

Ladies and gentlemen

About fifteen years ago, when I still was an anonymous hobby politician, with an actual job as an assistant professor at the department of modern history at the university of Leuven, I wrote an essay on the present-day value of Edmund Burke's ideas for a Flemish newspaper. To my own surprise the essay was quite well read and provoked a lively public debate. At that point in my nation's history, it was evident and self-explanatory for every intellectual below the age of 70 to proclaim him- or herself a progressive. By consequence, the essay was received like a loud curse in a quiet church: everybody looked at me with a gaze of wonder, compassion or disgust.

To be called a conservative, wasn't exactly a compliment. There were no conservative politicians or parties in Belgium and people who called themselves conservative were considered to be strange creatures, still living in the dark ages. In the words of Roger Scruton: a conservative was seen as someone who chose „age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation, the 'structures' against spontaneity and life".

No politician in Flanders wanted to be associated with such a derogative term. Even those who were conservative would never actually use the word. It was deemed destructive to do so in a media landscape dominated by left wing editorialists. Politicians then, like many still do today, believed that opinions of newspapers actually dictate what people think. As I begged to differ, I decided to pursue a political career and to sail under the conservative flag.

Journalists and political analysts didn't give a penny for the chances of the new political party we founded. But within the first decade of our existence, we became the country's leading political formation. In 2006, I was the sole elected representative of my party in the city council of Antwerp. In 2012 we almost managed to obtain 40% of the popular vote in the city and ended the socialist rule that lasted for eighty years. So I dare to say that we proved wrong all those who considered it impossible to raise the conservative flag. In the church of intellectuals and pundits, they stopped looking at us with wonder and compassion. But the disgust is still there...

But let me come back to the man we owe for our success: Edmund Burke. Already as a college student I had admired the Irish statesman for his stubbornness and his adherence to stark principles. Born from a catholic background, he had to spend his lifetime hiding his identity, but none the less he fought against the discrimination of Catholics in Great Britain, just as he fought against the abuse of power in India or strove for more autonomy for the American Colonies. As a product of the Flemish emancipatory movement, that was something I could relate to.

But why is Burke still relevant today? We live in – what some like to call – a post-ideological age. An age in which liberalism seems to fail, and socialism has transmuted into something beyond recognition. Liberals are obsessed with open borders and global citizenship, socialists with individual privileges, safe spaces and laws that protect feelings. Just yesterday I read an article about an English sexuality expert claiming that parents should ask their babies for their permission before changing a diaper in order to set up a culture of consent from birth. The expert recognized that babies are unable to give an answer, but said it's important to use eye contact to teach them their response matters... I could not help but wonder what Winston Churchill would have thought of this.

As ridiculous as this may seem, it is a good example of how liberalism and socialism have undermined and tried to demolish the recipes and values that are fundamental to govern our lives. No more tradition, no more authority, not even over your own baby. The grand narrative of the European culture seems to have run its course and lies exhausted at the side of the tracks. Our cultural hardware is still there. Buildings, paintings, music and institutions such as universities, operas or

musea can still be found in any major European city. But the software on which this hardware operates, is faltering. Young people walk through our cities looking at buildings and statues like we walk through prehistoric caves looking at ancient drawings: not knowing why they were made or what they mean. Our culture is permeated by a metaphysical unease, a moral panic even, caused by an undefined sense of loss. The degradation of our operating system went largely unseen – until it started crashing. That’s what is happening today. And that is exactly why we should reread Burke. He can help us to reboot.

Let me remind you, by way of disclaimer, of Burke’s essential insight: wisdom cannot be contained within one head, one class or one system, nor in theories or even in a generation. Only in society as a whole can wisdom exist. ‘The individual is foolish, the multitude is foolish; but the species is wise,’ Burke wrote. And that wisdom is contained in institutions and traditions, and the spontaneous pre-political attitudes that shape social life. Abstract reason cannot replace these, but it can lead to their demise.

That insight is at the heart of Burke’s critique of the French revolution. Burke did not oppose the Enlightenment as such. One could even make the argument that Burke was a part of that same Enlightenment. Again, his sympathy for the plight of the American colonies, his preoccupation with the British rule in India, his relentless pursuit to empower parliament at the cost of the crown’s dominion, ... These are not the political handlings of a man keen on safeguarding an old and outdated social order. As a young man he even evoked the admiration from Immanuel Kant and David Hume for his ‘A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful’.

Burke however, did oppose the French Revolution with all the intellectual strength that was left in him. He considered it an act of the highest human conceit to imagine – as the French Revolutionaries did – that one could reshape an entire society overnight. In his mind, this could only lead to the downfall of all social order, escalate into bloodshed and eventually end in a coup d’état by the army and a military dictatorship. Words that would become prophetic as the Revolution derailed into the Terror of Robespierre and the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte.

However, not all of Burke’s predictions came true. The French Revolution didn’t destroy all traditions and institutions. Some were transformed, others adapted themselves to an industrialized, urbanized and democratic society. And Burke was a child of his day. The political project of bringing equality and democracy to the upcoming middle classes was difficult for him to grasp. He could not understand democracy and social relations in the way we do.

Burke’s famous ‘costly social fabric’, which tied all human endeavour together, relied heavily upon the church and the nobility, upon the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion. To us, that sounds rather outdated. Christianity is still part of our cultural heritage, but the god of Christianity has become powerless. There are few Christians in Europe for whom the social norms of their religion dictate their daily conduct. And there are hardly any left for whom divine law is superior to human law. If there are, they are the last of the past, not the first of the future.

I would argue that conservatism has absorbed the revolution. The spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion have been replaced by the spirit of Enlightenment. Freedom and equality are our new gods, for better or for worse. And as conservatives, we have to ask ourselves: how do we connect this to the quest for community? How do we create a shared feeling of responsibility based on this knowledge? How do we define the res publica today? And how do we translate the answers to these questions into guiding principles with a sound metaphysical foundation? After all, people are metaphysical creatures, so we require metanarratives to shape our lives.

It is true, in his Reflections, Burke spoke of 'the patriotic crimes of an enlightened age', and about the 'solid darkness of this enlightened age'. But we must remember, Burke identified the Enlightenment with the French revolution. As Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote: it took more than a century for the noun to make its appearance in English. It was not until the 20th century that people started to talk about something as the 'Scottish Enlightenment.'

Since then, the meaning of the term has been broadened. I believe that the secret of the success of my political party is exactly that we embraced Enlightenment as a conservative tool. We confronted progressive, neo-enlightened thinkers dreaming their shallow dream of a world citizenship with the wisdom articulated by Roger Scruton: 'the national idea is not the enemy of Enlightenment but its necessary precondition.' The modern European nation-states are rooted in the principle that a country is defined by a territory, and by the history, culture and law that thrusts this territory upon the shoulders of its people. European intellectuals like Hobbes, Burke and de Tocqueville developed the enlightened political theories that allow us to continue on this path.

That is what Enlightenment means: nations rather than tribes, citizens rather than races, and democracies rather than dynasties or theocracies. Furthermore, nations require borders. National solidarity, the sense of responsibility we have for each other, requires that we see each other not as 'wholly other,' as potentially everybody, as the postmodern defenders of global citizenship would have it, but as a recognizable other, someone from the same nation, a player of the same team.

As the mayor of a city with 175 different nationalities, this is something that I experience every day. People don't identify with the vague notion of 'humankind' or with an abstract social contract. It is only through sharing a public culture with solid ground-rules that people become attached to a community: to the idea of a shared past and – more important – of a shared future.

That is why the European Union will never become a European nation. Because it is a combination of many nations, with different languages, not to mention political preferences. That is why 'more Europe' is not the solution to everything. A one-size-fits-all policy can simply never work with the European peoples. The future of the EU is dependent on the sovereign decisions made by sovereign governments, not on a commission of unelected officials in Brussels.

Therefore, I will always oppose to the idea of European taxes. For the same reason Burke supported the American revolutionaries: no taxation without representation. Citizens pay taxes to their governments, to their countries, so that they can build roads and bridges and be accountable to their co-citizens, with whom they share historical ties of loyalty and solidarity. People don't want to pay taxes to a faraway bureaucrat, so it can be used to pay off the debts of some southern European government. How am I supposed to explain to my plumber that the taxes he pays will be used to help the Greek communist government, if he can't vote for or – preferably – against that government?

It is only through nations that Europe can survive. Burke understood that nations consist of people who make their own decisions about how to live their lives. Individual citizens, who organize themselves in families, communities, small businesses and spontaneous associations. Or what Burke called "the little platoons we belong to in society."

This is something that both we and the British conservatives understand. And it's why we worked so well together in the European parliament. So, I'm sorry, but it makes me sad to see you're leaving. I'd rather see you stay next to us to combat the threat of a European super state. But I understand why you left, and although you cannot expect me to celebrate it, I do respect the sovereign choice of a proud people and a brave nation.

Let's never forget that the EU is only a treaty. It is not the EU, but history that ties us together. Antwerp will never forget who liberated our city in September 1944 and gave their lives in the battle of the Scheldt river. The gates of Antwerp will never be closed to you. Your bravery and your sacrifice earned you that right. History made us more than just friendly neighbours, it forged us into brothers and sisters.

However, there are those on the continent who immensely rejoice in the Brexit. They celebrate the loss of an inconvenient obstacle that was blocking the path to a federal European Union. But for them I have bad news. That critical voice will not disappear. We will pick up the torch and hold it high. The fight for the future of Europe will not stop. I can promise you this: there will always be a voice on the continent fighting for the rights of sovereign nations, against the blind Jacobin arrogance of those who want to surpass it.

Burke resented revolutionary France because of its obsession with abstractions over the tangible reality of every day, because of its contempt for the experience of normal people and the settled order, because of its adherence to universalist principles that treated every individual as an administrative subject and because of its unprecedented incursion into the private sphere.

Had he lived long enough, I'm pretty sure Burke would have been equally horrified by the replacement of the aristocracy with a new elite of bureaucrats. And ultimately, that is why Burke is still relevant today. He serves as a guide and a warning. Europe wasn't invented after World War Two, it has a long and lengthy history. It is the accumulation of hundreds of years of experience, of triumphs and defeats, of deeds of genius and deeds of the greatest atrocities. It's a source of pride and a source of sorrow. It's something to boast about and it's something to be humble about.

If we neglect this reality, if we give way to the illusion that the complexity of Europe is of no importance nor interest, we are bound to make the same mistakes as the French Revolutionaries. We will allow a viable and legitimate political project to be corrupted by our own vanity and illusions of grandeur. And one day, when ordinary people are fed up and the tensions between every day experience and the abstract regulations of Brussels becomes unbearable, it will collapse.

I, for one, fear that day. And it can only be avoided if we follow the principles of Burke. We must act with care and deliberation, with respect for the diversity of Europe and the knowledge that every nation has accumulated. It is my honest opinion, that if the Brussels elites would have handled in this manner, the Brexit could have been avoided.

But alas, for now, I am doomed to conclude with Burke that the age of European chivalry has gone. In Brussels, the sophisters, economists and calculators have taken over. Let us just hope that the glory of Europe isn't extinguished forever.