Peace in our time: Neville Chamberlain returns to the UK in September 1938 after the Munich Conference with Hitler and other European leaders
The UK – or is that merely England? – is drowning in “the national interest”. The national interest is everywhere, pouring out of parliament, spouted in TV and radio studios by interviewees of all Brexit stripes, and obligatorily inserted into politicians’ op-ed pieces (which are largely ghosted by press officers, who know what the zeitgeist demands).

Brexit has turbo-charged the phrase. It is not so much spoken as incanted – to ensure there can be no mistaking the sincerity and high-mindedness of the speaker, their nobility of purpose, the seriousness of the issue at hand, the obvious and unique rightness of the solution they desire. But the “national interest” used in this way is less a phrase, more a verbal burp. If you agree with the point of view of the person who recites it, that’s fine – but resist the temptation to bathe in your own national interest virtue and, more importantly, please don’t assume that anyone who begs to differ is lacking in feeling for the nation or its interests – in other words, is something of a second-rate citizen, deficient in patriotism.

Theresa May lunges towards “the national interest” more often than anyone else – but given that her job is sorting out the referendum mess, that is understandable. There is some tactical variation. In October, before her agreement with the EU 27 the following month, she deployed it to reinforce Ken Clarke, the veteran Europhile MP, after he urged her to work with the opposition: “When we come back with a deal, I would hope everybody across this whole house will put the national interest first.”

That was a call to the higher status of “the national interest”, aimed at the souls of Labour MPs whom she hoped (still hopes) she could detach from Jeremy Corbyn’s “not on your life” view of voting to pass any Conservative Brexit deal.

But usually, given the Conservative civil war, the focus is squarely on her own MPs and members of the cabinet. After-two-and-a-half years of Brexit cacophony it has become apparent that the more orthodox means of persuasion – variously, calls for party unity; the semblance of adherence to the convention of collective cabinet responsibility; the straightforward need to govern; and, in the case of backbenchers, the deprivation of goodies doled out by the whips – have not singly or together provided sufficient motivation to agree a policy.

The national interest is portable. The phrase can be trotted out anywhere. It flies around the world with the Prime Minister: appearing in New York for the UN General Assembly and in Buenos Aires for the...
The national interest is unlikely to be a lump of opinion and policy that we can discover on a treasure hunt

once held” by calling for a second referendum. Nicola Sturgeon has used it in Brexit debates in Holyrood, although it is not always wholly clear to which nation she is referring.

The pundits too like the declaratory, ringing sound of the national interest. David Cameron’s former policy director Camilla Cavendish, writing in the Financial Times after May’s victory in the leadership confidence vote last month, said that the PM could now make “decisions in the national interest” because the hard Brexit European Research Group types had been isolated.

Whereas Paul Mason, from the Corbynite left, writing on the New Statesman website in November, wagged his finger at Labour MPs who might be tempted to vote for May’s deal, telling them they were in danger of betraying not just the working class and the Labour Party but “the national interest of this country”. Everyone is at it. Throw in Simon Jenkins at the Guardian, from the maverick centre. He wants a free vote in parliament on the May deal because that too would be “in the national interest”.

Enough. From all the above, and myriad other examples from all points in the political spectrum, we can easily deduce that the national interest is unlikely to be a discoverable lump of opinion and policy. We cannot find the damn thing by simply following the right clues in a national treasure hunt. The solution is not conveniently chiselled into a rock somewhere in the middle of the UK, where we could all read the one and only magical “national interest” answer to Brexit – to the accompaniment of a truly national round of applause. If only.

Every now and then the affairs of state – or more accurately put, the survival of the nation – gives “the national interest” genuine meaning and clarity.
and provide sufficient coherence to implement what comes out of the mixer.

But in this particular contest the two big political parties are near-hopeless instruments. The political system, in England at any rate, is driftwood when it comes to Europe – and has been, on and off, for decades. The politics of capital and labour is what most significantly defined the difference between the Conservatives and Labour in the 20th century, not war and peace, and certainly not membership of the EU.

The class base of politics may feel out of time for many, but the first-past-the-post electoral system allows the Conservatives and Labour to cling on – aged gorillas with their internal organs bleeding, yet still able to intimidate by their mere presence those MPs who might yearn for a different mapping of ideology or policy on to party politics. Neither has managed, over decades, to create a settled or convincing way of dealing with the various European institutional arrangements: the Common Market, European Economic Community, European Community and European Union.

Harold Wilson and David Cameron each had to resort to a referendum to stop their party from breaking apart. Neither suggested to the voters “my party’s unity” as the reason for holding a plebiscite. In Cameron’s case he might have advanced the argument that a referendum was in the national interest because it was the only way to protect the country from Ukip’s surge (it won nearly four million votes at the 2015 general election, even after Cameron promised a referendum), as well as end (or pause, as it turns out) the Conservative civil war over Europe. That would have been frank – but would not have exactly sounded virtuous.

Allowing the voters to decide the matter evidently did not define a settled national interest. You could just as well argue that the handling of various IRA trials made it evident that judges who reach verdicts that incite the justified focus of deep suspicion. Its reputation has recovered from many other institutions have suffered from the (healthy) collapse of automatic deference the judiciary has not lost its moral authority. Its reputation has recovered from the lacerating failures of the 1970s, when its work is junked or implementation delayed, as has been the case for most of this century. First past the post has enough problems, without a parliamentary map where some constituencies have electorates of around 40,000 and others well over twice as much.

For decades Labour has been uninterested about this particular inequality. It performs much better at general elections with the current mosaic than it would do with anything that gave greater priority to numerical fairness. And the Lib Dems haven’t been much interested either. In coalition in 2010 they killed off Boundary Commission changes that would have done them damage, as a penalty for David Cameron not managing to persuade his backbenchers to bring in an elected second chamber.

This is not arcane and technical stuff. The calamitous state of American politics owes much to the combination of vices that corrode elections, such as the gerrymandering of congressional boundaries, the uncontrolled flow of money, and Supreme Court decisions that constrain minority voting rights. We haven’t sunk that low, but we don’t seem to care much about the health of the system as a whole.

I spent decades at the BBC, in News and at Radio 4, and probably convinced myself that its key characteristics – its desire to be fair, its independence, its reach and scale – were in the national interest. I still believe that UK democracy is best served by having well-resourced broadcasters, led by the BBC, which complement an ideological, rumbustious and often entertaining print and digital universe. As a result the public has easy and relatively cheap access to a flow of news and interpretation that avoids polemic and prescription.

Is it a national interest? I think it is. But Brexit has cheapened the language of politics and I may need a more modest idiom. I shall experiment with the BBC as “an institution that buttresses democracy” or, perhaps more simply, “a heavyweight force to stop the Foxification of broadcasting”.

In the meantime, when you hear the “national interest” mantra in the next phase of Brexit turbulence, stay alert for self-interest and cant. •

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