

# Brexit will only be judged a watershed if it leads to major new directions in the constitution, political economy, or external stance of the state



*Britain's oscillation between engagement and non-engagement with the rest of Europe is likely to remain a fundamental part of British politics, writes [Andrew Gamble](#). But whether Brexit marks a major watershed remains to be seen.*

How will Brexit come to be judged? Five years on from the referendum, it is still unclear whether this striking manifestation of popular sovereignty will come to be seen as a major watershed in British politics or not. As with all revolutions, the rupture which is proclaimed at the time often masks much deeper continuities in policy which soon reassert themselves. I explore these questions and other aspects of British politics in a [collection of my essays](#) on British politics published over the last forty years. *After Brexit* was chosen as the title essay because it reflects on the historical contexts which have shaped the British political economy and its external relationships in the decades of European engagement and non-engagement since the Second World War. The European issue has been central in British politics in the last forty-seven years, since Britain first entered the European Community in 1973. But it reaches back before that, to Churchill's identification of Europe as one of three circles of key external relationships in which Britain was involved (the other two were the Empire and the United States), to Britain's refusal to become involved in the first steps towards European collaboration after 1945, followed by the two failed attempts to join the Common Market in the 1960s.

When Edward Heath finally secured entry in 1973, he intended Europe to provide a new national purpose and to give Britain a new role in the world, following the withdrawal from Empire. It was regarded as a watershed moment in Britain's post-war development and a decisive recalibration of Churchill's three circles, giving top priority (for the first time) to the European circle. In the same way, the decision to withdraw from Europe after the 2016 referendum has the potential to be a major watershed which some of the leaders of the Leave campaign are hoping will recalibrate the three circles again by giving priority to the United States and the wider Anglosphere. If this could be achieved, it might reshape British politics in many different areas – its political economy, its role in the world, its party system and its constitution.

Britain was often a reluctant member of the European Union. But both supporters and opponents of the European turn in British policy assumed that membership was permanent and unlikely to be reversed, despite the presence of a strong and vocal anti-European minority. Europe was always an issue of low importance for most British citizens, but it was a vital matter for parts of the political class as the virulence of the civil war in the Conservative Party attested. Both main parties were divided about the merits of integrating with the rest of Europe and the priority to be given to Britain's relationship with Europe over its relationship with the United States.

The increasing Europeanisation of Britain's laws, institutions, policy-making processes and of its regulatory regime over four decades intersected with other domestic issues and debates. These included the response to the relative decline and poor performance of the economy, the character of Britain's hybrid Anglo-liberal model of capitalism, the reshaping of the post-war Keynesian welfare state, the rise and fall of Thatcherism, the transformation of both the Conservative and Labour parties, the relationship between Britain and the United States, the new regulatory state, and the changing constitutional order, with the devolution of power to assemblies and parliaments in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

For all the passions Brexit has aroused, it will only be judged a watershed by historians if it leads to major new directions in the constitution, political economy or external stance of the British state. The most likely form a constitutional watershed arising from Brexit might take is the breakup of the United Kingdom. Brexit has further destabilised the Union, increasing secessionist pressure in Scotland, raising the possibility of Irish reunification, enhancing support for Welsh independence, and accelerating the emergence of a new politicised Englishness. The new disunited Kingdom has been on full display during the pandemic.

A second possibility is that Brexit may mark a watershed in Britain's political economy. Will it be seen as leading to a decisive turn from the economic principles which have shaped British economic policy since the Thatcher Government in the 1980s? There is talk of a more active role for the state, in part spurred by the Conservative agenda of levelling up to retain its new support in former Labour areas, in part by the demonstration of what an active state can achieve during the COVID-19 emergency. But to make these changes of direction, there would need to be political commitment to a fundamental broadening and deepening of the tax base and some major institutional changes in the way policy is delivered; at present, there are few signs of either.

A third possibility is that Brexit marks Britain's relaunch as 'Global Britain'. The initial flurry of symbolic gestures and rhetoric may be a poor guide to the pragmatic choices British governments actually make over the next ten years. One scenario sees Britain inexorably edging back towards closer involvement with the EU and adopting the kind of associate status Jacques Delors once urged the UK to consider. That is because the realistic possibilities for 'Global Britain' outside the EU orbit altogether are not great. Promotion of deeper links with the Anglosphere finds little support within the Anglosphere nations themselves. Britain will remain a strong supporter of the western alliance and the leadership role of the United States, but this was Britain's position before Brexit. Britain was always a reluctant and at times an awkward partner for Europe, but the relationship was also an indispensable one for both sides. That has not changed. The British have won greater freedom of action in some areas by giving up the power to shape and influence the general direction of European policy, much of which Britain will still be obliged to comply with.

Since Britain cannot just cut its links with Europe, the relationship threatens to be one dominated by friction and resentment. But this again is hardly a change from what existed before Brexit. Britain's European odyssey shows no signs of ending any time soon, because although Britain is now *after Brexit*, it will never be *after Europe*. Britain's oscillation between engagement and non-engagement with the rest of Europe is likely to remain a fundamental part of British politics.

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Note: the above summarises aspects of the author's new book, [After Brexit and Other Essays](#) (Bristol University Press, 2021).

### About the Author



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