffnung flüstert sanft mir zu:/Wir werden frei, wir finden Ruh’.’ Hope whispers gently to me: ‘We will be free, we will find rest’. That is my only ambition for my would-be assassin. That he will be free, that he will find rest.”

Another sip.

“Look, it would be so easy to disparage the American people on the basis of my, how shall I put it?, interaction with this single citizen. But

I'm not interested in one broken man with a grudge. I'm not thinking of him right now. Because my mind is on great Americans.

“The great Americans who leapt to my aid, right there, where I fell.

“The great Americans who dashed in their ambulance to get to me in time and brought me back from the very brink. Twice.

“The great Americans who moved their cars, their trucks, their taxis, their bikes out of the way as we sped to the ER.

“The great Americans who stabilised me there and gave me the chance for life-saving surgery.

“The great Americans who operated on me so wonderfully.

“The great Americans who watched over me in the ICU and brought me back.

“The great Americans who are working so hard to prepare me for my new life.

“So, that's where I am.

“I am thinking only of great Americans. And nothing will change that. Nor will it prevent my returning here, if that opportunity arises.”

The applause was instant, booming off the wood panels and resonating right around the theatre.

Édouard nodded at Dr Wilson. She held up her hands to still the audience.

“That is enough. Professor de Rouffignac is tired. We will issue a statement about the next steps in his recovery in due course. Thank you all for coming.”

The immediate response to the press conference was international in its acclaim, wide-ranging in its breadth. And, as it would turn out, of pivotal importance to the development of the UNE.

Some focused on his candid exposé of paraplegia's impacts.

Others were taken by his thinking about gun control.

Still more had been moved by his compassion towards the shooter.

But most eulogised his ‘Great Americans’ answer. Headlines in newspapers and across screen tickers shouted their thoughts.

A ‘Gettysburg’ for our times.

Frenchman captures the essence of Americanism.

Gallic Prof waves Old Glory – nation weeps in gratitude.

‘Great Americans’ – de Rouffignac's ode shames US politicians.

One of our own becomes American hero - sings hymn of praise to USA.

Then it began to rain plaudits.

Honorary doctorates from the world's great universities followed rapidly on the heels of Harvard, the first off the mark in order to hold a special commencement ceremony before he left for France.

His admission to the Académie Française was almost a formality, as was the awarding of the Legion d'honneur.

But, in the light of what his future held, two awards were of particular significance.

The European Union had inaugurated a new honour to celebrate great Europeans. Édouard became the first recipient of The Beethoven Medal. The burnished bronze accolade depicted the great composer encircled by the words ‘Alle Menschen werden Brüder’ – ‘All men become brothers’ – on the obverse, with the EU flag and date on the reverse.

And the Nobel Peace Prize of 2030 would say in its citation:

Édouard de Rouffignac's response to his injuries and the crimes perpetrated against him demonstrated the highest ideals of humanity, mercy and honesty.

In his exemplary conduct, he held out hope to his attacker of a life beyond prison. He became a model for other paraplegics that they need be neither ashamed nor defined by their limitations. And he inspired Americans to mine deep wells of national pride (even as he challenged embedded views on gun control).

His widely-accepted concept of Constitutional Aggregation is fundamentally changing the way in which nations think about – and interact – with their neighbours, bringing about radical new ideas around identity, frontiers and defence.

In his work since then he has helped cement the foundations of a new settlement in Europe that will assure peace in perpetuity.

Monday, May 8th 2045, 11:25 CET

Inauguration

The Ballroom, Palais Monnet, Brussels, Belgium

“I have come to that part of the speech where the contribution of all those who have made this day possible must be recognised. I will, at the outset, apologise to those who I accidentally omit. The list of individuals would be as exhaustive as it would exhausting, so I will talk instead about classes of people.

“Not long after I had returned to France in 2028 and begun to adjust to my new life, I was asked by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to meet with her and some colleagues.

“I must admit to you that I was at first reluctant to do even that. I have never shirked from speaking about my convalescence and the toll it took on my family and me. Mastering a life without walking and with all the attendant new disciplines I needed to learn, well, I just couldn’t see how it was possible to do what I suspected they might want.

“But my wonderful wife and children realised what I had not – that I needed a project, an intellectual mountain to scale, to complement the physical and emotional peaks I was confronting.

“It was the vision of Ursula and her team to model the incorporation of the core elements of Constitutional Aggregation into EU policy. And it was that foresight which laid the foundations for today’s culmination of something like fifteen years work.

“I think that, when they made that initial invitation, they saw me as some kind of figurehead for the process and its underlying rationale. They reckoned without my tenacious, not to say bloody-minded, exercise of executive parental rights!

“As is now well-known, this moved quite quickly to the 360-degree scoping exercise that asked, first of all: ‘Can there be a partial aggregation or is it always going to be a phased process that only

concludes with full-blown unionisation’ And, if so: ‘What would a united Europe look like?’

“Part of the narrative that has grown up around the long process to bring us to this point was The Unification Group. This ensemble of experts came together from all parts of the EU. A central core, specialised in economics, defence, law and governance, worked in groups, first to identify the indispensable elements of a pan-Europe federation – the functions that must be present for the union to be viable – and then to devise the necessary structures and processes. Hunting in twos and threes, we produced a series of white papers setting out options and ideas, and a wider group with similar expertise but not immersed in this imaginative process challenged the thinking and suggested resolutions. From time to time, issue to issue, we’d swap roles or mix and match.

“We – only half-jokingly – reduced our unit’s name and called ourselves ‘Thugs’. In some ways, that was exactly how we saw ourselves – as destroyers who were demolishing time-honoured assumptions and traditions as the only means of building something that could deliver what people needed and wanted.

“Although we came from different countries and backgrounds, had different specialities and creeds, were of different genders and races, nonetheless, we knew that the work we were doing was noble and important. And we were certain that it would define not just our careers, but our entire lives. We understood that, when our last breath has passed, what people remember of us would be just this: when the summons came to set aside our usual labours and strive to build that which had never been built before, we – each of us – heeded that call and bent our minds and spirits to create the best of places in which future generations could prosper in peace and security.

“And I must tell you, my friends, we had some blistering rows. Those who were taking the lead on one aspect of the new Europe occasionally became unnecessarily defensive, proprietorial even, when they tabled a proposal. I was as guilty as anyone of this.

“Indeed, there were many times when I thought that, just perhaps, the group might not come back together. But no, the importance of our

mission was the safety-net and, even when we fell, we bounced and often ended up in each other’s arms.

“I have now come to realise this was unbelievably rare. In most areas of life – business, politics, shared interest groups – there is a reluctance to jeopardise careers or positions, or to cause offence, especially within hierarchies. It’s how alpha bullies thrive – people just don’t want to confront them. But we were, to invert Jonathan Swift, a confederacy of intellectuals. When we entered our studies and meeting forums, occasionally face-to-face, frequently virtual, we left our egos at the door. This pooling of our very selves created a bond between us, forged by what we saw as the most virtuous of odysseys.

“Europe owes them an enormous debt, one that we are still to honour so that all our citizens – now and, more importantly, in the future – can pay due respect to their service and their memory.”

“Let me turn to the support we received from the European Commission and the institutions of the European Union. Whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted it, they delivered. Everyone, from the President down and out through its many branches, knew the importance of our work. All the necessary budget, provisions and support infrastructure were available, as needed.

“Let those who have criticised the sometime-glacial performance of the EU engrave this on their heart. ‘Our work was done in under three years.’”

More applause filled the hall as the audience recognised the multiple actors who, hitherto invisible, were now brought out from behind the curtain to stand centre-stage.

“But there is one category of people that we must all acknowledge were the critical agents of this great journey. The political leaders of the thirty.

“I won’t pretend that they all travelled the same path at the same speed – but just pause for a moment and think of what they did. Elected leaders and those who wish to replace them all decided that the future prosperity and security of their people would be more certain and

sustainable if they ceded a significant amount of power and responsibility to a higher authority.

“These leaders – so often maligned and denigrated by the own electorates and media as shallow and cynical careerists – willingly sacrificed, *willingly sacrificed*, huge tranches of the influence they held or aspired to hold because they were convinced it was for the greater good.

“I can stand here before you and say – with absolute confidence – that never before in human history have a group of leaders done this. Far more usual is the opposite: that they cling tenaciously to power, often at the expense of the well-being of the population.

“What they have done is nothing less than this. Our leaders have looked deep into themselves and asked: ‘What is the purpose of government?’ In answering this, they met the call to greatness.

“Each of them may express it differently, but I would distil their thinking into a single broad moral precept. Government and the societies they govern must deliver generational betterment.

“Throughout history that goal has often demanded sacrifices, invariably on the battlefield. Now, it demands we prepare for the slaughter of ideas we once cherished; that we willingly destroy notions of national exceptionalism and individual advance in order to create the space for something shared and greater than ourselves.

“In saying this, I am not suggesting you should put away the healthy scepticism that informs an electorate’s engagement with its political representatives. Far from it.

“But I do ask you to recognise without malice or partisanship the profound moral, intellectual, psychological and emotional leap that these leaders have made.”

2030-2032

Thugs at work

Centred on European Commission headquarters, Brussels,
and numerous satellite sites around Europe

“You are a moron!”

“And you, you’re an arrogant poseur. You can’t even admit the notion that you could be wrong.”

“Rubbish! I’ve tested this till I’m blue in the face. There is no other way.”

“But why can’t there be a second option?”

“Because nothing else makes sense, that’s why. It’s no good just gain-saying what’s proposed. Playing devil’s advocate is pure self-gratification. If you can’t come up with a direction we haven’t already considered and rejected, then you’re just a waste of space. And I just can’t be bothered to justify myself any longer. I’m off!”

De Rouffignac quickly mediated.

“Wait! Please, this is not how we do business. We agreed a code of mutual respect and reflection, so let’s take a breath and a break before we restart.”

It was just one of the many eruptions, but this one stood out because the subject was more symbolic than strategic.

A few minutes later, they reconvened, and he restarted the meeting.

“Ok, everyone calmer? Good. Now then, let’s go back to the beginning. Miklós?”

Still flushed from the row, Professor Miklós Talich stood to confront the group. He faced the state-of-the-art screen that dominated one wall of the war room they’d created in the library of an abandoned mansion within Brussels’ European Quarter. Those in the group that weren’t in

the Belgian capital rematerialised in a sequence of boxes that filled the huge display. The rest settled down around the large conference table.

“So, once again, I took away the task to model the constitutional framework. My post-grads and I felt that, from the granular perspective, the institutions closest to the citizenry were self-recommending. Of course, the nations of Europe organise governance differently. But we could see no compelling reasons to disrupt their domestic functioning and, in fact, formed the view that continuity at the democratic interface most closely located to voters was a desirable stabilising factor. Do any of you disagree with *that* determination?”

“Right. So, we move up the chain to national assemblies. Again, for phase one of the UNE, we preferred to assume that current settlements maintain, with the fundamental caveat that some decisions would inevitably transpose up to the European level. This prompted us to develop the skeleton of a theoretical scheme of delegation. The idea behind this was that everyone would know at which of the broad tri-level executive and legislative hierarchies particular responsibilities reside. To illustrate. Declarations of war and trade deals – the UNE. Education and health policies – national assemblies. Social care and road maintenance delivery – local authorities. Does anyone have any issues with this part of our submission?”

It was the custom of the Thugs to build in to presentations some reflection pauses. Talich brewed his tenth Turek of the day, its strength and name betraying its Turkish origins.

When his colleagues had settled, he continued.

“Ok. Now to the vexatious question of the Head of State. Our thinking went like this. There is, essentially, a single model right across Europe, with the exception of France. All heads of state are broadly non-executive, ceremonial and ambassadorial. They wield no meaningful power, except when governments collapse and they have a facilitating role to bring about continuity of governance.

“Within this model, there are two broad strands: presidential, and hereditary. As only six of the thirty followed the monarchical route, we quickly dismissed that. This left a republican model. The only

remaining issue was the methodology of presidential selection. Do you want me to go over that, too, Édouard?”

“For completeness, yes, please.”

“Fine, then. We rejected the route preferred, say, by Ireland, as a popular vote across half-a-billion people seemed very unwieldy. In addition, it would be reasonable to assume that not every candidate to be the UNE President would be widely known by voters. We wanted a transparent and democratic process that would withstand scrutiny. The appointment must never be seen to be a stitch-up by just a few powerful nations. Which is why we came up with the 75:75 formula. The recommendation to emerge from the European Council of Ministers and be ratified by a simple majority of the European Parliament must come from seventy-five percent of the nations of the UNE and also represent the same proportion of its population.

“We even hoped that 75:75 would become the default position for the most impactful of decisions, such as declaring war or admitting new members. That’s it. I’m done.”

The grumbling started immediately.

“We got all that already! This is *not* what we’re complaining about.”

The irate political scientist from Vienna’s Academy of Government was gesticulating wildly at his digi-cam.

De Rouffignac again intervened.

“Klaus, please, moderate your tone. And let’s all abide by the decorum for these sessions we agreed at the outset. Hands raised, and let the leader bring in questions and comments.”

“Alright, but it really is so frustrating. Miklós, it is not your choice to exclude the monarchy option. That is a political decision. Our role is to identify all the available choices with the pros and cons of each, and then feed those into the political machinery. All our recommendations will be compromised if we appear parochial or partisan. You must see this.

“We should outline how a hereditary Head of State could work and then the Commission, Council and Parliament can come to a decision for onward approval in the referendum. And, as a group, we can even state our collective preference, if you wish.

“But to go down this exclusive route is a bad strategy that jeopardises our work. We already have enough enemies rallying against this whole enterprise. Why give them ammunition? It makes no sense.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“Well, Miklós, Édouard, colleagues. I propose we include the monarchy option with the role of Head of State rotating around the crown heads of those members who have retained the model. I suggest it would make sense to start with Belgium for geographical proximity and then rotate periodically, the term to be agreed between the EU’s leadership groups and the various royal families. What do you think?”

The group was silent, awaiting Talich’s reaction. Even on screen, they could see his eyeballs moving beneath closed lids as he processed the argument.

Imperceptibly at first, his shoulders hunched in surrender. “Dammit, you’re right. Sorry. Yes, I see the force of this. I reckon I got a bit too heavily invested. I’d support that improvement. Lost sight of the big picture for a while there, friends. A thousand apologies.”

“And that” exclaimed de Rouffignac, triumphantly “is what the Thugs are all about! Thanks, Klaus, Miklós, an excellent result. Do we all agree?”

The smiles and murmurs were eloquent assent.

“Er, excuse me, Édouard, may I add one more thing, please?”

“We really must move on, Miklós, but, if that’s ok with colleagues, please, be brief.”

“I will. I just wanted to add, for me, the single most compelling reason to be a republic.

“Everyone will compare us to America. Their Head of State is abbreviated to POTUS. We, however, can pay homage to our fresh produce, great cuisine and – above all – total commitment to freedom of movement by being led by a PrUNE.”

Complete silence. Bemused faces. Then, from the Scottish judge based in Edinburgh, the first burst of laughter. From there, the virus spread with wild contagion as comprehension hit.

The sight of a dozen or so muted people rocking silently with unconstrained mirth, while those in the room laughed audibly, added to the surreal vista and compounded the kind of hysteria that builds upon itself long after the trigger has passed. The idea that Talich had made a joke was enough. But the image of his adamantine features slowly cracking with unalloyed joy as his long-practised shock hit home only added fuel to the fire.

Eventually, and not without difficulty as he, too, kept succumbing, de Rouffignac calmed them.

“Thank you, Miklós. I think I can say with confidence that you’ve given us the highlight of our adventure so far.

“Now, we really must move on. We’ll break for lunch and then turn to what I expect will be another smörgåsbord of opinion.”

That day would prove to be one of the most exhausting of the entire process. The project plan brought together Talich leading on the constitutional framework, followed by Nobel economics laureate, Isabella Sosa, who held the Chair in Economic Sovereignty at the Sorbonne.

The core premise of her subject was a direct response to globalisation. The UK had left the European Union on the basis of sovereignty, a concept suggesting twin attributes: mastery of the influences that impact a nation, and freedom of action.

Neither was achievable. The complexity of an interconnected, global economy, where, for example, state-owned wealth funds owned huge tranches of foreign economic infrastructure, rendered the idea infantile.

To understand the organic nature of the globalised economy, the French government endowed the Chair. And when she joined the Thugs, it was clear that Sosa's remit would be pivotal.

She started her update with a philosophical positioning of her work, speaking in clipped sentences that brooked little argument.

“Good afternoon everyone. I undertook to produce a foundation paper on the economic integrity of the UNE post political and fiscal union.

“I am assuming that the work on financial institutions and democratic accountability will produce effective economic governance. My role is to provide some principles and precepts by which to test the moral operability of the resulting systems.

“‘Moral operability’, this is a new term I have coined for our purposes. It is shorthand for the restraints on political and economic behaviour. If you like, the minimum standards against which leaders should evaluate actions and proposals. Is that ok?”

Silent nods from the gallery on the screen, quiet murmurs of assent from the room.

“Good. Now this may be optimistic. But we must aim for the stars, as the risks of being cut down are severe. I have measured my work against Michelangelo's ambition: it is more dangerous to set low targets and achieve them than to aim for the highest and fall short.

“So I am tabling what I see as the optimum position. It flows from economic sovereignty into constitutional and political sovereignty. It proved impossible to define any meaningful barrier between them.

“The first thing to note is that true mastery over economic affairs comes only with mass. No small nation – or even a reasonably large one – can sincerely say they control the value of their currency or possess the ultimate weapon in economic warfare: the closed border. I'll pause to let that sink in.”

The seconds ticked by. Rosa could see them computing whether that was correct.

The screen jumped to ‘speaker mode’ as the military expert, Marshall Magdalena Szymbańska, was the first to speak.

“Please, let me understand this. Are you envisaging a physical closure of borders? If so, this has big implications for the distribution and logistics of defence force locations.”

“I don't rule it out. But I am actually proposing a test of whether we can do it, if it's possible to seal us off, so to speak. If we can't, then I think I must argue we are not sovereign. This may not be a bad thing, you understand.”

“May I push back, Édouard?”

“Please do, Marshall.”

“Thank you. Isabella, I am uncomfortable with this. It seems to open up lines of strategic thinking on all aspects of physical security that haven't yet been broached. I'd prefer it if my group could give it more thought.”

Sosa bristled.

“Not necessary. This is notional, more in the nature of a thought experiment than a policy platform. In a global economy, it's more about virtual frontiers as it is physical. Can we please on? Does everyone accept the premise?”

She only paused for a moment.

“Good. The UNE will be a large economy. This means our borders must possess the ability to be closed. That demands, at the very least, a notional boundary that encompasses the whole land mass covered by the Union, even if complicated by the anomalous geographical position of the United Kingdom.

“The first moral operable of economic sovereignty therefore is territorial integrity. Maintaining outposts of our collective imperial past makes no sense for an emergent UNE. The obligation to defend them or even just sustain them represents an unacceptable open-ended commitment.

“In addition, their continued ownership by Europe creates an intolerable dilemma. The Union must be raised up on a foundation of fiscal integrity. It cannot therefore be responsible for offshore tax havens. And it must prepare for a future where the UK joins and seeks to import its own tax haven overseas protectorates. We must avoid this from the outset, so this flows straight into another operable ...

“... the tax regime. There is a clear need to balance the federal duty to lay down the ethical boundaries of the fiscal regime with the benefits of flexibility on the ground. But it would be morally wrong to create a climate where different parts of the Union compete for corporate and individual residency on the basis of preferential tax rates. I remember the unedifying sight of companies moving their registered office just to shave a few points off their tax burden.

“Let’s be clear here. This will involve considerable discomfort. The fate, in particular, of the Principality of Monaco will require some deep consideration if this operable were applied. If the Union is to subscribe to the underlying thinking of this, then we would be looking at a significant transformation of its economic model away from low taxes. The alternative would be hard borders to cut it off from the UNE.

“I realise these are difficult issues. But they must be faced now. If the political will is against grappling with the unpleasant, then I think we all know the implications for our project. It will be stillborn.

“It follows from such issues that we will need to devise transitional plans early on and accept they might take a while to fade away into the new substantive Union. So, in addition to what historians may well come to call the Monégasque Question, we will need to make proposals for all overseas dependencies. My thinking is that, at the moment of unionisation, these territories transfer to the UNE within a plan for them to become independent nations, protected by expansive economic and administrative, albeit time-limited, safety-nets.

“As with all these issues, we must focus on the ultimate objective – a super-nation with a clear and unambiguous moral foundation that, at once, both defines it and provides a baseline for policy-making.

“When pondering the idea of ‘economic sovereignty’, what else did we have to consider? Although not strictly within the purview of our brief, the team put in a lot of time considering what would need to be in place to achieve genuine freedom of action.

“Economic sovereignty demands, *demands*, that we consider every question of external dependency.

“We need to focus on energy, aiming to become totally independent of imports as soon as possible.

“Can we feed our people without recourse to imported staples?”

“Can we ever be truly secure if our defence relies on non-UNE suppliers?”

“I am sure you will yourselves already be thinking of other mission-critical strands that come within this broad approach.

“As you can see, contemplating economic sovereignty leads us down paths that others should probably be treading. But we will not shirk our responsibility merely to prevent the toes of others being squashed.

“I’m happy to take any questions.”

In common with all the submissions, the presentation mainly focused on the headline principles and risks. Beneath them lay the copious detail, all referenced and sourced as appropriate, that allowed meaningful critique. Nothing was ever hidden. It had been a commitment from the very beginning that they would be creating an accessible archive which would be available for all time and to everyone. Meetings were minuted, recorded and transcribed, and uploaded to a cloud, along with papers and their foundation sources.

The response to Sosa was mixed, to say the least.

Some accused her of grandstanding, others of a land-grab of monumental proportions, But she stood her ground.

“I’m sorry. But what would you have me do? Put to one side the strands we have identified within our broad remit? Remember James Baldwin:

‘Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.’

“My team and I will not stand accused of failing to face what we’ve identified. And I’m not proprietorial here at all. If the Thug family wants to deconstruct our paper and redistribute it, then go ahead. We will be happy that we’ve helped progress this great endeavour.”

This was the way the project evolved. Robust intellects marrying knowledge and creative thinking to build propositions that were then tested in the crucible of inquisition. From it emerged the complete model, delivered to the leaders of the European Union in the autumn of 2033 to be tested on the rack of political interrogation.

It would strain alliances, psyches and malleability almost to breaking point. And yet, in 2038, a mere five years later, the full treaty, agreed by every one of the thirty, emerged.

September 1st 2039

Treaty of Versailles

Palace of Versailles, Hall of Mirrors

Strangely, if perhaps not unduly surprisingly, there was as much argument over the venue for the treaty signing as around many of its more challenging provisions.

The five years it took to agree the detailed plans for the construction of the Union was regarded by seasoned observers as an astonishing speed.

But the location of the historic and symbolic signing was as mired in controversy as it was dripping in symbolism.

At one time, indeed, it seemed as if each and every one of the thirty EU members was making the case for their own historic venue. All of them argued, some more tenuously than others, that their particular castle, palazzo, chateau, schloss, estate or whatever, held so rich a place in European history that its claim was irresistible.

But the usual suspects are usual for a reason. And the Palace of Versailles that had seen the signing of treaties ending the Franco-Prussian and First World Wars won out. As the citation awarding the conference declaimed

To the Mayor of Versailles, Greetings!

We, the European Commission, together with the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, are honoured to award to the town of Versailles the hosting of the Conference and Ceremony of the Signature of the Treaty inaugurating the Union of the Nations of Europe.

In recognition of the unique place held in European history by the Palace of Versailles as a location for the making of peace, we invite its detailed submission for this singular moment in the

millennia of continuous human occupation of the European landmass.

The Commission has delegated authority to the Official Organising Committee to make all the necessary arrangements and urges Your Excellency to establish at your earliest convenience a similar forum.

Our only pre-condition is that a round table with thirty seats be located in the Hall of Mirrors, equidistant between the Salle de la Guerre and the Salle de la Paix.

We look forward to the time when the history of this age is written and the ceremony signifies the embarkation of a venture never before seen in the history of our species.

The treaty was the result of incalculable negotiating hours. In fact, on the founding principles as enshrined in the treaty, there wasn't fundamental disagreement. A small proportion of the thirty had sought to use the leverage they believed the desire for unanimity conferred to secure significant advantage. But the Concorde of Stockholm in 2035 cut the ground from under them.

In it, nations with the greatest confluence of economic interest, political symmetry and cultural affinity, from Scandinavia right through Western Europe to the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Aegean, agreed the moral foundations of the UNE.

Maverick outliers, mainly from the East, overplayed their hand. Poland had refusal to negotiate if the rights of those with what they stated were 'non-normal sexual preferences' and 'identity deviations' were acknowledged.

And Hungary's de facto, if geriatric, dictatorship rejected out of hand any notion of democracy, freedom of expression, or outside interference.

These two of several examples underlined the importance of the Moral Declaration which the Thugs had commissioned as a pre-emptive strike against fundamental dissent.

Realising that the project may well fail unless the UNE was built on universally accepted foundations of justice, freedom and equality, they had gazed enviously towards America. Its Declaration of Independence and Constitution served as enduring models of aspirational and elegant codification.



They vowed to lay down Europe's equivalent, and enlisted the services of the 2032 Nobel Literature laureate, the Irish poet Ciarán Mac an Bhreithiún. He called his rhapsodic prose-poem "Paradisus Restitutam - A New Decalogue for a New Age".

Now, let the whole world bend its ear to hear.

We are Europe, and we call upon all nations and citizens of the earth to witness:

That we, staring, liked not what we saw through future's lens, and dared to dream a different way



That we have called upon the Gods of Learning and Wisdom to light our flaming torch



That we have gazed down history's long and liquid path to fathom our wandering from roaming, rootless packs to teeming, towering babel cities



That we then have loosed our imagination to draw a line from where our journey started through where it thus far brought us, and on to where our destiny demands we voyage



That we are pledged to join our countries together while honouring the tongues and culture and customs of each



That we build our Union as a new City of Peace and Serenity, raised up on the principles of justice, community and respect



That no citizen be greater or lesser than any other, nor shall any member treat a denizen as underserving of the privilege of being called 'European'



That all the people of Europe lie beneficiary of the rich pageant of its history



That our Union is woven from the diamond silk of peace and harmony, and neighbours need hold no fear of aggression



And that the Union of the Nations of Europe shall stand as beacon to the world of what may be wrought when we make common cause and grow together.⁵

In Stockholm, the cohesive bloc who had convened the meeting deployed their most potent arsenal; the German Chancellor stated their position with irresistible clarity.

“If any nation cannot sign up to the proposed Concorde then, quite simply, unification will proceed without them.

“There will be no two-tier UNE. Those not able to embrace the spirit and letter of “Paradisus Restitutam” with all its diverse ramifications will be left adrift once the majority of the thirty member states of the European Union merge to form the new Union.

“This will mean hard borders and a host of obligations not exercised at the local, national level for many years. Look no further than the fate of England should there be any doubt of what this means.

“All the leaders agreed on this one point at the outset of negotiations: for the years leading up to unification and for a minimum of five years thereafter no members would be admitted. So those who now aim to refute the core principles of our new constitution having failed to convince us of the merits of their position have a clear choice.

“Join now, or leave now.

“But, if you join, do so in good faith according to the articles we have set down. Or risk ejection and ostracisation.

“There is no middle way.”

The outliers buckled. Despite some deep-seated instincts tending towards autocracy and stone-faced social conservatism, there was no negating the overwhelming arguments in favour of joining the union.

⁵ For anyone interested, the original handwritten version, with all its many workings, can be viewed in the foyer of the parliament building in Strasbourg

One of the ironies behind what tipped them over was the role of the Vatican. The decision to throw its weight behind the Concorde of Stockholm wasn't hindered by the fact that Mac an Bhreithiún was a staunch Catholic whose love of the liturgy permeated so much of his work.

But what allowed them to rationalise their most restrictive reflexes with the liberalism of Europe's secular charter was the unstated recognition that church attendance had been in decline over many years. The need to reflect the palpable and irreversible shift in attitudes of younger Catholics towards issues like sexual orientation, gender identification and same-sex marriage was seen, even in the Curia, as of existential importance to the Church.

This practical demonstration of realpolitik surprised some. But not those who had been involved in prayerful conclaves of cardinals and senior Vatican officials. All the numbers were bleak. Falling congregations. Lower income. Reduced influence. In some countries, attendance had not merely dropped but plummeted, often as a result of the crushing legacy of child abuse that successive popes had failed to expiate.

So the encyclical "Pax Europae" published by Pope John Paul III on the eve of Stockholm made it clear that – while some of the implications of the Concorde ran counter to current teachings – the promise of peace in Europe overrode everything. The idea that, with the creation of UneVerteidigung, the unified defence command, there could never be war between the thirty nations, proved impossible to circumvent, despite byzantine intellectual gymnastics from the most deeply traditionalist elements within the Church.

Indeed, the very term 'UneVerteidigung' epitomised the new world ushered in by the Treaty of Versailles.

True to the fifth ethic of the Concorde of Stockholm, the treaty confronted the knotty issue of linguistics. Proceedings would – as always – be available in every official language of the thirty members.

Behind closed doors, officials privately acknowledged that it would have been easier if the UK was an EU member as there was general acceptance that English would have worked well as the language of the

UNE's institutions. But once it had declined all overtures to reconsider membership, attitudes hardened considerably and it was only because Ireland, Malta and Scotland were members that it was used officially at all.

Versailles established in law the principle that every agency and body would be named as a compound of 'Une' plus its determinant purpose, coined in one of the official languages. There had been something of a 'big ender/little ender' debate about typography. Eventually, 'Oners' ('Une') won out over 'Acronymers' ('U.N.E.'). A schedule set them out and, as well as UneVerteidigung for Defence, just a few examples will paint the picture.

UneΕκπαίδευση = Education

UneObchod = Trade

UnePolicia = Law enforcement ...

UneSanté = Health

... and so on. Every federal function was named in one of the languages, creating a multi-lingual glossary of the Union's scope of operations.

The treaty itself was divided into chapters, each of which codified the outputs from the Thugs, as developed through the intricate negotiations between each and all of the thirty, and the Commission.

The final document allowed for continuous review and development through UneParlament and UneCorte de Justiça, enshrining an organic process of maintaining relevance down the ages as mores, attitudes and technology shape the ever-evolving landscape.

Versailles 2039, as it became known, also resolved the last vestiges of empire.

France and The Netherlands had taken some convincing that the dictates of economic sovereignty demanded the amputation of their overseas territories. In the end, their leaders could not dispute the logic that said the need to protect lands many thousands of kilometres distant just perpetuated long-standing anomalies. Without an exit plan, the

UNE risked forever being responsible for lands with which it had no cultural ties.

So a transition plan was agreed that had, as its main provisions, a break in democratic links and a fostering of a special relationship which ensured economic viability for islands dotted across the Southern hemisphere. But there was a clear understanding that there would be no military commitment, although creative brains ensured that sea-based manoeuvres and the like could take place off the coasts of Aruba and Reunion, amongst others.

But the biggest obstacle came from Spain. It argued with great force that if this reasoning extended to its Moroccan enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, then the reverse process must apply with equal power to the long-coveted Gibraltar.

This was a problem. The Rock's fierce British patriotism had been eroded over the years by empty rhetoric from London and the fault-line created by ninety percent of its population voting to remain in the EU. Inexorably, ties to the Britain had weakened over the near-twenty years between the final enactment of the Leave decision in 2020 and the emergence of the new European ideal. During the period from formal departure to the imminence of federalisation, Gibraltarians began to imagine a new model within the UNE, even if it meant being more closely allied to Spain, at least in the short term.

One could have thought that England, seemingly permanently mired in the injurious fallout from Brexit, might have welcomed a further release from the malign legacy of empire. After all, its failure to retain control of the Falkland Islands in 2029 when a resurgent Argentina reprised its 1982 invasion with rather greater success, had been a mixed blessing. The loss amplified its impotence, of course, but the country saved somewhere in the region of one hundred million pounds, the annual cost of maintaining the garrison.

But Gibraltar was much closer to home, not eight thousand miles away. And it held a strategic significance that pandered to England's distorted image of its international importance. When Spain's position emerged

and garnered a sympathetic reception from the other twenty-nine, England engaged in some unconvincing sabre-rattling.

The ruling party could rarely see a high horse without attempting to mount it – and this was no exception.

“We stand with Gibraltar. We shall not move.”

“Let anyone who threatens Britons – wherever they may be – stand on notice that they will know no rest.”

“Send the Navy – now!”

Where once such sentiments might have struck fear into the Spanish government and given their allies pause for thought, now they sounded merely hollow.

The EU started with soft power. A survey run out of Brussels asked the twenty-eight thousand or so over-sixteens in Gibraltar two simple questions. “Do you regard yourself as European?” “Do you believe Gibraltar has a viable future attached to England?”

The answers were unequivocal. Demographic change, and deep-seated scepticism surrounding the sincerity of London's response and its capacity to back it up, meant that the numbers outstripped even the referendum result. Ninety-eight percent answered ‘Yes’ to the first; ninety-five ‘No’ to the second.

It ripped the ground from beneath the feet of the English government. Their argument in favour of democratic primacy following resistance to the 2016 referendum result meant that they had nowhere to go.

On behalf of the European Commission and Parliament, Spain issued a take-it-or-leave-it offer to London. On the signature of the Treaty of Versailles, Spain would assume sovereignty over Gibraltar and its citizens would become Spanish with full rights, pending their assumption of UNE citizenship on its formal launch. It would grant England a five-year lease on the naval base, after which the Royal Navy would be required to vacate, to be replaced by ships flying the infinity flag.

The symbolism of this was lost neither in Brussels nor London. It was as if the near-seven square kilometres occupied by the Rock stood as a

manifestation of the inexorable parting of the ways. Those in England who had harboured hopes of a re-joining finally and irrefutably realised the futility of their dreams. Their haphazard armchair-gazing was exposed for the passive-aggressive ineptitude it was.

And, still hankering for some miraculous reconnection, they could only sit and watch with growing frustration as Europe unleashed the full majesty of pomp and ceremony to celebrate the signature of the treaty.

Versailles had never looked more resplendent. Brickwork was scrubbed clean, and every sill, frame and pane brought to gleaming by fresh paint and polish.

The magnificent gardens were manicured to perfection, a profusion of fresh-planted colour greeting the distinguished visitors. Fountains were newly choreographed to play in perfect harmony with a suite of the continent's finest music.

Gilding, water, silvered statuary, windows, all the shiny surfaces, be they solid or liquid, watered the eyes of onlookers. Curated bouquets of fragrance haloed visitors in invisible clouds and, as they strolled the topiary avenues, songbirds serenaded them.

The evening before the signing ritual, they gathered outside. Beamed right round Europe, into homes and on to giant screens in parks across the territory, the concert consisted of the only piece possible.

The players were drawn from the famous orchestras, the ones rooted in the great musical legacy that had conquered the world. From Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Leipzig and Prague they came, as well as from centres without their global reach. They were gathered and drilled by the doyenne of conductors and the first female to be in charge of the Vienna Philharmonic. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, just turned fifty-three years old, selected them all individually and had hand-picked the four soloists who would sing in the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, whose 'Ode to Joy' had been the EU's anthem for decades.

Now, as the final dignitaries settled into their seats and the moon rose in the evening sky, she turned to her audience.

"Distinguished guests, we are honoured to be playing for you tonight.

"One hundred years ago tomorrow, the second world war began. We will never forget it. My own beloved Lithuania suffered so very grievously that we still mourn our catastrophe.

"But tomorrow you will consign conflict to the past. Never again will Europe raise the hand of war against her neighbour. In Schiller's immortal words amplified by the genius of Beethoven, we now know that, right across the thirty nations of the UNE, *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*, all men will be brothers.

"We rejoice with you. But, more importantly, we thank you for your courage, your vision, your tenacity – and your humility. And we hope our performance does your achievement justice."

She turned, took her baton from the music stand, looked around the orchestra, and raised her arms.

From the first downbeat, the tension of the opening bars rose up from the strings, growing, swelling until it seemed like the whole world was playing. The sound seemed to stir the sleeping waters of the fountains as it expanded in force and volume to overwhelm the palace. Later, the players would testify that it felt as if all the dead ever slaughtered on European land had wakened to find once more their voice and cry 'Peace. Peace for ever.'

Through the second movement they drove on, the energy only seeming to infuse the playing with greater precision and power. And, when the solemn slow movement was reached, it felt as if, when they introduced its glorious main theme, the strings mourned for all those lost souls.

The short introduction in the last movement was a springboard to the celebrated finale. When the soloists and then chorus entered, they too felt themselves part of something unique and unforgettable, raising their song up to the sky, louder yet more controlled than any of them had thought possible.

And when the finale had ended, when its last echo had finally faded, there was that magical moment of silence when all those present paused to reflect on what they had experienced.

As the players caught their breath, the audience collectively exhaled and came to their feet, releasing the tension with thunderous applause and cheering. Gražinytė-Tyla summoned orchestra, chorus and soloists to stand and turned to face the cheering crowd, her tear-streaked cheeks clearly visible.

They all knew that the symbolism of the concert was unmistakable. It was not just a unifying force, created by the great intellect and spirit of European music. It also exalted the glories of fraternity, and served as a rousing synthesis of the momentous journey that was due for its next major milestone the very next day.

The round table had proven impractical, so the organisers made it square, referencing archive photographs of 1919 to replicate the shape, and also to position guests and journalists.

The signing was due to start at eleven in the morning, Central European Time. Leaders and their Heads of State began gathering after breakfast. Mirrors the length of the long hall magnified the sunlight as it poured through windows and bounced from glass to crystal, from gilt to polished wood.



Promptly at the appointed hour, Commission President Sofia Hämäläinen called them all to order.

“Today, we do something never before attempted in history.

“Good morning and welcome everyone.

“The signing starts with Austria and the treaty books will be passed clockwise from her to Belgium and so on until Switzerland has signed the last of the thirty-one copies. You will each retain one copy and the last will be held by the European Commission.

“We will pause every twenty minutes for a break.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Europe awaits you!”

2039-2045

European Commission, Parliament and Court of Justice

Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg

The institutions of the European Union had found their purpose.

Critics had long complained of unnecessary buildings, profligate budgets and over-staffed bureaucracies. But Versailles 2039 had given the people who worked across the Commission, Parliament and Court of Justice a sense of shared mission and a clear route-map to follow.

It was as if the tens of thousands working in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg were melded into a coherent whole where, at last, each knew their role.

Leaders and managers who hitherto had sleep-walked around their role now rose to the challenge, infused with a new zeal and the dream of a long-term impact and legacy.

Where before, departmental in-fighting and parochial turf-wars were prone to break out, now the workforce resembled a hive of bees or a colony of ants. All knew their *raison d'être*, and hungered to be as good as they can be. They found inspiration in the poetry and power of Ciarán Mac an Bhreithiún's dream; they held Versailles 2039 as their compass.

It raised a provocative question: “What is leadership?” After all, the people had neither changed nor suddenly acquired new skills. No-one had administered some transformative cocktail of drugs. There had been no comic-book metamorphosis where internal chemistry mutated to liberate hitherto unimaginable superpowers. So what catalysed such a dramatic change of culture?

The answer was simple: Vision; the idea that there was, behind all their previously disparate interests and motivations, a unifying purpose totally transformed performance. The concept of a single Europe annihilated the petty battles and wagon-circling that had thus far characterised much of their working lives. Now, where, in the past a defensive and risk-averse

mind-set might have stalled progress, assertiveness and a refusal to accept reticence drove it forward.

A wriggling, squirming contortion of work-streams writhed its way across the centres of European governance. Rainbows of project management tools Gant charts of task-specific developments pulsed on a thousand screens, watched hawk-like by those charged with oversight and implementation. It was as if a tree had sprung to life from a single seed and burgeoned with eye-watering rapidity.

With increasing velocity, this proliferation overwhelmed the ordinary course of working, frustrating some programmes that struggled for oxygen. But the fervour would not abate as the workforce drove forward towards its goals.

The roadmap they followed was set out in detail in the Treaty's many chapters and schedules. Designing the skeleton of the UNE and identifying all the necessary organic systems enabled politicians and officials to deliver the detailed work that would enable the body to function effectively.

So, for the best part of four years, they worked. And, like a teeming Breughel, the swarming detail of the new terrain slowly evolved from blank canvas to completed picture.

Even while they worked through the various building blocks of unionisation, national leaders began to bend their mind towards the first Head of State of the UNE.

It had already been decided that the Chief Minister would, at least for the first five years, be the serving President of the European Commission, the Finn, Sofia Hämäläinen. The twenty-nine premiers and one president could choose between retaining their role as the newly-titled Governor of their country or taking a cabinet portfolio. They divided roughly fifty:fifty between the two, decisions being shaped by personal circumstances and drivers. It left around ten cabinet positions to be filled with an ad hoc appointments committee sifting appropriate candidates.

Around now, it became clear that a decision about the Head of State could not be put off any longer. The immediate need for an independent arbiter, someone who could chair discussions with impartiality and so imbue deliberations and decisions with authority and fairness, meant that the selection process needed to be accelerated.

This pressing imperative overreached the continuity argument that most militated in favour of making the UNE a monarchy. For all their many qualities, the crown heads of Europe had hardly perfected life skills in the real world. In any event, many citizens of monarchical countries were revealed by numerous surveys and focus groups to find the hereditary concept in equal measure reactionary and bewildering.

The Thugs had prepared the ground for this. For the role of Head of State, they devised an all-purpose job description, But they also drafted a specification of the person who might assume the presidency (it not being necessary for a monarchy).

As they did it, they were alive to the risk of designing it to fit a particular individual, so it was couched in vague terms that highlighted career experiences, such as the diplomatic service, governmental roles or international agencies. And they tried to eliminate high-risk jeopardies, such as political partisanship, lobbying or other potential sources of bias.

But the leaders had different ideas. The digi-capture of their various conversations made for interesting viewing, as – one-by-one – they voiced opinions in a free-flowing exchange.⁶

“I think we need, how you say?⁹, to make a difference between the first President and those who come after. This will be our George Washington. They will stand as a model for all those who follow.”

“Si. To go for some bureaucrat seems wrong, so I would discard the proposed person spec.”

“I think this must be right. I remember when the Czech Republic emerged from Soviet control, they chose a writer as figurehead and embodiment of the state ...”

⁶ This can be found in full at www.europe.une/archive/decisionmaking_materials/video/presidency

“... And he was a dissident, too, so was an expression of a great movement.”

“Indeed. This I like very much.”

“Ach so, who’s our Havel, then?”

“We know, we all know, don’t we?”

“You mean ...?”

“... de Rouffignac, of course!”

“But he wrote the person spec. Are you saying he was just being disingenuous or even devious?”

“No. I think he was being modest and genuine. I believe it accurately captures his and the other Thugs’ views. I just sense that their sincerity is at odds with our collective view.”

“And that is, after all, why we’re here ...”

“... why we have to make these decisions, not them.”

“Precisely.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the debate, one of those expectant pauses where everyone is waiting for someone to say what they are all thinking. Eventually, the Slovenian Prime Minister spoke.

“Ok, I guess someone has to say it, don’t they?”

“And what might that be?” offered the Portuguese leader, with a knowing lilt.

“Can someone in a wheelchair do this job?”

A further silence, now rooted in embarrassment.

“Oh, come on everyone”, she continued, “Do stop this! Why is it always we women who have to call it as it is? It’s really annoying. We’re all thinking it. The job description – which no-one has argued with, I might add – specifically talks about the need for visibility right across the territory. That means travel, and a lot of it. Do his limitations conflict

with that? Leaving aside that not all the places he’ll visit are going to be accommodating.”

“Please to tell what you think.”

“Well, I hope that I’m not going to be the only one expressing an opinion, that’s for sure.”

“Come on. You had the courage to say the unsayable. So?”

“I think it would be the most powerful statement we can make. That the role is within the reach of anyone with the ability to do it, even if they are limited.”

Now that the unsayable had been said, the atmosphere eased and any reticence quickly evaporated, each leader now keen to participate and advocate the nomination.

“Let’s be honest, if anyone is going to be seen as the parent of this process, it’s none of us, but him.”

“Do we know if he wants it?”

“Or feels up to it?”

“I don’t care. He doesn’t have a choice.”

“Why?”

“Because we simply say to him that he has a moral duty to do it. He can’t preach the need for statehood – with the explicit corollary of its having a Head – and then decline to do the job.”

“Oooh, that’s brutal. I love it!”

“Anyway, what part of the job can’t he do? Look at all he’s achieved. Who better than a Nobel laureate? And someone who’s universally admired, both for his intellect and personal integrity.”

“Yes, and let’s face it. We wouldn’t be hesitating were it not for the wheelchair. I agree. It sends the most fantastic signal. I vote for Édouard de Rouffignac as the first President of the Union of the Nations of Europe!”

A chorus of ‘Hear, Hears’, ‘Agreeds’ and ‘Bravos’ filled the room, both from those present and those participating from a distance.

“Any dissent?”

Silence.

“Right. Let’s do the research and, assuming the proposition survives intact, ask the Chief Minister-elect to issue the invitation.”

“Summons!” shouted the Estonian PM. “What makes an invitation an invitation is that it can, by definition, be declined.”

Laughter concluded the session.

Things moved swiftly from then on. There was a well-rehearsed process to test every major determination emanating from the multiple decision-making forums across Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg.

A secure network of scientifically-populated focus groups was given the proposition and the options, where there was more than one. The (generously remunerated) research subjects were then guided into a discussion on the merits of the decision or action under consideration.

For this, they were posed a number of questions that reflected the output from the Thugs and the discussion points aired, in this case, among the thirty-strong leadership group.

The meetings took place across teams of citizens, organised in broad geographical quadrants of Europe: North, East, South and West. It required a certain degree of arbitrariness, but served to identify regional variations and any severe discrepancies of accord across the proposed UNE territorial mass.

The Head of State sessions were the shortest of them all. Even citizens of nations retaining an hereditary system thought it absurd to consider a monarchy. They were, if anything, more dismissive than those who lived in republics, even while happy to keep their own royalty for domestic purposes.

When given the option of the types of people who might serve as President, they were, in the main, vehement in their rejection of

functionaries. Those with long careers in politics without ever having made it to the top were almost instantly dismissed.

Asked to give some generic examples of who they would prefer, focus groups spoke of ‘excellence’, ‘respect’ and ‘admiration’ far more than they mentioned ‘affection’, ‘witty’ or even ‘likeability’.

Invited to suggest names unprompted, the field became impossibly varied. A few, probably but not definitely tongue-in-cheek, went for celebrities and sports stars. Others were more thoughtful, proposing a wide variety of names, invariably from their own domestic political scene.

Presented with a list bearing the names of specific people, the President of France and the German Chancellor included, they quickly passed by politicians, but carefully pondered Europeans who had served as President of their country or held senior rôles in organisations like the United Nations, Médecins Sans Frontières and the World Bank.

But in every group, they lingered longest on the name of Édouard de Rouffignac. All knew his contribution to the creation of the UNE, just as they did the personal back story of magnanimity in extremis and overcoming adversity.

Immediately after receiving a very positive report from the researchers about a week later, Hämäläinen held a formal adoption with the thirty leaders. She then view-called de Rouffignac, and they saw each other on the foldable televisions that enabled face-to-face conversations anywhere.

Édouard was actually in the hydrotherapy pool, which was not a problem for the element-proof, wafer-thin graphene device that he could just pop on to envelop his eyes and ears.

“Good afternoon, Rouva Presidentti, how are you?”

“Well, thanks Professor. And you?”

“Damp. But these sessions are, as you know, a must-do for me. They still make the world of difference.”

“How will you manage when you’re the President of the UNE?”

More than a moment's silence passed.

"I'm sorry. Would you mind repeating? The message went a little garbled. I thought you said ..."

"I did. We just finished our final session on the Head of State. At our first, we went through the relevant submission from your group. But we rejected the person specification."

"Why?"

"Because it precluded you. And we unanimously felt that you are the outstanding option, as did the focus groups."

Apart from the slight slosh of the tidal pool, there was quiet once more.

"Can you still hear me?"

"Yes, sorry. I was just absorbing it."

"You do know you can't say no?"

"That's what I was computing."

"The overwhelming view is that people are less likely to trust a building if its architect refuses to live there."

"Very drôle."

"But true nonetheless."

"Can I check with Claudette?"

"You have twenty-four hours."

"Voi, kiitos paljon!"

"You're most welcome. Sarcasm in Finnish – I'm impressed!"

"You do know, of course you do, that some significant allowances are going to have to be made?"

"Yes, but, please explain."

"Well, obviously, moving around. The job description is firm on this; there must be personal visibility. And that doesn't mean televisions and the like: it's boots – or, in my case, wheels – on the ground. I am limited

both in accessibility and stamina. I need a good rest every afternoon if I'm busy in the evening – or an early night, if I'm not. I just can't be as productive as an able-bodied person.

"But there is a ray of light. We haven't gone public on this as it's still early days, but I'm being assessed to try out an exo-skeleton suit that would enable me to walk, at least short distances. New technology is sketchy but it might just give us another option."

"Wow, that sounds really interesting, Édouard! Do keep me informed. If you need anything, I still have many contacts in the medical world. Whatever happens, we believe that there are considerable work-rounds to develop. In any event, your incumbency will be so powerful and send a tremendous signal to the entire citizenry. No-one is excluded. Everyone can participate equally. Seductive, no?"

"Yes. Alright. Got the message. I'll call you later today or first thing tomorrow."

"Merci mille fois. Oh, and beaucoup de félicitations."

Wednesday March 22nd 2045, 19:00h CET

European Broadcasting Union

Studio of Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté
française, Brussels

“Good evening, my name is Élise Janssens. For those across Europe who don’t know me, I am Chief Political Editor for the appropriately-named Radio-Télévision Belge channel *La Une*. It is my pleasure to introduce this programme to the largest audience for any current affairs programme in European history.

“Tonight, I welcome Édouard de Rouffignac. Assuming the referendum starting tomorrow and concluding on Sunday agrees, he will be inaugurated as the first President of the Union of the Nations of Europe in just a few months.

“The professor will be taking questions from citizens the length and breadth of the land occupied by the thirty founding members of the UNE.

“We are using the EU’s new state-of-the-art TraductRapide instant translation system. As a question is posed, the Professor will hear it instantly in French. His answer will appear in subtitles in the original language.

“Professor, or should that be President? Welcome.”

“Thank you, Madame Janssens. I am certainly not assuming anything; the people are yet to pronounce on this question. So ‘Édouard’ will do very nicely thank you. Your questioners are welcome to choose whatever mode of address they are comfortable with.”

“Ok, thanks.”

“Before we take the first question, is there anything you’d like to say?”

“Not really. I don’t want to pre-empt anything. Perhaps, if there’s time, I might sum up, if that would be of value.”

“Understood. Let’s take our first question, which is from a schoolteacher in Estoril, Portugal. Fernando Caeiro, your question please.

“Thank you for choosing me. Good evening Professor. My question is simple: How can you be certain we will be better off under the Union?”

“Thank you for your question, Senhor Caeiro. Well, as I have said on many occasions, nothing is certain. We are working on probabilities, based on a rational and dispassionate analysis of history. On that reading, we came to the view, much shared with Europe’s citizens and bodies politic, that a formal union was a logical development, both to meet the reasonable expectations of national populations and to confront the international challenges of the modern world. But guarantees? No.”

“Would you like to come back on that, Senhor?”

“Yes, please. So, what you’re saying basically is ‘Trust us’, isn’t it?”

“Only in part. Yes, of course, it would be gratifying if you trust those advocating this change, whether in Portugal or at the regional level. But that trust must be earned. And that means you have to take it upon yourself to scrutinise and verify the things you are told. You’ve been given ample opportunity to study the reasoning behind the core observation and the proposals to reflect it institutionally. In the end, every citizen has to weigh the evidence, listen to who is advocating change and who is not – and why? – and then vote accordingly.”

“The next question is from a young lady from your own country, Amélie Chausson in La Ciotat.”

“Hello. Monsieur de Rouffignac. I was paralysed in a car crash a year ago. Your example has been really helpful. What I wanted to ask is this. Do you think that being President and in a wheelchair will make it easier for us to be accepted as the same as able-bodied people?”

“How old are you, Amélie?”

“Fifteen.”

“Wow. This must have been so hard on you. I’m truly sorry that you’ve had to go through all this. I guess my hope is that people don’t actually

see the wheelchair, that – when they look at us – they no longer go straight to our wheels and then glance at our legs. So, yes, I do dream that my being the President of the UNE would really help acceptance. But the fact that I’ve been nominated means that the leaders of our countries have recognised that there are some attributes which are more important than others.”

“But will that help me and those like me to do the things I, we, want to?”

“Well, that does depend on what it is you want to do, doesn’t it? I mean, if you said you wanted to, oh, I don’t know, become an Olympic pole-vaulter, I think I might counsel you against that. But if you want to become a Paralympian then I would say – go for it.”

“I want to go into either politics or law and fight for the rights of the disabled.”

“Excellent! In that case, let’s make a deal. You work as hard as you can at school and I will invite you to shadow me in my new role, assuming the referendum goes well. Also, I’ve been testing a new type of high-tech exo-skeleton, that looks like it may help me walk a bit. If your condition is suitable, I’d be happy to ask my doctors to take a look. How does all that sound?”

“Th-, that would be just wonderful, thank you so much.”

“My pleasure. I look forward to meeting you, Mademoiselle Chausson. And thank you for swinging the disabled vote behind ‘Yes!’”

“And, now, from Latvian capital, Riga, we have an accountant, Anastasija Fjodorova. Your question, please.”

“Yes, thank you so much. So, my question is this. Do you really think this can work? And, if so, how will you measure success? My country has been occupied by Nazis and Communists, always it came with suffering and a loss of identity. What make this so different because I do not feel comfortable, having only so relatively recently gained our independence?”

“Thank you, Kundze Fjodorova, for asking the most important question of all. I welcome the chance to address it head-on.

“The first point I’d like to make is that you cannot possibly compare this with Nazi or Soviet annexation and occupation. Nor, as it happens going back through Latvia’s history, Swedish, Polish or Russian rule. Neither is it like wider European movements of mass annexation, whether, say, Napoleonic or Roman in origin. This works precisely because it is consensual, that leaders and citizens knowingly and voluntarily pool sovereignty to be part of a larger, more sustainable whole. The single European defence agency, UneVerteidigung as it will be called, is exactly that, a *defence* force. We would never expand into territories uninvited. This is the pivotal point, and the one that, if anything is going to, should ease your discomfort. Latvia and Latvians enter the UNE as equal partners, freely doing so because you have weighed the pros and cons and found the balance tipped in favour of doing it.

“The single most important factor is accepting the core premise that Constitutional Aggregation tells us. This is now well documented and proven beyond any reasonable doubt. Now, there do remain some who don’t accept it, in much the same way that there are those who reject evolution. But you, Kundze Fjodorova, must make up your own mind.

“In doing so, you must put aside your personal opinions and instincts and look at the cold, hard facts. You may still vote against on Saturday but please do so not on the basis of sentiment, but with clear-eyed logic, devoid of subjectivity. Is that clear?”

To prevent untimely interruptions, all questioners were muted, so she simply nodded, but combined with a shrug that more than suggested the absence of conviction.

“Now, the second part of your question: measurement. That is a tough one. But let me suggest to you, if not precise metrics, some trends that will suggest the UNE is working well. First, of course – the big one – no military flare-ups. We haven’t had any since the Common Market took off, but this will be cemented. Hand-in-hand, I am expecting a major reduction in military spending per capita. The streamlined command-and-control structure that is being put in place will no longer mean the thirty countries operating a silo structure based on the three theatres of war – air, land, water. This is just one example of stripping out appalling

duplication of effort and quite startling wastage. So, one measure would be something in the region of a twenty-five to thirty-three percent decrease in aggregated defence spending. This will liberate billions of tax euros back into UNE and national budgets for the various levels of government to decide how best to spend.

“I am also expecting major savings through the single-embassy strategy and other streamlining within the broad diplomatic and foreign outreach field.

“But, as an accountant, you are drawn to what can be measured. I, on the other hand, am attracted by less tangible concepts. So I will be looking out for more qualitative changes to assess UNE’s impact. I hope that some of the, admittedly woolly, happiness indices show marked upticks. I will be seeking out confirmation that people are more content and feel more secure. The wrap-around defence, security and intelligence protection will, I genuinely believe, make citizens sleep more easily in their bed. And, if I may say, for you, living in one of the Baltic States that have been so vulnerable to military incursions down the centuries, this should bring you great comfort.

“On the economic front, I am expecting really significant progress. I am sure, Kundze Fjodorova, it won’t have escaped your attention that many European businesses have been heavily promoting their heritage. We have already seen clear evidence of a switch from American, Japanese and Korean cars to our great European brands. The EU has been investing, quietly but very effectively, in local businesses where there can be easy competitor substitution. Areas like IT, consumer electronics and even social media platforms will, I believe, take on a decidedly European identity over the next decade or so. These market shifts will, I hope, be both measurable and sustainable.”

“Did you want to respond, Anastasija?”

“No thank you, Élise. That was very enlightening.”

“Has it helped you make up your mind?”

“Not yet, but I am getting there, thanks very much.”

“You’re most welcome.”

And so it went on for the best part of two hours. Questions covered a wide range of topics, from the preservation of national identities and culture through inward migration to relations with the USA and China.

Each time, de Rouffignac answered with respect and, in many cases, at length. His temper frayed just once, as the end approached and he was just beginning to flag.

“This is just a plot for left-wing paedophiles to take over Europe, bring in socialism, and steal our children, isn’t it?”

Janssens intervened.

“I’m sorry. How the hell did this guy get through? I thought we would screen out these calls?”

“No, it’s ok. Well, sir, how to answer? Um, er, no, no – and no.

“You speak English with an American or Canadian accent. I wonder where you’re actually calling from. Not that it matters. I imagine you are rather taken with some of the more fanciful conspiracy theories that echo round the digi-sphere, would that be right?”

Not even the sound of breathing.

“Uh-huh, silence. What a surprise. Never mind. I would actually say to you, in all sincerity, as I did to earlier callers, don’t believe anything without evidence – and without challenging others’ views. It is not the human condition to accept things we’re told, just because some part of them appeals to our innermost fears.

“All I would say is that one of the most fundamental drivers behind the UNE is to secure our European social model of capitalism, to ensure that it endures. That is the precise opposite of your position, grounded as it is in equal measures of malevolence and ignorance.

“I won’t dignify the rest of your question with even a moment’s consideration.”

The final question came from a Polish doctor.

“What will happen, and what will you do, if the referendum rejects the union?”

“I am certain that the thirty will continue to grow together as sovereign nations, at least for the time being. A lot of the work won’t be wasted as the commonality of interests is no longer in any doubt. The UNE as a concept will re-emerge when all generations of voters regard such close co-operation as the natural order of things, and question why the formal merger has not yet happened. In other words, when nostalgia for an irrecoverable past has finally evaporated.

“As for me, I will return to France. If I am still wanted, I will go back to lecturing. If not, retirement and writing, perhaps the odd speech. Quite frankly, after tonight, that sounds pretty seductive.”

“Well, we’ve run out of time, I’m afraid. Thank you Professor, and apologies to all those whose questions we were unable to take.

“You did say you may want to say something at the end. Do you?”

“Please.

“First, thank you, Madame Janssens, for your excellent facilitation.

“All I would like to add is this. Whatever one’s views, the important thing over the next few days is to vote. It is not just a civic duty. It is also a privilege that has long been battled for and protected against many adversaries. With highly reliable digi-, postal and in-person voting, no-one over the age of sixteen has any excuse.

“Get out there, cast your ballot – whether for or against – and take ownership of the result. Only with an unequivocal mandate can we move forward.”

From seven in the morning local time the following day, March 23rd 2045, polling stations opened in those countries that had a tradition of voting on Thursdays. Across Europe, e-voting started at the same time, while postal votes had been arriving for last two months.

The process continued over four days. The turnout was the highest many of the thirty had ever recorded. This was partly caused by some acrimonious campaigning from those on the far left and far right who

were drawn to the idea that achieving their extreme views was only possible with division, not harmony.

Far more importantly, there had been by any measure the most effective voter engagement programme in history. The EU had launched a long-term campaign after Stockholm ten years earlier. Carefully, subtly calibrated, it built slowly on the values inherent in Ciarán Mac an Bhreithiún’s “Paradisus Restitutam” to create a single European identity, where every citizen was heir to the great traditions of the continent’s rich heritage.

By the time it came to vote, the combination of national leaders making the case for federation worked harmoniously with a burgeoning feeling of continental belonging. Even in those countries where a strong nationalist tradition had been amplified by populist leaders, the arguments in favour of joining together proved decisive.

Across the territories of the EU, seventy-two percent approved their country joining the UNE. In some, particularly those relatively recently liberated from the old Soviet Union, the vote was less enthusiastic, averaging in the low sixties. Among others, it touched the very late seventies.

And, so, the die was cast.

Monday, May 8th 2045, 11:40 CET

Inauguration

The Ballroom, Palais Monnet, Brussels, Belgium

“My dear friends, I have spoken for too long. I apologise. I have forgotten that brevity is the soul of wit.

“Soon we must leave this place. Each of us must return home to begin the work. How we perform will determine the judgement of history upon us. We have done an enormous thing. Yet so much more is needed.

“Step out into a new world, and know that all you now do is to build a thriving and secure home for our half-a-billion fellow citizens. We are not gods. We are not superheroes. We are not different. But we are called to do our duty. And we shall rise to this greatest of challenges, challenges not faced by our continent since the great tumults of recent history: the cataclysm of fascism, the malignancy of communism, the fever of coronavirus.

“How can I say this with such confidence? Because of Europe’s history.

“Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways.’

“When Homer opened his epic “Odyssey”, he was talking about Ulysses. But he could easily have been referring to a species we now name Homo Europa.

“Europe’s culture has conquered the world.

“Homo Europa’s poets, dramatists and novelists defined form and style, producing and inspiring an infinite ocean of profound and beautiful words right around the globe.

“Homo Europa’s painters and sculptors created iconic images that have burned themselves into the psyche of humanity, inventing revolutionary techniques and epoch-making ideas as they went.

“And the songs of Homo Europa’s musicians have filled the halls and homes of every country, every city, every village, performed over and over and over again down the centuries as new generations come to know their everlasting glories and eternal truths.

“Homo Europa’s moral philosophies were mother of democracy, father of the Enlightenment and midwife to human rights.

“And Homo Europa’s inventors, scientists, doctors and mathematicians have broken ground time-after-time-after-time in our perpetual quest for knowledge, understanding and longer, better lives.

“Nor must we ever forget those great businesses born of Homo Europa’s mercantile brilliance. Think of the companies and brands that have conquered the world: Mercedes. Lego. Philips. Chanel. Ikea – the list is endless.

“Of this one thing I am certain. The genius of Homo Europa has also shaped this great union, this unparalleled voyage, this extraordinary moment.

“So, when you doubt, consult a friend or colleague. When you err, admit it and help rectify the mistake. When you succeed, do not crow; share what you have learned.

“And through all the mountains and valleys we will traverse, always listen to the ghosts of those paradigms of Homo Europa: Da Vinci and Beethoven, Velázquez and Einstein when they whisper: ‘As we changed our world, so might you.’

“Let us now depart and go forward hand-in-hand together into the dawn of our new Europe.

“Viva the Union! Viva Europe!”

Little did any of them know that the first test would come sooner than any of them imagined.

2024-2047

A History of England

The British Isles

In the general election of October 2024, the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson was returned with a majority slashed from eighty to twelve. This was still hailed by his supporters as a triumph and he himself lost no time in mocking the opposition parties for their abject failure.

What no-one knew until a slew of memoirs broke in the late 2020s and early 2030s was that Johnson had tried to bail in the Spring of 2022. It is now believed that he had never planned to stick around for long. He wasn't interested in breaking duration records. Becoming Prime Minister was only ever about proving he could get the job and then leveraging the status of the role into a money-generating machine, commanding the highest tariffs for speaking and writing.

The notion to resign was born from the instinctive understanding that, as the repercussions of Covid and Brexit bit ever deeper, he needed to avoid tarnishing his reputation in case it might suppress the potential for earning.

As several of the memoirs testified, his argument for resignation was two-fold. One, the legacy from contracting coronavirus, he claimed, had compromised the physical side of being the country's leader. Secondly, his son Wilfred was almost two, and he wanted to be a more active parent.

When they recalled the pivotal conversation, two former colleagues who were at the cabinet table when Johnson aired his intentions captured the moment vividly.

One said it was like a dam cracking, crumbling under the weight of an entire reservoir releasing its pent-up energy. The other was more graphic, suggesting that it was more as if a large aneurysm ruptured, the

patient drowning in a matter of minutes as the body's entire blood volume flooded all its vacant spaces.

But they both quoted one senior minister more or less verbatim. Those who don't like swearing or believe that politicians are paragons of linguistic moderation are advised to skip the next four paragraphs.

“Boris, you really are a complete and utter shit. We have all loyally stood by you through all the madness, deceit and incompetence. We've taken our turn in front of the media, played a straight bat and embraced collective responsibility.

“And now you're fucking well going to bail and leave us all in the crap while you coin it in. No fucking way.

“Nobody believes you're not fit enough to do the job. All this bouncing around on diggers and fuck-knows-what, and jogging every day. It's just bollocks.

“And how you can be so shameless as to use your son as a shield, well that's just a repulsive new low, even for you. You don't even know how many kids you've got, for fuck's sake!

“No, this won't do. It's just insulting. If you don't shelve this right here, right now, I will walk, and make a public statement to the press outside. I'm just not having it. It's disgusting.”

Johnson apparently looked shell-shocked, particularly when the traditional sign of agreement, a loud rapping on the table, was taken up in almost complete unison.

And so he stayed, a reluctant PM who had to play the part, albeit unwillingly. But, unbeknownst to any of them – well, at least consciously – the 2024 election victory would prove pyrrhic in the extreme. Of course, this ignorance meant there was no consolation for the near seventy-five percent of the UK's electorate that had declined to vote Conservative.

The absurd vagaries of the British electoral system had been steadily eroding confidence in its outcomes for decades. It reached its nadir in

2016 when a mere twenty-five percent of the population, many old enough never to be faced with the repercussions of their vote, voted to leave the European Union.

If that were not sufficient, a seeming mountain of evidence had accumulated to suggest foreign interference in the campaign and in subsequent elections. This came from state-sponsored cyber guerrilla warfare from governments in the east, notably Russia and China, while, from the west, American right-wing ideologues deployed billionaire-funded donations to maverick outliers who could snipe from the sidelines.

And all of this was known, yet unknown, suspected but never investigated or, if indeed there were probes, it was not in the interests of those in power to expose the full findings to public scrutiny.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so this failure of transparency seeded suspicion, conspiracy theories and rumour, much of it ill-informed.

Problems of legitimacy after 2024 were magnified by the new administration's demonstrable unfitness to govern. The five years from December 2019 through to election day had been typified by a malign mixture of deceit, arrogance and incompetence.

The UK's performance during the tumult of coronavirus and the management of its economic and social aftermath had been lamentable. One of the highest mortality rates per thousand people anywhere in the world. More cases and deaths than any other European country, and only outstripped globally by countries with much larger populations. And the deepest and most enduring economic shock of any member of the G20 group of nations.

Worse still in many eyes, there were enduring symbols of decline. England's place in international comparison tables for educational outcomes slumped. Its percentage of GDP spent on health continued to be unfavourable when set against similar economies. Unemployment among young adults remained intractably high. And personal debt amongst all age groups below 70 stubbornly refused to decline.

So, how then to explain the tenuous grip on power that Johnson's party managed to retain?

In short, it was partly a fear of the unknown. Despite the widely-acknowledged stature of the leader of the opposition, the Labour Party's baggage proved too tenacious to purge in a single electoral cycle, the large majority from 2019 simply too high a hurdle to clear in one bound.

But it was also a misplaced belief that the government couldn't possibly be as bad as it had been in its first term under Johnson. This irrational feeling, a triumph of hope over experience, was also rooted in the absurdist notion prevalent among the many Labour voters who switched allegiances to the Conservatives in 2019 that their decision demanded vindication; the only hope for redemption was a miraculous conversion from hubristic ineptitude to something approaching competence. But it also found nutrients in the attendant and complementary hunger that a vote to leave the European Union was the right thing to do.

The five years of the incoming government would be focused on two strands which, if not exactly mutually exclusive, were certainly mutually antagonistic.

Despite assurances to the contrary, Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, buckled under pressure from his party's paymasters. The promise of not returning to the economics of austerity introduced for ideological reasons by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 was quickly broken. The full impact of the recession following the pandemic proved to be more vicious and more enduring than the optimists had hoped.

Swingeing cuts in the financial safety-net were as inevitable as they were unnecessary. But the right-wing instinct to avoid tax rises had evolved to the level of theology – and no-one in the party wished to be branded a heretic. They could no more raise top-end income or property taxes than they could bring themselves to tackle tax avoidance, a burden on the economic body that was constantly submerged beneath much lighter but more spinnable social security abuses.

Despite the triumphal greeting of the trade deal on Christmas Eve 2020, the stark realities of Brexit became ever more vivid. As 2021 rolled on

and into 2022 and beyond, the true magnitude of the falsehoods of Brexit became increasingly obvious.

There was a clear acceleration of the slow exodus from the City of London as international finance businesses found the siren call of Paris, Milan and Frankfurt increasingly alluring. This leaching of wealth, taking with it swathes of direct, indirect and induced jobs, had been masked by clever presentation but, in the end, the actual picture could no longer be suppressed.

This transfer of capital from the UK to Europe was mirrored in the emigration of industrial jobs, particularly those that required complex, pan-European supply chains. It was just simpler to locate all production within the Single Market and Customs Union. There was no ‘big bang’, just a slow, remorseless oozing that – while not imperceptible – was plain to those who wished to see.

The ties that bound the United Kingdom together had been fraying even before coronavirus took hold. Scotland has long been hankering for independence, its devolved government a perpetual agitator for a binding referendum that the Westminster government had stubbornly resisted.

Northern Ireland’s main Protestant party, the Democratic Unionists, mystifyingly campaigned to leave the European Union without any apparent consideration of the possible economic impact. This was made even more bewildering when, despite the ‘D’ word in their name, they completely ignored the will of the majority in Ulster who voted to remain in the EU.

In the chaotic negotiations with the EU to secure the Withdrawal Agreement, they had been comprehensively betrayed by Johnson when he fractured the unity of the UK by placing a customs border in the Irish Sea. For a few years they stood by impotently, in shock, but gradually found themselves drawn more and more towards the Republic. The insuperable obstacle of the border meant, perforce, a distancing from Great Britain as the EU required secure frontiers.

Working closely both with the Dublin government and with their power-sharing partners across the sectarian divide, leaders of the Protestant

majority who previously had been the United Kingdom’s most fervent cheerleaders began to contemplate another way.

And, like a seed-pod wind-blown to fertile terrain, the idea of uniting took root right through across the sectarian divide in Ulster. Fertilised by the untrustworthy manure of the UK government’s protestations of loyalty and commitment, the argument for a united Ireland seemed to grow with every contemplation of its benefits, with every negation of its disadvantages.

When it came, the surprise announcement sent shockwaves through the British political establishment. On the symbolic date of Monday, 17th March 2026, St. Patrick’s Day, the public statement received blanket media coverage. Given the tendency of some Northern Irish politicians to verbosity, it was comparatively short, but also brutal and admitted of no rebuttal.

Protestant and unionist elected representatives in both Westminster and Stormont parliaments have considered deeply how best to secure a prosperous and peaceful future for all the people of the six counties of Ulster.

In partnership with the leaders within the community, we have reached the irresistible conclusion that this future resides outside of the United Kingdom. The mendacity, unfaithfulness and ineptitude of the government in London has shredded our commitment and destroyed our historic loyalty to Crown and country.

Our traditions are deep-rooted in being equal and respected members of the federation that is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That this is no longer the case is now indisputable. We have reflected long and hard upon our attachment to these traditions and have come to realise that one’s country can live either by honouring the deeds of its grandparents or the needs of its grandchildren, but it cannot do both.

We embrace building a modern, forward-facing country that is ready and able to meet the aspirations of our children, and their children.

With this statement, we invite the leaders of the nationalist community, the government in Dublin, and the European Union to open discussions with us to build a roadmap to the future.

We now know that King Charles III and his heir, William, Prince of Wales, personally called the unionist leaders to plead with them to remain. To no avail, their entreaties being met with one simple question: ‘Where were you when Johnson cut us adrift?’. There was no answer.

The Prime Minister was visibly shaken by the development, and the fury which erupted across both Houses of Parliament outstripped even the splenetic passions of the Brexit debates of 2016 to 2020.

Like so many of his ilk, particularly those lacking the intellectual and moral backbone to find rational arguments, Johnson doubled-down, unceremoniously attacking the political leaders.

“What did they think would happen when they campaigned to leave the European Union?”, he mocked when challenged in the House of Commons. “Even a child would see that the problems of the border with the Republic were insuperable. If they hoped that, like Mr Micawber, something would turn up, they were criminally negligent. And if they failed to consider it at all, they were wilfully blind.

“I would have more respect for their position if they had campaigned to remain. But, like the Duke of York – not, I hasten to add, the real one – they led their community up the hill. And now they want to lead them down again.

“Their position is risible.”

Sir Keir Starmer, who had remained as the Leader of the Opposition following Labour’s improved performance in the election, rose to his feet again.

“If the Prime Minister could dispense with the oratorical bluster, perhaps he could answer my original question. What is the government going to do about this break-up of our United Kingdom. He has often echoed his predecessor’s description of it as ‘precious’ so, I ask again, what’s he going to do about it?”

“I would hope for some cross-party co-operation, quite frankly, Madam Speaker. It’s typical for the Right Honourable gentleman to carp, but where are his solutions?”

The colour of the Speaker of the House had been rising during the session and this time she snapped, her face florid with contempt. “Prime Minister, on far too many occasions I have had cause to remind you that Prime Minister’s Questions are posed to you, not by you. Please answer the question.”

“Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your guidance but, as you and he know all too well, questions of national security are by convention not ventilated on the floor of the House. I’m not about to start now.”

Total uproar ensued, apart from Conservative members who appeared to slump diminished into the green benches, fuming silently in their miserable loyalty.

“Sir Keir Starmer.”

“Thank you, Madam Speaker. I now call on the Conservative Party to find its collective backbone and put an end once and for all to this charade.

“We are living in a dictatorship, and it is facilitated by their craven slavishness to party, in disgraceful disregard of the national interest.

“My party will no longer legitimise this fiction of parliamentary democracy. We are leaving, and I call on all Right Honourable and Honourable Members, at least on this side of the House, to join us.”

With that, he turned towards his MPs and waved them towards the doors of the chamber. As one, they stood and left, none failing to make the cursory bow to the Speaker. All other opposition representatives

joined them. For the first time in history, the governing party faced empty benches opposite.

Johnson railed. But he was impotent, a bully bereft of victims, with no-one left to shore up his tottering ego.

When British troops arrived in the dead of night to take control of Ulster, everyone knew the death-knell of the UK was plangently tolling.

So wary of violence were both sides of the sectarian divide that they accepted occupation, but only as a temporising capitulation, a necessary husbanding of energy before the giant leap to freedom.

Everyone knew that the clarion call to Dublin and Brussels had not fallen on deaf ears. Multiple conversations were taking place, some known about, others not. All were working towards the moment when the EU would issue an ultimatum to Downing Street – “Let your people go.”

Those at the heart of the British government had actually seen the writing on the wall when de Rouffignac’s paper was published in 2026.

One of the more barbed ironies was that Johnson’s support network consisted almost entirely of self-styled ‘super-forecasters’. They prided themselves on identifying long-distance trends through a collage of research, data and intuition (albeit dishonestly distorted through a lens shattered by primal instincts).

So Constitutional Aggregation should have been hailed by them as a living, breathing vindication of their mind-set. But they recognised that it made a nonsense of their life’s work, Brexit. In the end, they were so enslaved by innate prejudices, atavistic tensions and psychological drivers that the rational and intellectual were silently vanquished.

Soon, the disparate strands of British political life that had been neutered by right-wing populism began to unify around de Rouffignac’s paper. One-nation Conservatives through moderate Labour members to strident left-wing firebrands, they all made common cause around the

concept to create a majority force. Those at the centre of government knew that they were in trouble.

Once more, the tendency to go on the attack was dominant. Over many years, the reactionary elite gathering at the heart of the executive had assiduously been accumulating kompromat on swathes of its political opposition, defined in the broadest way as anyone that either disagreed with them or they just didn’t like.

It was enough to draw the sting. Those who preferred to keep their sexual grotesqueries or financial shenanigans under wraps retired to bitter backroom gabfests where they powerlessly inveighed against injustice.

But the boil, far from being lanced, continued to fester. And, for a while, the government became inured to the discomfort and carried on, stumbling from one catastrophic impact of Brexit to another.

Exports continued to fall, the multiple (and much vaunted) trade deals concluded around the world nowhere near compensating for the loss of business from the EU. Compounded by the continued departure from London of international finance and the failure of totemic and illusory benefits of Brexit, such as major investment in the NHS or the enforcement of fishing rights in the UK’s unpoliceable territorial waters, disenchantment corroded British society at an ever-increasing pace.

Labour, now seen as a government-in-waiting, stormed ahead in all the polls. The sense of the impending end of an era was amplified by concerted independent referenda in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in 2027. There was little the Westminster government could do to prevent such demotic expressions, even if they were little more than glorified opinion polls.

With huge majorities for secession in all three countries, Labour faced a crossroads. In 2028, it announced that in the 2029 general election, its flagship policy would be to re-join the European Union.

This repositioning coincided quite closely with the announcement by President von der Leyen of the invitation extended to de Rouffignac to build a model for a formal union. This was not lost on the enemies of

Europe who still owned swathes of the British media and whose employees willingly toed the line of their masters' wishes.

Like Frankenstein, they began to revivify the moribund corpse of Brexit, the electricity of base nationalism and populism once again channelled to resurrect the lumbering leviathan which was the UK's departure from the European Union.

Only now, the fire was turned unashamedly on the 'other', the outsiders who had apparently destroyed Britain. Immigrants, Muslims, Jews, socialists, trade unions, women – anyone, in fact, who was not white, Christian and male.

Some were torn. Journalists who didn't fit that paradigm squirmed, pinched between livelihoods and self-respect. One well-known former-radical-feminist-turned-right-wing pundit, broke ranks.

Her resignation digi-post bounced between self-pity and a profound sense of betrayal, ending with a ringing peroration. "I thought I could trust the Establishment. I thought that if I walked in their footsteps, parroted the party line with only the occasional deviation in the cause of individualism, I would always be safe, be one of them. I was harrowingly wrong. Now, I must strike out on my own, trusting no-one. I, a Jew, am one with another, Saul, for surely the scales have now fallen from my eyes."

But this was a voice crying in the wilderness. All those organisations who together could have formed a compact opposition fragmented. They were unable to see the power of unity even as, across the English Channel, the twenty-seven were coalescing around the concept of federalisation.

It was one of the many ironies of this time, just as Europe was re-inventing the region's entire constitution, Britain's archaic settlement, more-or-less unchanged since 1688, continued its sclerotic facilitation of minority government.

The massed ranks of reaction mobilised very much more effectively, knowing how to exploit the British electoral system. Far-right English nationalists saw their historic opportunity to create a perceived idyll

based on racial purity and common origins. No amount of calm and rational argument could dent their self-belief. All they could focus on was the imminent threat posed to their identity by Labour's policy platform.

The full force of so-called patriotic fervour was unleashed. Although a number had gone to the wall, some newspapers remained in print and, with one or two exceptions, they were arrayed against the new policy on paper and digitally. More potently, a myriad channels broadcast directly onto people's several devices, reinforcing entrenched views and converting others who were looking for reasons to explain their discontent.

They played to a core base of citizens who were easily led and even more easily beguiled by deliberate ambiguity and outright deceit. A staunch cohort of ultra-conservative politicians did nothing to discourage the deluge of lies and personal attacks.

Integrity, like truth, is an early victim of war and it was clear that, by any other name, this was civil war. Violence became commonplace with attacks on Labour constituency offices presaging personal assaults.

It seemed the police were either powerless or unwilling to confront vandals and worse. Political interference in law enforcement had become a given and, where cases did come to court, juries were cowed and judges leaned on to be lenient.

Tensions rose as the election date approached. Labour agreed electoral pacts in Scotland and Wales by which they would not compete against nationalist parties. While in England, it entered into reciprocal agreements with the Liberal Democrats and Green parties to stand down candidates where the record suggested that one of them had a better chance of defeating Conservatives.

In tandem, they aligned manifestos around core principles and the overarching policy to apply for re-entry to the EU.

Starmer had already negotiated a draft Heads of Agreement for negotiations. It played badly, with a significant tranche of voters,

especially those beginning to be swayed towards the view that leaving was a mistake, feeling it was presumptuous.

What was particularly uncomfortable for the new defectors to Europeanism was that the outline accord so starkly illustrated the nation's impoverishment. Britain would have to sign up to the Euro as its currency. It would need to join the Schengen community of borderless travel, and its original rebate was a total no-go area.

The upshot of this was that Labour won the 2029 election, but only within a rainbow coalition of opposition parties. The Democratic Unionist Party, the ones who had entered a similar partnership with the minority Conservative government under Prime Minister Theresa May in 2017, could not quite bring itself to support a 'socialist' government, even one whose pro-EU stance ensured that, if Ulster still wished to secede from the UK, the new executive and parliament would not stand in its way.

So they retreated to what was their default position: don't promise 'Yes' to anything, but reserve the right to shout 'No' at every opportunity, hoping to exercise power without responsibility.

Labour re-entered Downing Street for the first time since 2010, at the head of a multi-coloured coalition which, with all its variegated ribbons, danced around the maypole of re-joining the European Union.

But the forces of reaction were nothing if not fluid in their response to the democratic process. Where once they insisted on the strictest interpretation and implementation of the in-out referendum of 2016, now they were equally unrelenting in the pursuit of setting aside the election result.

The maverick advocates of Brexit returned to the battle, older and more frail but with their passions intact. But while they were idolised as the founding fathers of English nationalism, they were at the same time derided by their aversion to direct action. The new cohort of activists had no reluctance to break windows or heads. In fact, they argued that violence was the only way, whether to resist change or to bring it about.

These zealots were impervious to arguments about democracy, even though they and their predecessors had cleaved religiously to them during the tempestuous exit years of 2016 to 2020. Their justification was rooted in ancient myths of exceptionalism and racial purity that supervened such bourgeois concepts as parliamentary sovereignty. And this time, the case would be made, not by rabble-rousing rhetoric, but by boot, fist, knuckle-duster and club.

It would not be long before it escalated and the new government was confronted by orchestrated civic strife that led to flaming buildings and bloodied streets. It tastelessly became branded among conspirators and participants as *Kristallnacht 2*, the vandalised windows of businesses and homes being owned by those neither Anglo-Saxon nor Christian were systematically wrecked.

Europe demurred on the request to re-join. During the sensitive time when the Thugs were beginning their work, the last thing anyone wanted was to open the door only to discover a powder-keg with a rapidly burning fuse attached.

The Labour government pleaded with them. "If you renege on your previous position, you invite anyone to use violence to achieve their aims. This is the time to stand firm and say that there are lines we shall not cross."

But in the meeting of the Council of Ministers at the beginning of 2031, the Dutch PM captured the mood.

"I would welcome Scotland and can see how that could be engineered relatively easily. I think also that Wales would, so to say, enrich our community of nations. And a single Irish state within the EU is logical for many reasons.

"But it pains me to say that I think admitting England, or a UK dominated by it, is asking for trouble. They've never been on board with our project. I trust Starmer, but I just can't see him delivering a tranquil England. And, even if he does, there is no guarantee Labour will remain in power long enough to suffocate anti-European sentiment.

“My strong preference is to say ‘No, not at this time. Let us either implement the new Europe after which you will fully understand the level and irreversibility of the commitment. Or, having rejected that path for now, we return to the negotiating table to readmit the UK, or England, to our family.”

None dissented. When Labour was told, there was public politesse but behind-the-doors fury.

Again, while single memoirs can quite easily be dismissed as egotistical and self-serving attempts to shape the historical record, an accumulation of corroborating anecdotes may with some confidence be accepted as reliable narrators of events.

Starmer convened an unminuted, informal retreat at Chequers, the PM’s official country residence. Only an inner core of ministers and strategists were there. No tele-devices. No digital interfaces. No contact with the outside world.

The meeting was fraught. They all saw three things with a sickening clarity. One, their signature policy was holed below the waterline. Two, the chances of keeping the UK united were next to zero. And, finally, there would never be a Labour government if the only Westminster seats being contested were in England.

Once frustrations had been aired, Starmer made the address he’d been preparing since he sensed the writing on the wall after a conversation with key leaders within the EU 27.

“Comrades, we were elected not just because voters were fed up with the Tories. No, we took power because, right through our United Kingdom, people knew there had to be a better way. A way that was at once more honest, more honourable, more transparent, more competent and, above all, more compassionate.

“But we must face facts. We all believed that, by re-joining the EU, we would find a sympathetic support system and a safety-net as we walk the economic and social tightrope bequeathed us by that hideous bunch we booted out of office.

“That’s gone. So, what do we do now? I know you’ve been thinking hard about this, too. But let me kick it off.

“We’ve never said it bluntly – and perhaps we should have done. Brexit was a right-wing coup, It was designed to embed an elitist, self-propagating system that sustained only a few at the apex of the economic pyramid.

“Our country can now look at what we have become – low regulation, low pay, inequitable, and impoverished.”

He looked around the room. They all knew this, but an innate fear of being portrayed by a media world with an in-built Conservative bias had gagged them.

“So, now we have no choice but to call it as we all see it. I can find no alternative to going for full-blooded, red-in-tooth-and-claw transformation. Dependent on the legal advice, I’m looking at major hikes in wealth taxes – high-end incomes, capital gains, inheritances. I want to kill off the rentier sector by swingeing caps and taxation on rental income and profits on the sale of second and subsequent homes. And I’m keen to launch publicly-owned competitors to dividend-led business sectors such as banking and energy. In short, any sector that is indispensable so that consumers are unable to exercise the ultimate sanction of refusing to buy will be in the frame.

“I also want to look at defence budgets. I can’t see the point of spending fortunes when our nation is no longer internationally active, desirable or respected. It is simply a question of priorities. I think we can use the money in ways that build a society that deserves defending.

“I intend to disenfranchise tax exiles, and merge tax avoidance into heavily-enforced tax evasion. It will be a declaration of war on anti-social elements who think they can use our roads without paying for them. And, yes, I know ‘anti-social’ is vaguely sinister, but you get my drift.”

By now they were all on the edge of their seats. Some were standing, others pacing. The room seemed to be buzzing, hissing with electricity.

“Above everything else, we must irreversibly transform our democracy, even if it incurs the risk of never winning again. First, we need to move

political funding away from the private and into the public, so that party finances are compulsorily transparent. And we have to have a more representative democracy. That means proportional voting, and an elected second chamber.

“The only way we get to stay in power for the long-term and take the country to a place where the EU, or whatever it might become, welcomes us, is by wholesale, rapid economic and social re-engineering. And, yes, I know that’s also sinister.

“We don’t do anything without risk assessments. And we don’t go live until we can move quickly and decisively.

“There it is. The floor is yours.”

Silence, apart from those who unwittingly has been holding their breath.

The power of his vision was eclipsed only by its breadth and intensity. They were astonished that someone who was admired for his calm, forensic approach to policy-making had now emerged as a fire-breathing radical.

“What have you done with the real Keir?” broke the tension.

A clearly agitated Shadow Chancellor was the first to speak. “How long have you been thinking this? Why the hell didn’t you share earlier”

“From the first signs of cross-Channel negativity about our core policy, I realised we might need a plan B. And it would need to be game-changing. Logic – not passion – brought me here. Sorry to disappoint! And I didn’t share because I didn’t want the idea to be diluted by committee. In order for this team to critique it, you had to see it in its purest form. Apologies if anyone feels excluded but this had to come from me, and me alone, so none of you feels the need to advocate it.”

The debate, the brainstorming and the challenging began in haphazard fashion, as each processed and reacted according to a multiplicity of influences. Creed. Class. Risk-averseness. Affluence. Representational responsibility. And personal ambition.

“I don’t know. This does seem incredibly risky, if not downright dangerous. I mean, how in hell do we ring-fence the economy?”

“Well, as I said, we’ll need to assess the risks, and economic dangers are obviously vitally important. All I would suggest is that, for every time we ask what the downside is of doing something, we also ask what the hazards are of *not* doing it. I’m done with us being in government merely to allow the right-wing to recover and re-create itself.

“This is our chance to do what even Blair didn’t manage with his massive majority – destroy the hegemonic tendency in Conservatives and their masters once and for all. And we have to do this without the violence that often triggers irreversible systemic change.”

“I’m up for this, Keir, I really am. But how do we do actually do it, how?”

“Well, one step at a time. Let’s see if we can come up with other options before we march down this road. Because one thing is crystal. It’s a path that is not only less travelled, there are no opportunities to reverse. Once we’ve set off, there can be no turning back. It is what I think the scholars call: shit or bust.”

For the rest of that day, they bounced options around, conceptual approaches to possible directions for the government. But at each turn they came up against one insuperable obstacle: no other option held the prospect of irrevocable change.

Every time a new idea or thought was tabled, they felt in some way diminished, as though even to consider some other avenue enfeebled them.

Over dinner, the conversation turned to two things. One was the capturing and expression of the idea. The other was the process of implementing it.

“What are we going to call it? ‘Keir’s Coup?’

“How about ‘Starmer’s Stratagem?’”

The leader, always nervous of anything that smacked of the personality cult which had surrounded Johnson, balked.

“Well, I was actually thinking of something along the lines of ‘Britain Resurgent’.”

“Wow! That works for me.”

“Me, too.”

And so began the playing of a long game. For the next six months, the government appeared to have no programme. It steadily declined in the polls, as voters began to perceive a sense of drift, a party in power but with its programme eviscerated.

Coalition partners could only be mollified for so long, although they realised that a revitalised Conservative Party led by its new hard-right leader was an even less enticing prospect to govern than an apparently dithering ex-prosecutor.

But behind the scenes, a secret team not entirely dissimilar from de Rouffignac’s Thugs was hard at work fleshing out the new direction, drafting policy while planning to manage the inevitable backlash in terms of the likely outflow of finance and a probable stock market crash.

When they moved, it was decisive, fast and with total surprise. On what would become known as the Night of the Purged Past, starting at midnight on Monday May 26th, the second public holiday of the month, emergency powers suspended the London Stock Market and froze all personal and corporate bank accounts.

Troops were positioned at key strategic sites and all outbound international travel stopped. The government called an urgent debate in the House of Commons. The atmosphere was electric and mirrored the shock reverberating right around the nation.

Coalition partners were briefed at seven o’clock in the morning. The programme which had been fleshed out from Starmer’s outline vision was exhaustive. It moved the UK economy onto something resembling a war footing. The leaders of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were astonished at the breadth of what was being proposed.

The Greens were delighted by the centrality of policies they had long espoused. Renewable energy, harnessed by super-efficient homes, expansion of rail at the expense of road, compulsory recyclable packaging, were all stand-out proposals.

And the Liberal Democrats jumped at the opportunity to expiate the sin of coalition when they had been a fig-leaf for a deeply divisive and damaging conservative economic ideology.

It was no surprise that the Ulster representative balked.

“This is revolution. I’m really uncomfortable with what’s on the table.”

Labour was ready.

“We will actively support any of you to leave the UK if this doesn’t work for you. But we want you to stay because – together – this is the one opportunity to consign to the past all the toxicity of recent years. What we do now will define our country for decades. And will pose an irresistible threat to the one party who, at one time or another, has screwed us over without a heartbeat’s hesitation.”

Scotland’s First Minister spoke up.

“This programme mirrors our underlying philosophy and political purpose. But you can’t do it, can you?”

Starmer was stony-faced.

“We think so. The time is not just ripe for this systemic re-engineering of our entire society. It is essential. Everyone knows this, even if they’re not yet ready to admit it. Our country is riven.

“Look, we want back into the EU and, if it unites, we need to be on board with that too. I don’t much care whether it’s as four or one, I really don’t. It’s about repositioning our whole society and moving it to a sustainable footing that will stand all our fellow citizens in good stead. Alun, what’s the Welsh perspective?”

“Keir, you’re a revolutionary!”

“Oh, no, don’t say that, please! Can we just say that I’m not averse to giving evolution a bloody good kick up the backside?!”

“So, are you all in?”

He was able to report to the behind-closed-door meeting of Labour MPs that all regions of the UK were on board, albeit with some reservations and conditions.

The parliamentary party was stunned into silence by what he was proposing. It was as if he was channelling the much-ridiculed former leaders, Michael Foot and Jeremy Corbyn, both now dead. Their radical manifestos in 1983 and 2019 had been the subject of high mockery, the former having once been characterised as the longest suicide note in history.

But now – in government and with all coalition partners secured – the dream that many had thought would only ever be just that could at last be coming true.

The ensuing debate in Parliament was furious. Rage cascaded from the Conservative shadow cabinet and members. The anger came not only from being comprehensively outmanoeuvred by those they had roundly mocked. It also emanated from the clear and immediate danger the government's actions and programme posed to their sources of finance and individual exit plans.

Starmer set out the strategy in the starkest terms, totally abandoning his lawyerly style to drive home his points like hammer-blows.

“We acted as we have because there are too many in positions of great influence who would have sought to thwart our plans to protect their own selfish interests.

“Since the onset of economic neoliberalism by Thatcher and continued by successive PMs of both main parties, those least able to fight for themselves have been left behind.

“The core engines of equality and justice – schools, courts, hospitals – have been systematically starved of cash and traduced by those in need of none of them.

“In particular, the Tory-led coalition of 2010 enacted wholesale austerity that punished all those save the people who were the architects and beneficiaries of a rigged economy.

“At the same time, progress to move our society on to a sustainable carbon-neutral basis has been sabotaged by foot-dragging and obfuscatory rhetoric.

“And nothing has been done to correct pervasive distortions in the common wealth of our country.

“So now, as the twin legacies of empire and Brexit combine to throw into undeniable high-relief the failure of successive generations of politicians to address the unspoken fault-lines undermining our country, it is this Labour-led coalition who – once and for all – will underpin our nation and raise it up to where it rightly belongs.

“Bay all you like, but this is the moment you've all feared.”

And he began to set out what would change. With every policy announcement, the roars of approval from behind him drowned out the howls of anguish in front.

“One hundred percent tax on the profits from selling any private residence other than one's own home.

“A scale of inheritance tax rising to ninety-five percent for all estates over five million pounds.

“Higher rates of income tax, rising to seventy percent for earnings over two hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

“Abolition of tax avoidance, so that all non-payments will be treated as evasion.

“Disenfranchisement of anyone who elects not to pay UK domestic taxation.

“The break-up of the accounting profession into no-link finance, audit and receivership sectors.

“The establishment of an independent government consultancy function to replace the use of external advisers.

“The launch of publicly-owned competitors to banking, utilities and any other product or service consumers cannot do without.

“The abolition of private education.”

And the list went on, each one a clarion call for a changed Britain, a stake through the heart of the ruling classes.

The fall-out was more dramatic than anyone could have imagined.

From 2031 until 2034, the programme was ruthlessly rolled out. Many of its provisions, such as the unwinding of the pernicious influence of private schools, were yet to take full effect.

But the enforced retirement of Keir Starmer at the start of 2033 was an unexpected blow to progress, although it only went to prove that the tenacious mutations of coronavirus respected no-one.

The drive appealed to many voters, a great proportion of whom understood that this was the major readjustment they were all yearning for and which, mistakenly, they believed that leaving the EU would deliver.

Losing the architect of 'Britain Resurgent' sucked much of the momentum from the project. His replacement, to the consternation of many party members, was yet another Anglo-Saxon man, one Simon Powell, the Home Secretary. It appeared to many that there was an innate social conservatism at the heart of the party, and its preference for someone with organisational skills but little charisma reinforced that feeling. He would not last long. The Tories smelled blood and were re-energised, just as the government was beginning to exhibit signs of fatigue.

Quietly, anonymous operatives within Conservative HQ began channelling funding to maverick right-wing groups to enable guerrilla action designed to distract government.

In tandem, tax exiles who had of late been treated as pariahs started to exert more influence, targeting resources at swing seats and in undermining government ministers and members of parliament.

And, inevitably, the entire panoply of conservative media caballed to co-ordinate attacks on the 'enemy' and defences for their allies.

But all of this paled beside the impact of the violence perpetrated by a fascist faction hell-bent on derailing the direction set by Labour.

The 2016 referendum had been irrevocably scarred by the murder of Jo Cox MP. During the 2034 election, three Labour MPs were

assassinated, a dozen or more physically assaulted, and two dozen constituency offices firebombed. An avalanche of threats and abuse consumed the ambition, energy and drive of many candidates.

This unsubtle menacing was amplified by false stories, rumours and malevolent gossip pumped like poison gas through countless digi-media. Despite multiple attempts to police the info-sphere, the dominant platforms remained driven only by their bottom line, even while protesting high principle and boasting manifold initiatives to the contrary.

In the end, it seemed that only the most sceptical or partisan of voters could shield themselves from the onslaught. And no matter the truth of Labour's claims and protests, its voice was drowned out by the orchestrated cacophony.

When the result was in, the forces of reaction were triumphant.

The disintegration of the UK was now unavoidable. The ties had long been weakening, but the combination of hopeful reluctance and an instinct for glacial progress had delayed the inevitable.

The EU, despite already embarking on turning the work of the Thugs into pragmatic legislation and preparing for the Concorde of Stockholm, accelerated Scotland's full membership and took the first steps to admit Wales at a date to be agreed.

In Ulster, the loyalist majority, having stalled in the hope of avoiding a final schism, now accepted that the only course of action was complete and formal unification. The St Patrick's Day Declaration of 2026 seemed to live in a different world, seeking other paths without precluding a full amalgamation. Now, there was no other way.

Dublin agreed, once the EU acceded to two conditions - a financial settlement to smooth the process, and the plan to supply a garrison in order to police the border and discourage any incursions from an entirely unpredictable UK.

This was radical. The EU had no defence policy, relying on its individual members to forge alliances, usually around NATO. Now, this demand hastened the modelling for EuroDéfense. With the benefit of hindsight,

this can be seen as a pivotal moment in the development of UNE, the concrete realisation of a critical pillar of the new union.

In 2036, less than two years into the new parliament, England was, to all intents and purposes, on its own. This was, perhaps, the plan all along for die-hard English nationalists who had long regarded the UK as England by another name.

While Europe accelerated towards federalisation, England found itself marooned in a form of stasis. Almost imperceptibly, the country was slipping into a form of coma.

As it lost weight and became weaker, it found itself on the outside of all the major international decisions. It did manage to thwart an attempt to take away the UK's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, but was being increasingly marginalised.

Lacking the financial heft to be considered a viable ally in time of war, it clung to its membership of NATO, even as the EU and USA were discussing its replacement with a bilateral mutual defence treaty.

There would be no role for England, whose isolation became even more acute when Norway and Switzerland abandoned their time-honoured stance and, along with Scotland, took the twenty-seven up to thirty.

Another EuroDéfense unit parachuted into the Scottish Borders and overnight readied pre-fabricated strategic positions in order to police the EU frontier with England.

The psychological impact of this was stark. England felt itself blockaded, ringed by the sea to the east and south, a new EU boundary in the north and an alienated (though still conjoined) Wales to the west.

All this acted as a vice. Initially, the pressure fused the population together, with common external forces sparking a collective siege mentality. But the jaws inexorably increased their grip, and so the splintering slowly started.

While this process of disintegration continued at its own pace, the construction of the UNE also progressed. And the increasing fusion of the thirty countries into one contrasted with ever-growing discomfort in

the eyes of the increasing number of observers gazing across the water from England.

There remained a well of ill-will towards the EU, many hoping that the entire project would collapse in bitterness and division. But, equally, there was a growing constituency who viewed the UNE with much the same optimism as the Israelites crossed the Sinai desert, impelled by the hope of a land of milk and honey that made the hardship worth suffering.

And with each significant development – Stockholm, Versailles, EU institutions – polarisation widened. The year after de Rouffignac's inauguration the cracks grew too wide to bridge.

Ever since the 2016 referendum campaign, those in favour of remaining had been armchair activists, apart from the occasional peaceful protest. The original campaign in favour of staying in the European Union had been woeful – passive, defensive, and with no hint of vision. At every stage, they had been badly led, out-thought and out-fought by opponents enthused by visionary, albeit largely fictitious and unattainable, concepts.

But now, they and the pro-Europe generations that followed found their fight. Many had felt that aggression and violence were an unacceptable contrast to the merits of persuasion and rational engagement. The tantalising joy issuing from Europe now triggered jealousy, aggravated by grief, a collective sense of loss sprung from that empty feeling which follows the death of a long-cherished dream.

In shadowy digi-zones, they began to plot, creating local cells that could launch lightning attacks of civil disobedience.

At first, it was a tenuous toe in the water. Mirroring one of the more insane notions that swirled around the cause of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, they began to destroy the 7G masts which delivered the ultra-high-speed info-highway.

Others sabotaged infrastructural targets. Railways, electric car charging points, solar farms – anything that would cause inconvenience without loss of life.

One early strand of resistance did achieve popular traction, while remaining firmly within the law. At the start of 2037, a mysterious, anonymous grouping announced its latest initiative. It decreed June 23rd to be Brexit Bonfire Night.

On that day, communities across the land would gather to drink Belgian and Czech beer, French and Italian wine, and eat sample dishes of Europe's great cuisines. And then they would burn effigies of the advocates of Brexit. The whole sorry parade of, those who once commanded the political and media worlds – Johnson, Gove, Cummings, Farage, and a score of the less well-remembered – all went up in smoke.

It was great fun, but was never going to be enough. Mockery and derision can only ever go so far. So, first, they launched their demands. Under the cryptic name UpoOpu, they threatened escalating actions without ruling out physical assaults and more unless England committed to a timetable to join the UNE.

It took about two minutes for government intelligence services to decipher the name. It was a contraction of *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno*, the Latin phrase meaning *One for all, all for one*, a nod to the unity of UNE as well as a reference to its adoption in French by Alexandre Dumas as the motto for his musketeers.

The government, of course, threatened to crush such criminality. But it found it much harder to penetrate the network than it did to reveal its name. The latest generation of technologies and processes took speed, mobility and flexibility to new levels almost indistinguishable from shape-shifting.

The moving spirits behind UpoOpu recognised the importance of such attributes and deployed the very newest encryption techniques and programming languages. These butterfly hybrids, as they were known, constantly mutated, flitting across dark webs or hiding in plain sight on open-source platforms. Their chameleon qualities effectively forged an impenetrable chrysalis around the movement.

Slowly, the temperature rose. Some might say that, at the outset, the air of rebellion was typically English – rather diffident, reserved, and with no

small degree of eccentricity. Over the next ten years, England stuttered, sometimes reeling after a period of silence as the confederacy of action groups operating under the UpoOpu umbrella carried out strikes. At other times, it seemed almost becalmed, although the slow, creeping decay manifested in unarguable symptoms of decline.

Marches meant to be peaceful descended into violence. Digi-posts rejected the notion of civil disobedience in unrestrained incitements to revolution. The stench of institutional gangrene seemed to float over the country and started to roll across the seas to continental Europe.

As 2046 melded into 2047, the UNE was becoming increasingly concerned about the growing friction on its doorstep.

Diplomatic approaches were spurned. The English government was firm that it could manage the situation on its own; indeed, it rejected any suggestions to the contrary.

But full-blooded civil war seemed not far off. Emboldened by success and the growing anxiety emanating from 10 Downing Street, UpoOpu kept upping the stakes. An increasingly fraught and aggressive tone characterised the frequent pronouncements from a beleaguered Downing Street.

With every action, UpoOpu felt it grew closer to its goal. And as each went unprevented and unpunished, it upped the stakes, choosing more and more iconic targets.

But when one operation in the North of England went wrong, the pivotal moment had arrived.

The North-East chapter had been hankering after a signature attack which would have not only symbolic significance but would provide stark visual imagery that held self-replicating viral potential.

They alighted on the massive statue beside the A1 road, the longest north-south artery in the country. After much logistical planning involving chemistry postgraduates from the university, they decided to dowse the Angel of the North in a viscous inflammable liquid while painting highly corrosive acid around the ankles and shins.

The plan was that it would stand there flaming while they streamed live video and that, after a period, it would start to subside as the metal failed and it slowly toppled.

The first part worked and images of an angel on fire flew around the world, the blazing shape silhouetted against the night, a beautiful yet terrifying metaphor for England. But the corrosion was much slower than anticipated and they had to flee before the collapse.



The team of eight had mapped their escape with precision, having calculated spy satellite orbits, hacked into police drone flight paths and scouted the myriad cameras that now covered all conurbations and main transport routes. Using off-road vehicles, they navigated minor tracks and fields to make their way north. They had decided to take refuge in Scotland, where sympathetic locals were primed to harbour them.

After laying low in a derelict cottage deep within the Kielder National Park, the group switched to electric dirt-bikes. The following evening they just managed to dodge a roadblock but were spotted and became the target of a sophisticated, high-tech manhunt.

Despite launching heat-seeking attack drones to use firepower to halt their progress, English law enforcement could not actually prevent them crossing into the Scottish Borders along an abandoned, tree-shrouded railway.

Farida Bhattacharya, the Conservative Prime Minister of England since a party coup in 2045, issued an immediate and aggressive demand for their instant return. She made no explicit threats, but implied some form of direct action allied to an expectation that the rule of law would be scrupulously adhered to. The irony was not lost on those with long memories who recalled the furore when the British government reneged on its EU treaty obligations.

Which was how it was that one of the many disadvantages to emerge from the wreckage wrought by Brexit came into high relief. In its hunger

to detach fully from the European Union, England had declined to stay formally connected to EuroPol (by now, of course, UnePolícia), sacrificing access to effective law enforcement arrangements such as the European Arrest Warrant.

This isolation was just one facet of the overall aim to stand sovereign and apart in a global world. But it came at a price, one clearly explained by the Governor of Scotland, Mhairi Black.

“The alleged perpetrators of this act of political protest are on the sovereign land of the Union of the Nations of Europe, here in Scotland.

“They have requested political asylum on the basis that, were they to be returned to England, they would suffer harsh and unjust treatment. Outwith evidence to the contrary, the position of the UNE is to assume this to be the case.

“When the United Kingdom departed the European Union, it unilaterally excluded itself from multilateral agreements designed to enhance law enforcement.

“Now, they have no ground to stand on and must suffer the indignities that flow from their short-sighted decisions.

“The request to return these English citizens is denied. If the government in London is willing to submit itself to a system of justice that culminates in the authority of UneCorte de Justiça, it is open to them to challenge this decision initially in the High Court in Edinburgh.

“Were they to lose there, they can appeal to Luxembourg, which is what we will do should the verdict to go the other way.”

To reinforce the UNE’s firmness of purpose, the defence garrison was mobilised right to the border in a show of strength to discourage any military incursion. In tandem with this first mobilisation in anger under the new flag, Chief Minister Hämäläinen announced that special forces would also be despatched to Scotland.

One of the vestiges of importance which England had cleaved to was the notion of military might. It had continued to fund the development and

maintenance of a so-called independent nuclear deterrent, even as the spiralling costs of doing so dwarfed budgets for education and health.

Now it moved a submarine carrying the warheads to the North Sea off the Scottish coast. At the same time, a major troop movement brought infantry and armaments to the border, while helicopters swooped over the border lands, straying occasionally into UNE territory in a symbolic threat.

The irony of this was not lost on anyone. The UNE was formed in no small way to assure that war within its territory was impossible. And here was England – the only nation state within the original EU that had voluntarily detached itself – representing the first threat to that original aim.

It was as if the country had gone from mainstream to rogue in just a few decades. And it became even more isolated with the announcement from the White House.

President Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was two years into her first term. Her priority foreign policy initiative after inauguration on Saturday January 20th 2045 had been to fly to Europe and begin the process of a major deepening and broadening of the relationship in advance of de Rouffignac's inauguration that had been a fixture in her diary since she won the election in November 2044.

But it still came as a shock to the core for the English political establishment when she called a press conference in the Rose Garden.

“We have been watching the developments in England with increasing unhappiness. The sabre-rattling from the government is unwelcome and ill-advised.

“Instead, it should be striving to meet the legitimate concerns of its citizens and address the underlying causes of their anxiety and anger.

“We do not condone the violent actions of the movement known as UpoOpu. But neither do we support the behaviour of 10 Downing Street.

“The United States of America cannot stand by while its allies, be they old or newer, rush headlong towards a very damaging and prolonged dispute.

“I have today written to Prime Minister Bhattacharya and told her that there are no circumstances in which I will authorise the use of the weaponry on board His Majesty's Submarine Audacious.

“In the same letter – which also went to the leaders of the Union of the Nations of Europe – I offered the diplomatic support of the USA to bring about a speedy conclusion to the current dispute and to find a long-term solution to England's precarious situation.

“I urge all parties – and, in particular, the English government – to recognise the facts on the ground and to develop solutions that are sustainable and offer a basis for a permanent plan for the future.”

This really was the beginning of the end of English sovereignty.

UpoOpu announced it would be abandoning its direct actions, turning instead to the ballot as a way to achieve its core – indeed, only – objective: the absorption of England into the UNE.

The emergence into mainstream politics of a single-issue party mirrored what happened when the Brexiteers cranked up the pressure on the Conservative Party leading up to the 2016 referendum and subsequent elections.

But the Tories had not been the dominant force in British politics for nothing. The party possessed an almost mystical ability to change direction when its grip on the levers of power was threatened. Once again, it reacted decisively.

Tuesday, September 18th 2047
Number 10 Downing Street
 London, England

Prime Minister Bhattacharya was nothing if not a pragmatist. Although she had entered Parliament in 2024 supporting a manifesto consisting of little more than the deceitful slogan *Making Brexit Work*, she had watched with increasing incredulity and concern the virtual disintegration of the Leave movement over the five years between that marginal victory and loss of power.

As she climbed the hierarchy, she assiduously and shrewdly winkled out of the faceless mass of backbench MPs a cohort of more independently-minded and sceptical colleagues.

It slowly dawned on them that the very idea of Brexit was so fundamentally flawed that they became embarrassed to be connected to it.

And as the EU continued its journey towards becoming the UNE, so this quiet and thoughtful band of sisters and brothers carefully sourced funding for the volte-face which they all knew to be inevitable.

That Bhattacharya became prime minister was, in truth, as much to do with the paucity of opponents as it was any innate brilliance. But she knew how to play the game and, with all the main Brexit actors gone to ashes, dust or the after-dinner circuit, those who remained to keep the flame alight lacked the guile, cynicism and bare-faced dishonesty necessary to carry off the attendant and indispensable deceit.

After the triple blow dealt by UpoOpu, President Ocasio-Cortez and the Governor of Scotland (on behalf of the UNE), she convened a crisis cabinet and told it to them straight.

“Does anyone believe our position is sustainable?”

An oppressive silence.

“Does anyone have any ideas of how we can re-engineer our current situation and deliver long-term stability?”

Another protracted quiet that was, if anything starting to transition into naked tension.

“Can we at least agree that we should grant an amnesty to all UpoOpu leaders and operatives?”

Instantly, the previous stillness fractured.

“You have got to be joking!”

“No! Too much, that’s too much. We’re meant to be the party of law and order, for Heaven’s sake.”

“It gives all the anarchists carte blanche to break any law they want.”

“Bit ironic, isn’t it” Bhattacharya continued “that the most ardent anti-European among us is speaking French.”

Uneasy laughter.

“It’s a necessary precursor to seeking to join the UNE.”

“We can’t!”

“Our voters will murder us. We’ll be finished as a political party.”

“Three centuries of Tory rule is consigned to the dustbin. This can’t be. It can’t!”

“Who was it” she asked “who said: ‘Greater love hath no monarch than this but that they lay down their crown for their country’?”

“This is the moment that history books will talk about until the Earth burns.

“This is the day, this is the hour when we stand up humbly and say ‘We were wrong. Brexit was a bad idea.’ Constitutional Aggregation was a seminal concept that changed the game. We should have shifted policy in the mid-2020s and accepted the force of its implications.

“That we didn’t should be a source of shame. But it’s not too late. And now we can draw a straight line from that wretched referendum straight

to this very point when history calls upon us to do what is best for our people.

“So this is what we must say to our citizens. And we should do so in unambiguous terms that marry humility and decisiveness.

“Will there be push-back? Of course. But we shall be resolute and firm in insisting that this will be a consensual process which must be ratified by the people.

“Colleagues, if anyone wishes to resign and oppose this directional shift, then you are welcome to do so. This will not blight your future career for as long as I lead our great party. I recognise the difficulty this will cause many in this room, on the backbenches and in the country. But I see no alternative.

“Would any of you like to leave?”

“Can we not have some time to reflect, Prime Minister?”

“Yes, I agree. I’m feeling somewhat railroaded, to be honest.”

Bhattacharya bit back.

“Oh, come on, gentlemen, give me a break. You must have considered this possibility. We’ve all known this choice was coming – and coming fast. None of you can surely pretend it’s a surprise, can you?”

“We are in trouble. Increasingly detached from Washington. Alienated from Europe. Proven to struggle on our own.

“These are, in the famous phrase, ‘known knowns’, even if they’ve been ‘unstated knowns’ until now.

“Again, is anyone leaving? If you stay, you stay as positive, committed advocates. No backing out later and leading opposition to the strategy – that’s not part of the deal.”

None moved. Each of them knew that, no matter how uncomfortable they felt or how great an embarrassment their previous advocacy for Brexit, this was the only way to bring about closure and security.

“OK, that’s great. Thank you, colleagues, your wisdom and support is very much appreciated.

“Here is the speech I would like to make outside straight after this meeting. Please read it while I call His Majesty, then President de Rouffignac and Chief Minister Hämäläinen.”

With the last of the late summer sunlight fading into evening, the Prime Minister’s exit from Number 10 and short walk to the podium came illuminated by the lightning of a hundred cameras and television lights.

Tension had been building throughout the day as the Cabinet had gathered after breakfast in the teeth of the escalating crisis.

Her speech had shocked ministerial colleagues with its blunt and uncompromising tone. It was like no other in its frank assessment of where England was and what should be done to restore a sense of direction and tranquillity.

“Good evening, and thank you for your patience.

“I do not believe that any of my predecessors have been faced with what currently confronts this country, and the time has long passed to pretend that the English garden is all roses.

“What I have to say will dismay some and delight others. But the cabinet is united in agreeing that nothing less is demanded of us than a total reassessment of where our country is just now.

“We are unanimous that our country, so profoundly ill at ease with itself, must change course or suffer the inevitable fate of all post-imperial nations – decades, centuries or worse of decay and obsolescence.

“This would condemn our people to a catastrophic decline in living standards and quality of life. No government with even a vestige of integrity or self-respect could do this. Mine will not.

“I first entered Parliament on a manifesto of ‘Making Brexit Work’. I supported it because the referendum of 2016 had divided our country and engendered stasis in our politics. Despite ‘getting Brexit done’ after 2019, in the five years before I was first elected, we remained mired in the repercussions of exiting without so many of the benefits and retentions recklessly promised by the ardent advocates of the Leave campaign.

“I supported Brexit because I believed, wrongly, that Britain could forge a viable and independent path in a global world. Had I known about Professor de Rouffignac’s work on Constitutional Aggregation and what that analysis showed on predictive modelling I would – at the very least – have been more challenging and sceptical about the entire philosophy and process of leaving the European Union.

“That I was not is a cause of personal shame and embarrassment which I hope I will be given the chance to rectify.

“One of the key disciplines I have learned is that, when the facts change, one’s opinions must also. I believe that far too many of the Brexit generation have clung to a fantasy of what can be done by a small country on its own. I have been guilty of that, as has my party. But no more.

“It has been all too easy over political generations to take a single poor statistic or weak metric and finesse it by distinguishing causation on subject-specific grounds, with no wider relevance. This habit has prevented us from drawing broader inferences which could question overall strategic directions.

“We cannot, will not, continue in that vein.

“Our position in international educational league tables has been in relative freefall for years. It is, quite simply, a national disgrace.

“Healthcare spend as a percentage of GDP ranks behind every country with which we like to compare ourselves – and many more we might otherwise look down our noses at. How can we retain our self-respect in the face of such data?”

“Defence budgets are higher per capita than any other country in the world, principally because we lack the economies of scale available to larger nations or the membership of the UNE’s UneVerteidigung.

“Infant mortality has been rising, shockingly.

“We still have far too many families in poverty, struggling to feed themselves. Totally unacceptable.

“Industrial productivity has remained frustratingly low.

“And, despite its centrality to arguments in favour of Brexit, immigration remains an economic necessity. The inevitability of this now seems so obvious, but this wasn’t always the case. Yet we are cut off from the sources of labour just across the North Sea, English Channel and Irish Sea, instead having to import workers from thousands of miles away. It is madness.

“There will be those among you who wish to continue an ‘angels-on-pin-heads’ debate about each of these. Well, don’t. It’s over. The picture becomes ever starker when you chart these numbers over decades. In which case, you see an undeniable picture of systemic and long-term decline.

“Well, this government is saying ‘No more’. The time has come to reverse all these trends in order to give our children and those generations that will follow them the chance to live in a country which is safe, prosperous and serene.

“So I have today informed His Majesty that a request has been submitted to the President and Chief Minister of the Union of the Nations of Europe that England wishes to start negotiations which would lead to our admission to the Union.

“The result of that negotiation would be in the form of a draft treaty put to all citizens of England who are over the age of sixteen. It will include any resident who has been here for two years and who pays national or local taxes either individually or as part of a household. All prisoners with fewer than five years to serve on their sentence will receive an electronic vote.

“We have thought long and hard about the proportion of the population or the electorate whose consent would be necessary. And I have also looked at countries like Australia, where voting is compulsory and every state of the federation must approve the kind of seismic change being proposed.

“In the end, it felt like changing the rules mid-game if we now adopt a more stringent measurement than that deployed in the 2016 referendum.

“So we will propose that a simple majority of the votes cast will be a binding instruction to Parliament to ratify the treaty.

“My fellow citizens, today is the day that we all hold hands and say that the dream of Brexit was a false hope. That the promise of sovereignty and independence was an illusion. That the world has moved on and we have failed to keep pace. And that the new Union across the waters and north of Hadrian’s Wall offers the future we need for our people to thrive.

“Long into the future when today is their history, people will say ‘They had the courage to say they had been wrong. They had the vision to recognise there was a better way. And they had the tenacity to make that vision a reality.’”

Monday, May 9th 2050, 11.00 CET

Quinquennial Celebration and Accession Ceremony

The Ballroom, Palais Monnet, Brussels, Belgium

Édouard de Rouffignac has just been elected for another five-year term as President of the UNE.

Once again the Palais was full to overflowing, with the temporary stage filling one end of the ballroom. All the guests had assembled and were awaiting the arrival of the platform party.

The President came out to a smattering of applause. Chief Minister Hämäläinen, cabinet, the Speaker of UneParlament and an assortment of other dignitaries followed. The audience itself was made up of ambassadors, journalists, UNE officials and the like.

De Rouffignac engaged Version 9.0 of his exo-skeleton and strode up to the dais to introduce proceedings.

“Honoured guests, welcome to this, the fifth anniversary of the founding of our Union of the Nations of Europe.”

This time the clapping was significantly louder and longer than that which greeted him and the rest when they mounted the temporary stage.

“Today, we take a little time to remember how far we have come. Since I spoke to you from this very spot five years ago, the Union has made giant strides.

“We have become a fixture on the international stage as an enabler of peace and a catalyst of progress.

“The UNE is a respected and sought-after partner as the countries of the world battle the global challenges which we can only overcome together.

“In this way, we have been active players in the greatest task of all – to resolve our climate crisis. And I think I can say with some confidence that, if we had federated earlier, much could have been done to mitigate the impacts of humanity on the environment. But, better late than never,

we are seeing some very encouraging metrics in terms of warming and marine pollution.

“That the UNE has tackled its own energy challenges so rapidly and constructively has been one of the most uplifting and exciting aspects of my watching brief as President. It is one whose legacy will stretch long into the future. So, thank you Chief Minister Hämäläinen for your inspirational leadership in this, as in so much else.”

The room and platform rose as one to honour their leader. After a small while, de Rouffignac stilled them with a hand.

“I will not, if you’ll forgive me, indulge in a long recital of successes. We all know them and cherish them for the benefits they have brought to our people.

“But I would like to dwell on the lessons that I, at least, have learned, if I may.

“First among these is the need for mutual respect, particularly for each other’s heritage. The experiences of, say, Poland and Portugal are so different. Yet they are both rooted in the traditions and psyches of their people. Now it is, of course, still very early days. Rome wasn’t built in a day; neither was it rebuilt speedily after Nero fiddled. This European renaissance still has many kilometres to travel, but the journey has begun with some justifiable optimism.

“My second lesson is to be patient. Bringing thirty previously autonomous nations together and travelling at the same speed in the same direction will continue to be challenging for a long time yet. But there is much goodwill and many signs that nations who have differed in their attitudes, say, to gay marriage, have managed to understand each other’s position.

“Which leads to the third lesson: the need for compromise. The EU thrived on finding a deal at the last minute. And that habit has continued. We all see the need to give a little to gain a lot and, as the years go by, we will see a deeper and broader coming together as the years of individual sovereignty fade into more distant time.

“Today does not only mark the celebration of five years of being a formal union, happy though that is, of course.

“It also signifies the lowering of the drawbridge to welcome new members to our family.”

This brought them all once more to their feet. For they knew that a truly significant moment had been reached.

“When we Thugs made our initial recommendations, one cornerstone was that it was vital that we worked with the current membership of the EU. Not knowing how timescales would evolve, we said that for at least ten years, from 2035, all the planning and treaty negotiation had to be contained and to bring in new nations would be problematic, to say the least.

“It has proved to be fifteen years before the UNE was ready to expand. Just before we raised that drawbridge, the EU welcomed three new members: Norway, Scotland and Switzerland.

“Today we grow our numbers by three more and I will now invite each Head of State and first minister to join Chief Minister Hämäläinen and myself to sign the accession treaty.

“First, Iceland. Please welcome President Ingólfur Egiłsson and Prime Minister Hallveig Traustadóttir.”

As the audience stood, a fanfare from the gallery played *Lofsöngur*, the Icelandic anthem, for its last time as the national song of a sovereign nation.

The signing was quickly over, and Egiłsson and Traustadóttir took their place at the UNE table.

“Next, we greet Wales.”

As a male voice choir filled the room with *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, the rugby-loving members among the gathering could not prevent themselves humming along to that most rousing of all national anthems.

Into the room strode the First Minister of Wales, Rhisiart ap Hywel, accompanied by His Majesty King William the Fifth. After they had signed, ap Hywel joined the Icelandic pair.

“And, finally, England.”

As a beaming Prime Minister Bhattacharya came out to join the King, the crowd erupted, drowning out *God Save the King*, even while its beneficiary stood in perfect stillness beside his PM.

After they signed, de Rouffignac came to the podium.

“Five short years ago, at my inauguration, I spoke directly to England. Despite a very dark period, they saw the light. I am as thrilled as I am grateful that Prime Minister Bhattacharya was able to show such strong and decisive leadership. When I took her call that September afternoon, it was a moment of pure joy.

“At last, my dear, dear friends, our European family feels complete.”

The ovation swelled to overwhelm the room. As the King and PM embraced, itself another never-before moment, it was as if the whole of Europe enveloped England in the forgiving embrace that awaits the yearned-for return of a prodigal child.

As the applause at last began to recede, it was replaced by the familiar strains of the UNE anthem.

Together they sang of that dream of joy and brotherhood, first penned by Schiller more than two hundred and fifty years before – and then both immortalised and liberated from language by Beethoven.

The end ... and the beginning

Notes

Cover: designed by Matt Covarr (www.covarrdesign.com) after an idea from the author

Page2: the quotation by Antonio Gramsci is from *Prison Notebooks Volume II*, Notebook 3 (1930)

Page 4: the Jean Monnet words referred were his declaration to the National Liberation Committee, the French Government in exile in Algiers (5.8.1943): “There will be no peace in Europe, if the states are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty...The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the necessary prosperity and social development. The European states must constitute themselves into a federation.”

Page 7: the references to Harari are to “*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*”, ‘The Unification of Mankind’, Yuval Noah Harari, first published 2011

Page 14: the Pushkin quotation is from his short story “The History of the Village of Goryukhino” (1837)

Page 18: de Rouffignac’s quotation from Bertrand Russell is from his essay “The Triumph of Stupidity” (1933)

Page 22: the Jensen quotation was made at the ‘Road to Brexit’ conference in Copenhagen (13.6.2017)

Page 32: the reference to Zamyatin is to Yevgeny Zamyatin and his essay “The State of Russian Literature”, ‘A piece for an anthology on books’ (1928)

Page 41: the James Baldwin quotation is from “As Much Truth As One Can Bear”, *New York Times Book Review* (14.01.1962)

Page 72: The image of the Angel of the North is © Michael Bosanko and is reproduced with kind permission (www.michaelbosanko.com)

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Many thanks.