

Welcome back, Geoff Hoon

The new minister for Europe has a lot on his plate, writes Richard Laming, Chair of the European Movement's Campaigns & Communications Committee.

The government reshuffle earlier this month saw Geoff Hoon return to the post of Minister for Europe. He has held the job before, for three months in 1999, since which he has been Secretary of State for Defence and Leader of the House of Commons. He also spent 10 years as an MEP and played a major role in the debates ratifying the Maastricht treaty, so he is certainly well-qualified.

Maybe it's not so exciting, going back to a job in government you have already held. But in the seven years that have passed since then, much has changed. To be Europe minister today is a very different challenge.

Back then, the big debate was about the euro. Europe's single currency had come into existence at the start of 1999, but Britain was a non-member. In fact, the policy since then hasn't changed: the government's view is still that Britain will join the euro when and if the economic conditions are met. Of course, in reality, much has changed. The economic conditions weren't met, and with hindsight it is hard to see how they could have been. The debate about Britain joining the euro has simply gone away. The strategy back then was "to prepare and then decide": these days there is no preparation because everyone knows there will be no decision.

Today, the big issue is the future of the constitutional treaty. The glidepath towards ratification has been brought to halt by the two referendum defeats, although some member states seem determined to get the process restarted.

Unlike the euro, where the question of whether Britain joined was effectively down to the British alone, the future of the constitutional treaty depends on agreement amongst all 25 member states. At the time of Maastricht, when plans for the single currency were first laid, Britain and the others agreed to disagree. That can't work this time.

But there are not only differences between 1999 and now, there are also similarities.

In the run-up to the launch of the euro, there was a widespread disbelief in Britain about what was happening. Many people found it hard to imagine that European countries might take such a step together. John Major famously described preparations for the euro as like a rainedance. As a result, Britain was unprepared for what followed.

There were no such doubts in the countries that formed the eurozone. They knew that they were taking a giant step in the direction of a stronger Europe, creating new opportunities for businesses on a European scale. The recent growth slow-down is for reasons of domestic policy, not the new currency, and we are likely to see new action at the European level to reverse it. A healthy continental European economy makes a better trading partner for Britain, just as it did in the 1990s.

It is important that Britain does not make the mistake of underestimating its neighbours again. The determination to make a success of the European Union remains, even if the

constitutional treaty might not. The need for a democratic and accountable EU grows stronger everyday, and there is a continuing debate about how to proceed.

But unlike the debate about the euro, the UK is no longer in self-enforced exile. Anglo-Saxon scepticism and disbelief are no longer useful tools, if they ever were. It must be a key priority for Geoff Hoon to ensure that the British voice is heard in this debate, and that the British people are informed about it. Both Britain and the rest of Europe depend on his success.

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