

The UK-EU relationship in retrospect – And prospect

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The Brexit separation between the UK and continental Europe can, in a way, be seen as a continuation of the history of post-war relations across the Channel. While the six founding Member States of the European Communities were in favour of pooling their sovereignty to ensure mutual benefit, the UK chose a different path, reflecting a long-standing preference for free trade rather than political cooperation. Reluctance to anything beyond the free market has been an essential feature of British participation in the European Union.

As the European Union (EU) prepared to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the original (Coal and Steel) Community on 18th April 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) was looking to a future outside the European Union. This divergent approach to Europe's future can in some ways be seen as a continuation of the post-war history of relations across the English Channel. While six West European countries favoured pooling sovereignty in order to secure mutual benefits in terms of peace, prosperity and security in the emerging integration process, the United Kingdom chose a different path, reflecting a long-standing preference for free-trade over political cooperation. Such preferences can be seen at the creation of the founding Communities, in the UK's decision to establish the European Free Trade Association, and most clearly in the UK's 2016 decision to leave the EU again. Thus, as this short article will show, the UK's relations with the EU before, during and after membership, in many ways reflect the same deeply held UK concerns about free trade and sovereign and a long-held view that the UK has no permanent allies, only permanent interests. Yet, the context in which the UK emerged from the EU has fundamentally changed, the challenges for a European state outside the Union perhaps greater than anyone, even the most passionate advocates of the UK's ongoing membership, could have imagined in their darkest moments.

The story of the UK's relations with its European neighbours is characterized by misunderstandings and frustration, marked by shared interests but differing world views. Perhaps nowhere have such differences been more profound than between the UK and its nearest continental neighbour: France, the numerous similarities between the countries notwithstanding. Both countries ended the Second World War as two of the four Allied Powers in Europe alongside the US and the Soviet Union. Both were former colonial powers that would see their empires decline and could no longer claim to be global powers so much as middle-ranking

countries. Both states remained committed to military capabilities and both would acquire nuclear weapons and a permanent seat at the United National Security Council. In these respects, the two countries had – and still have – more in common than either has with any of the other 26 EU Member States, including Germany. Yet in the aftermath of the World War Two, these two countries took markedly different directions. Whereas France became a founding member of the Coal and Steel Community, the UK remained aloof from the embryonic integration process, as former Prime Minister Winston Churchill put it, "we are with Europe but not of it". The decision to remain "apart from Europe" rather than "a part of it", ensured that the UK played no part in the foundation of the European Communities, despite playing a full part in the intergovernmental institutions established in the late 1940s and 1950s, including the Council of Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). That fateful early decision not to join the European project at its inception meant that when the UK finally did accede the rules of engagement had been set – primarily by the federalist vision of Jean Monnet. As a late-comer, the UK was destined to follow the rules, not to lead despite hopes and expectations of many.

The UK was not unique in its reluctance to accept the basic tenets of what came to be known as European integration – the Scandinavians also preferred intergovernmental cooperation – but it was the UK's position that was most significant in opposing supranationalism, initially thwarting attempts in the 1940s to move towards a federal Europe which at the time seemed the desired position of many (elites and citizens alike) elsewhere in Europe⁽¹⁾. Yet, the

(1) The creation of both the Organization for European Economic Cooperation and the Council of Europe established in 1948 both owed their inter-governmental framework to the UK's preferences. The ECSC was explicitly set up on a supranational basis as others, notably France, were no longer prepared to let British reluctance prevail.



A woman holding a leaflet about Brexit.

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UK was also the country that some of the Six, notably The Netherlands, were keenest to welcome into the Communities once established, in part because it was expected to add ballast against the two largest members: France and Germany, the very neighbours whose rivalries the integration process was intended to resolve, as Churchill had pointed out in his Zurich Speech of 1946, but which were still viewed with suspicion by their smaller neighbours.

The prospect of supranationalism and uncertainty about the ultimate direction of the European project ensured the UK's initial dalliance with negotiations for the Coal and Steel Community was brief: the UK had just nationalized coal and had little interest in putting it under supranational authority, quite apart from its persistent sense of global reach and commitment to national sovereignty. That decision was under the post-war Labour government, and there seemed a chance that the Conservatives who took office in 1951 might have had a different stance, not least in light of Churchill's Zurich Speech. However, there was no change initially in the UK's position as the Six moved on to create the Atomic Energy and Economic Communities (respectively Euratom and the EEC). Indeed, the British narrative at the time was dismissive of a project that it believed was doomed to fail, if it ever took off, particularly given the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) in 1954.

The UK's position towards cooperation was not wholly negative but it would always be on the UK's own terms, namely intergovernmental. Thus, the Eden Plan which helped resolve the question of defence in Europe following the demise of the EDC emanated from London and brought positive results in terms of outcomes, but what it did not do was foster the embryonic integration process: the lines of functional federalism and intergovernmental logics divided the founders of the Communities and the UK at their inception and the divergent approaches would shape the subsequent sixty years of British engagement.

While the UK was reluctant to pool sovereignty, the Conservative government (1951-64) did recognize the benefits of free trade (still the leitmotiv of many of those advocating leaving the EU sixty years later). Thus it proposed ways of creating a larger free trade area that would have included the Six in a wider and looser arrangement than envisaged in the Treaty of Rome. Now seen as an attempt to wreck to emergent integration process, the original plan came to naught. The alternative, rival European Free Trade Association (EFTA) established in 1958 only brought together six rather small economies alongside the UK, which rapidly saw its economic error: being a larger fish in a small pool may not be economically advantageous – perhaps offering a lesson the UK would do well to heed as it seeks new trade deals outside the Union.

While EFTA failed to thrive economically, dominated as it was by the UK, the emerging EEC rapidly proved beneficial to its members who saw their economies expand. So began sixty years of magnetic attraction as third countries started to press their respective cases for membership of the successful trade and political bloc.

The UK would be among the first to try to join the Communities in the 1960s, along with fellow EFTA members, Denmark, Ireland and Norway. At the time there was no formal process for enlargement, in contrast to the elaborate provisions put in place in the 1990s in preparation for Eastward enlargement. Members and would-be members merely had the treaties to go by – and the 1957 Treaty of Rome establishing the EEC simply stated that “any European state may apply to be a member”. What should happen thereafter was not elaborated. The UK clearly met the one accession criterion, of being European, at least geographically if not in terms of outlook, still tending to look West to the “special relationship” with the US forged during World War Two or globally to the nascent Commonwealth, born of its erstwhile Empire. French President General Charles de Gaulle took matters into his own hands, unilaterally declaring « Non » at a press conference in January 1963. Absent any clear rules for joining, the UK (and by extension to other three states) had no right of appeal then or in 1967 when de Gaulle blocked British membership for a second time. A single Member State could block enlargement indefinitely, then as now.

De Gaulle’s stated reasons for rejecting the UK differed somewhat on the two occasions but the key issues related to concerns over British competition for leadership in Europe, the UK’s close relationship with the US, which he considered made the UK a potential American “Trojan horse” and, by 1967, a rather scathing view that the UK should not seek to join the successful EC when its own economy was failing, having refused to join at the outset, when it had the chance to do so. With hindsight, it is easy to think that De Gaulle’s scepticism about British membership was justified. When the UK finally did join in January 1973 (after De Gaulle’s departure from the European political scene in 1969), it proved to be reluctant to support further integration, almost immediately tried to renegotiate its terms of membership, belatedly held a referendum on whether to be in the Community at all, and then spent nearly five years demanding a budgetary rebate. The budgetary wrangle that laid bare the fundamental differences in conception of integration – France argued there was no principle of « juste retour ». The UK begged – at length and to general frustration – to differ. This was no rival for leadership but rather a laggard, likely to hold up integration, or so it appeared.

Yet, the pattern for stalling integration as Margaret Thatcher did so effectively from 1979 until 1984 while she sought to “get our money back” had been set by De Gaulle in 1965 when he provoked the “crisis of the empty chair”. Thatcher had learned that lesson well. Indeed, De Gaulle’s reluctance to countenance British membership of the EC in many ways deprived him of the opportunity of welcoming a like-minded country into the Communities, one that

favoured national sovereignty over pooled sovereignty and which adopted a fundamentally realist approach to international relations. When the founding Communities were established during the French Fourth Republic de Gaulle had not been supportive. As President he swiftly welcomed integration for the benefits he recognised it brought to the French economy. Nonetheless, he insisted on the importance of the nation state, demanding « l’Europe des patries », quite unlike the vision of Monnet and the other founding fathers.

The UK was to prove a difficult member as De Gaulle had anticipated, albeit not in the way that he might have anticipated. Despite the occasional British aspirations to be “at the heart of Europe”, the UK scarcely challenged France for leadership of the Communities. It was mostly reluctant to support further integration, the Single European Act being the notable exception precisely because the goal of the 1992 programme to complete the internal market was about further market integration, committing the EC to remove non-tariff barriers to trade. When matters moved beyond the market, UK scepticism typically reasserted itself. This attitude was particularly pronounced in the negotiations for what became the Maastricht Treaty transforming the Communities into a Union, when the Member States broke with the convention and all states moved forward together and allowed the UK (and Denmark) to opt out of key parts of the Treaty, notably on the Euro and aspects of internal security policy deemed to threaten national sovereignty. This decision enabled agreement on the Treaty but set a precedent for asymmetry in the Union, the desirability of which is a question. Moreover, acceding to the UK’s demands in the early 1990s did little to quell British Euroscepticism. Quite the reverse: from Maastricht onwards the calls grew ever louder for the UK to have a say on European integration, either in the form of a referendum on ratifying a Treaty or the more fundamental question of whether to remain in the EU or not. Over the years, the leaders of all three main parties promised referendums of one sort or another on Europe, regardless of their own policies and preferences on integration – party leaders recognized the dangers of the Murdoch press and some voters, not to mention the electoral successes of the UK Independence Party. It took twenty years but eventually these promises led David Cameron to offer a vote on whether the UK should remain or leave the EU.

When the fateful day came, the arguments put forward by the Leave campaign highlighted the very themes than have characterized Britain’s initial reluctance to join – a return to national sovereignty, entailing control of “our laws”, “our borders” and “our money”, or so the slogans ran. Little attention was paid to what UK-EU relations might look like if citizens did opt to leave. Many remainers could not even envisage Leave winning the referendum and the Prime Minister did not allow civil servants to engage in scenario-planning for the victory of Leave. Nor did the Leavers all have a shared vision of what the future would hold for an independent United Kingdom. Some did wish to sever all ties with the Union but others talked of membership

of the European Economic Area or re-joining EFTA. The economic benefits of membership were such that even advocates of departure frequently talked of staying in the single market. Such a scenario might have been possible, except for the inevitable corollary of being inside the market, namely the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union. Sometimes portrayed in the UK as

the EU trying to punish the UK for having the audacity to try to leave the Union, the post-referendum tensions and misunderstandings are redolent of the dialogue of the deaf over « juste retour » in the 1980s. Ultimately, the UK's preference for sovereignty trumped all other ambitions potentially even the free-trading relationship to which it had long been wedded.