

# ***Moving Beyond British Exceptionalism***

## **Brexit, Inevitability, and the Road to the 2016 Vote**

It is tempting to interpret the convoluted narrative that led to Brexit as a story of British exceptionalism. The fit between European integration and the United Kingdom had never been easy – much less natural, it would appear, than for any other country in Europe. It was for this reason that the British initially stood aside from the process, spurning repeated chances to join the institutional precursors to the European Union (EU). When they did belatedly change their mind and join the European Economic Community (EEC), moreover, they did so amid sustained domestic controversy. And the deep-seated mismatch between Britain and its European partners was to become a leitmotiv of the country's forty six years as an EC/EU member state. The UK was never at ease within the EC/EU, at odds with important aspects of the process, divided internally on the necessity of membership, and liable to see itself as an 'awkward partner', the malcontent within. The 2016 decision to leave could thus be interpreted as the logical, maybe even inevitable, outcome of this profoundly difficult link-up, the end of a long aberration rather than a surprising and contingent development.

This chapter will acknowledge that there is some substance in this case. Britain's road to Community membership, and its path throughout its four decades of membership, have indeed been bumpy, and there have been many aspects of the interaction between the UK and its continental partners that have made Britain stand out as a particularly problematic participant. Some space will hence be devoted to exploring the fragilities of Britain's European membership. But the chapter will also caution against too easy an assumption that the United Kingdom and the EC/EU were never really compatible and that a break between them was foreordained. To argue this risks overlooking the significant ways in which Britain has been able to influence, and in turn be influenced by, the European integration process. There has been a tale of positive engagement and mutual benefit to stand alongside the narrative of discomfort and confrontation. Too forceful an emphasis on British exceptionalism and the underlying difficulties of the match also risks devaluing the shorter-term contingencies that led to the 2016 referendum and to its narrow but decisive

outcome. Perhaps most seriously of all, the emphasis on Britain as the misfit, the perpetual outsider, wrongly implies a degree of effortless fit between most other EU member states and the integration process. All participating states have struggled at times with the implications of close cooperation and tight interdependence and rebelled against certain aspects. And yet most other European countries have overcome such hesitations and repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to working together. Britain's failure to do the same is therefore a reflection not of structural inevitability, but of deliberate policy choices. Brexit may have to some extent at least been an accident waiting to happen. But this does not mean that the country's leaders had no agency. Instead Britain's departure from the EU reflected the failure by the country's political elite to explain the realities of tight cooperation to its wider population.

### **A Contested Literature**

Given the huge topical interest of the subject matter, it should come as no surprise that a sizeable academic literature has emerged on the relationship between Britain and the process of European integration. The full bibliography is too extensive properly to be analysed in a few paragraphs. But in setting the scene for a piece on Brexit it is worth pointing to four broad categories of writings.

The first is constituted by books that seek to contextualise the UK's troubled dealings with the process of European integration in the much longer history of interaction between the British Isles and continental Europe. Some of these emerged in the 1990s or early years of this century.<sup>1</sup> The run-up to and aftermath of the Brexit vote of 2016 produced a second such wave.<sup>2</sup> Each author reached somewhat different conclusions from their overview, but all underline that controversy over whether and how Britain should interact closely with its geographical neighbours is an enduring theme in British history.

A second rather larger category is formed by the numerous works which focus on Britain's role in the post-1945 history of European integration. A handful sketch out long chronological portions of the story, starting with the widespread assumption in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Black, *Convergence or Divergence?: Britain and the Continent* (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1994); Keith Robbins, *British Isles and Europe, 1789-2005* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Brendan Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (London: Penguin Books, 2017); David Reynolds, *Island Stories: Britain and Its History in the Age of Brexit* (London: William Collins, 2019).

immediate aftermath of World War II that the United Kingdom would lead any attempt to unify Europe, and tracing the tale through the disappearance of such hopes, the break between Britain and the six countries who would go on to found the forerunners of today's EU, Britain's hesitant decision to re-engage with the process, and then the country's uneven track record within the EC/EU.<sup>3</sup> Rather more works, by contrast, zero-in on particular sub-periods. Amongst the most extensively studied are the 1950 'parting of the ways' between Britain and the Six, and the first UK application to the EEC in 1961-3.<sup>4</sup> A recent flurry of publications means that we are also well-provided with studies of the 1975 referendum on Community membership.<sup>5</sup> And there is a significant amount written about Britain's 1978 decision to opt out of full participation in the European Monetary System (EMS).<sup>6</sup> Other crucial moments by contrast still await detailed, archivally-based historical treatment: the best investigation of the 1970-2 membership negotiations is still unpublished, we have little on Margaret Thatcher's early engagement with the integration process, and even less on the Conservative in-fighting over Europe that first contributed to her fall from power and then bedevilled the premiership of her successor, John Major.<sup>7</sup> The timetable for the

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); John W. Young, *Britain and European Unity, 1945-1999* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); D. A. Gowland and Arthur Turner, *Reluctant Europeans: Britain and European Integration, 1945-1998* (Longman, 2000); Benjamin John Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Continental Drift: Britain and Europe from the End of Empire to the Rise of Euroscepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Dell, *The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Christopher Lord, *Absent at the Creation: Britain and the Formation of the European Community, 1950-2* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1996); Alan S Milward, *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy, 1945-1963, The UK and the European Community*, v. 1 (London: Whitehall History Pub. in association with Frank Cass, 2002), 48–77. Wolfram Kaiser, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans: Britain and European Integration, 1945-63* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); Jacqueline Tratt, *The Macmillan Government and Europe: A Study in the Process of Policy Development* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Anne Deighton and Alan S Milward, eds., *Widening, Deepening and Acceleration: The European Economic Community 1957-1963* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999); Milward, *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy, 1945-1963*, 310–483; N. Piers Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe!: The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Lindsay Aquiri, *The First Referendum: Reassessing Britain's Entry to Europe, 1973-75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol, *A Europe Made of Money: The Emergence of the European Monetary System* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012). For the British 'no', see Edmund Dell, 'Britain and the Origins of the European Monetary System', *Contemporary European History* 3, no. 01 (1994): 1–60; Kiyoshi Hirowatari, *Britain and European Monetary Cooperation, 1964-1979* (Basingstoke, Hampshire [u.a.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Furby, 'The Revival and Success of Britain's Second Application for Membership of the European Community, 1968-71', PhD thesis, London, Queen Mary, University of London, 2009. On Thatcher partial exceptions are Mathias Haeussler, *Helmut Schmidt and British-German Relations: A European Misunderstanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); N. Piers Ludlow, 'Solidarity, Sanctions and Misunderstanding: The European Dimension of the Falklands Crisis', *The International History Review*, 16 July

release of official papers from the British National Archives means, furthermore, that the frontier of detailed historical research is only likely to move slowly into the final decade of the twentieth century, let alone into the 2000-2016 period, although the planned appearance of a third ‘official’ history volume by Stephen Wall who is given earlier than normal access to government documents will begin to fill the gap.<sup>8</sup> But archival studies of the European policies of Tony Blair or of David Cameron are unlikely to appear any time soon.

A third category of writing on Britain and Europe is constituted by books, often written by journalists, practitioners or political scientists, that were written up shortly after the events analysed and were intended as contributions to the debate about contemporary affairs, but which can now be re-visited as important first drafts of history. These have a long pedigree: Antony Nutting’s *Europe Will Not Wait* published in 1960 helped trigger the debate about whether the UK had made a disastrous mistake in allowing others, notably France, to assume the leadership of the integration process.<sup>9</sup> But Nutting’s analysis of recent developments was followed by equally important studies by Miriam Camps, Uwe Kitzinger, David Butler, Peter Ludlow, Stephen Wall and Philip Stephens.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore there are a huge number of works on Britain and Europe produced by political analysts, lawyers or economists throughout the period of UK membership.<sup>11</sup> The methodology of

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2020; N. Piers Ludlow, ‘A Double-Edged Victory: Fontainebleau and the Resolution of the British Budgetary Problem, 1983-1984’, in *Reshaping Europe towards a Political, Economic and Monetary Union, 1984-1989*, ed. Michael Gehler and Wilfried Loth (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), 45–71. On Conservative in-fighting, see Nicholas J. Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945: At the Heart of Europe?* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See also Stephen Wall, *The Official History of Britain and the European Community. Volume II: From Rejection to Referendum, 1963-1975* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Stephen Wall, *The Official History of Britain and the European Community, Volume III, The Tiger Unleashed, 1975-1985* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Nutting, *Europe Will Not Wait: A Warning and a Way Out* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1960). For context, see Oliver J. Daddow, *Britain and Europe since 1945: Historiographical Perspectives on Integration* (Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Camps, *Britain and the European Community, 1955-1963* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1964); Uwe W Kitzinger, *Diplomacy and Persuasion: How Britain Joined the Common Market* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973); David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger, *The 1975 Referendum* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Peter Ludlow, *The Making of the European Monetary System: A Case Study of the Politics of the European Community* (London: Butterworths, 1982); Stephen Wall, *A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Philip Stephens, *Politics and the Pound: The Tories, the Economy and Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Good examples include David Baker and David Seawright, eds., *Britain for and against Europe: British Politics and the Question of European Integration* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Simon Bulmer, Stephen George, and Andrew Scott, eds., *The United Kingdom and EC Membership Evaluated* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1992); Oliver J. Daddow, *New Labour and the European Union: Blair and Brown’s Logic of History* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013); Oliver Daddow, ‘The UK Media and “Europe”: From Permissive

such studies is often very different from that normally employed by historians, with a far greater reliance on interviews or questionnaires, or on various data-sets. But they can provide vital insights, especially into the substantial period for which governmental papers remain inaccessible. Also useful – although to be used with caution – are the memoirs of many of the protagonists, civil servants as well as ministers, and the biographies of some of the key characters in the Britain and Europe story.<sup>12</sup>

Finally there is the small but fast-growing literature on Brexit itself, a category which includes a mixture of journalistic ‘instant history’, the testimonies of some of those involved, and detailed analysis of the trends and tendencies that led to the 2016 vote and its messy aftermath. The most vivid of the journalistic accounts are Tim Shipman’s two volumes, *All Out War* and *Fall Out*; one of the better insider stories is *Unleashing Demons* by Craig Oliver, Cameron’s former head of communications; while the economic historian Kevin O’Rourke has attempted a *Short History of Brexit*.<sup>13</sup> We also now have Michel Barnier’s diaries, as chief negotiator on the EU side, and Philip Stephens’ assessment of how Brexit has affected Britain’s place in the world<sup>14</sup> And such books are flanked by an array of shorter pieces ranging from lectures, to blogs, via multiple chapters in edited volumes, journal

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Consensus to Destructive Dissent’, *International Affairs* 88, no. 6 (2012): 1219–36; Anand Menon and John-Paul Salter, ‘Britain’s Influence in the EU’, *National Institute Economic Review*, no. 236 (2016): 7–13; Simon Bulmer and Martin Burch, *The Europeanisation of Whitehall: UK Central Government and the European Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 2012); John Roy Major, *John Major: The Autobiography*. (London: HarperCollins, 2000); Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (London: Hutchinson, 2010); David Cameron, *For the Record* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2019); Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London: Macmillan, 1994). Amongst civil servants, see Michael Butler, *Europe: More than a Continent* (London: Heinemann, 1986); David Hannay, *Britain’s Quest for a Role: A Diplomatic Memoir from Europe to the UN* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013); Roy Denman, *The Mandarin’s Tale* (London: Politico’s, 2002). Biographies include: John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Grocer’s Daughter to Iron Lady* (London: Random House, 2009); John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume 2 the Iron Lady* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003); Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography: Volume One: Not for Turning* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume Two: Everything She Wants* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2015); Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography. Volume Three, Herself Alone*, (London: Allen Lane, 2019); John Campbell, *Roy Jenkins. A Well-Rounded Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014); N. Piers Ludlow, *Roy Jenkins and the European Commission Presidency 1976-1980: At the Heart of Europe*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Christopher Lee, *Carrington: An Honourable Man* (London: Viking, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of How Brexit Sank Britain’s Political Class* (London: William Collins, 2016); Tim Shipman, *Fall Out: A Year of Political Mayhem*. (HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 2018); Craig Oliver, *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit*, 2017; Kevin H O’Rourke, *A Short History of Brexit: from Bentry to Backstop* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Barnier, *La Grande Illusion: Journal secret du Brexit (2016-2020)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021) ; Philip Stephens, *Britain Alone: The Path from Suez to Brexit* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021).

articles and a range of longer newspaper and magazine exposés.<sup>15</sup> Few political events have so quickly spawned so extensive a literature as the 2016 referendum and its consequences.

### **Britain's European Discomforts**

The United Kingdom's ambivalence when confronted with the idea of tight European cooperation became quickly apparent in the years following World War II. Most British leaders had concluded from their wartime experiences that the country could not stand aloof from what was happening on the other side of the Channel. The UK had to be deeply involved with the reconstruction of Europe and the prevention of any future conflict. But Britain's political elite were also wary of entering into too tight a pattern of cooperation with their neighbours. This reflected a preference for closer links to the Empire/Commonwealth and/or the United States, rather than with continental Europe. It also sprang from a fear that most European countries were too weak to constitute reliable partners.<sup>16</sup>

The way out of this dilemma proved to be to bring in the Americans. Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of the postwar Labour government, deserves huge credit for his role in persuading the US to commit itself to European security through NATO.<sup>17</sup> But this very triumph created a situation in which Britain felt able to allow six of its European neighbours to press ahead with supranational integration without UK participation. The 1950 split over the Schuman Plan was then reaffirmed five years later with the British decision to stand aloof from the negotiations that would establish the EEC. By the end of the 1950s, an enduring divide had emerged between those European countries prepared to cooperate tightly through supranational structures, and those, led by Britain, unwilling to do so.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One of the most prolific and well-informed lecturers on the subject has been Sir Ivan Rogers. See e.g. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/play/categories/politics-society/sir-ivan-rogers-where-did-brexite-come-and-where-it-going-take-uk> (last accessed 20 Apr., 2021). The three best Brexit-centred blogs are the UK in a Changing Europe (<https://ukandeu.ac.uk>), the LSE Brexit Blog (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/>), and that run by Chris Grey (<https://chrisingreybrexitblog.blogspot.com/>). For an astute article length analysis see e.g. Robert Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 6 (3 December 2020): 1140-1174.

<sup>16</sup> Milward, *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy, 1945-1963*, 10-47.

<sup>17</sup> John Baylis, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism: Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942-49* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Kaiser, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans*.

Within the British government, though, there was mounting unease about this division. In 1950, there had been annoyance at the manner in which the French had precipitated the split, but little real anxiety about what the emergence of European structures might mean for Britain's power. Before the decade was out, however, such complacency was waning, replaced by a fear that exclusion from a prospering European Community could harm the UK both economically and politically.<sup>19</sup> The unsuccessful Free Trade Area scheme of 1956-8 was an early indication of this changing perspective; the first membership application to the EEC submitted by Harold Macmillan's government in 1961 an even clearer sign. But the course alteration was hesitant and contested – factors that almost certainly contributed to the failure of the first membership bid.<sup>20</sup> And hesitancy and contestation were to persist throughout the 1960s as Britain's path into the EEC was twice blocked by the French leader, General de Gaulle, and on into the 1970s when membership was finally attained. Quite how uncertain the British still were about their decision to join would be underlined by the 1974 attempt to renegotiate the terms of entry and the 1975 referendum on whether Britain should continue to participate.<sup>21</sup> This last, it is true, appeared decisive with 66 percent of the British population voting to remain within the EEC, but most commentators, at the time and since, were struck by the 'unenthusiastic' nature of this sizeable endorsement by the British population.<sup>22</sup> A majority of voters preferred staying within the Community rather than face the economic crisis of the 1970s alone, but this did not mean that they were much enamoured with the EEC.

Similar ambivalence characterised the European policies of successive British governments. Membership itself was seldom questioned – the Labour Party suffered a crushing electoral defeat in 1983 when it ran on a platform that included withdrawal from the EEC – but the British made no effort to hide their dislike of central aspects of the Community system. At first much of this ire was directed at the Common Agricultural Policy which was criticised (not without justification) as wasteful, protectionist and crippling expensive – although the British proved rather less forthcoming when it came to suggesting

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<sup>19</sup> James Ellison, *Threatening Europe: Britain and the Creation of the European Community, 1955-58* (St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> N. Piers Ludlow, 'A Mismanaged Application: Britain and the EEC, 1961-1963', in *Widening, Deepening and Acceleration: The European Economic Community 1957-1963*, ed. Anne Deighton and Alan S Milward (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999), 271-85.

<sup>21</sup> Aqui, *The First Referendum*.

<sup>22</sup> Butler and Kitzinger, *The 1975 Referendum*, 33.

constructive reform.<sup>23</sup> In 1978, the Labour government of James Callaghan resorted to the first of many opt-outs by deciding not to participate fully in the Community's biggest new policy development since Britain had joined, the launch of the EMS.<sup>24</sup> From 1979 onwards the UK embarked upon a determined but disruptive campaign to revise the budgetary rules of the Community.<sup>25</sup> And then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the British again diverged from their partners on the new central priority of the EU, opting out of, and directing constant criticism at, the goal of a single currency.<sup>26</sup> Further 'opt-outs' would follow on social policy, justice and home affairs, and Schengen.

The UK's reputation as an 'awkward partner' was reinforced by the behaviour of successive British leaders at meetings of the European Council. Here the pattern was largely set by Thatcher whose forceful handbag swinging and readiness to hijack collective meetings of Europe's leaders in pursuit of her own narrow aims won admiration at home. It also overshadowed, in the collective British imagination at least, the more constructive line that she would adopt on some key issues, notably the pursuit of the Single Market. And the template of Thatcher's approach has influenced most subsequent British Prime Ministers obliging them to portray their tactics as confrontational even when their instincts and approach were less aggressive. The way in which Major allowed a soundbite about the Maastricht Treaty being 'game, set and match' to Britain to define his view of the treaty, despite the fact that the words were not his and were at odds with the moderate manner in which he had actually negotiated, underlined how keen were all British leaders to be seen as fighting Britain's corner as forcefully as Thatcher had done.<sup>27</sup> Press coverage of the UK's interaction with its European partners, focused as it is overwhelmingly on European Council meetings, thus confirmed Britain's status as the defiant odd one out amongst EC/EU member states. Cameron's abrasive approach to European diplomacy, best exemplified by his December 2011 blocking of the EU-treaty designed to resolve the Euro-crisis was simply a reprise of an approach to collective European discussion adopted by most of his predecessors.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Alan Swinbank, "Something Significant to Show for Our Efforts?" British Perspectives on the Stocktaking of the Common Agricultural Policy', *Agricultural History Review* 68, no. 1 (1 June 2020): 63–85.

<sup>24</sup> Dell, 'Britain and the Origins of the European Monetary System'.

<sup>25</sup> Ludlow, 'A Double-Edged Victory'.

<sup>26</sup> Stephens, *Politics and the Pound*.

<sup>27</sup> On the origins of the phrase Major, *John Major*, 288.

<sup>28</sup> 'David Cameron blocks EU treaty with veto, casting Britain adrift in Europe', *The Guardian*, 9 Dec., 2011



## Explaining British Awkwardness

Why did the British allow themselves to become caught in this cycle of confrontation? This was not what they had sought to achieve by entering the Community. On the contrary, Edward Heath, the Prime Minister who had overseen Britain's entry into the EEC had spoken eloquently of how once a member the UK would move beyond the antagonistic relations with its neighbours that had characterised its years in the EEC's waiting room, and instead treat them as genuine partners in a common endeavour.<sup>29</sup> Heath, like Macmillan and Wilson before him, also believed that the UK would quickly take its place at the helm of the EEC, replacing the dominant Franco-German partnership with a Paris-Bonn-London triangle. So how were such ambitions replaced by a seeming acceptance of perpetual isolation?

Part of the answer, as will be explained below, is that they were not entirely replaced and that a constructive layer of British engagement, even leadership, persisted despite the rows highlighted by the awkward partner narrative. But the latter, while not the whole truth, had a strong grounding in reality. There is therefore a need to explain why the British were so often drawn to role of European trouble-maker or critic, rather than convinced participant.

One factor was undoubtedly the ongoing existence of strong veins of Euroscepticism within both of the UK's main governing parties, the Conservatives and Labour. In neither case was hostility to European integration necessarily the majority viewpoint, although it was within the Labour Party during much of the 1970s, and it would become the same in the Conservative Party from the mid-1990s onwards.<sup>30</sup> But even when a minority stance, Euroscepticism was sufficiently strong to ensure that few British governments have been able to formulate their European policy without constant backward glances at their own party members or anxious looks at the Opposition benches. This had a number of knock-on effects. For a start, it helped ensure that all British ministers have had to approach negotiations in Brussels with caution, aware that making concessions in order to secure agreement would be liable to attract substantial criticism at home. Such defensiveness has been hard to combine with the type of leadership role to which UK leaders had initially

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<sup>29</sup> *Hansard*, 28 Oct., 1971, column 2209

<sup>30</sup> Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945*; Roger Broad, *Labour's European Dilemmas: From Bevin to Blair* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

aspired, since leadership in a multilateral body like the EC/EU requires the ability to build consensus even at the expense of one's own national starting point. Furthermore it has played into a pre-existing British tendency to portray all European negotiations as brutal battles, with each country fighting hard for their own interests and little sense of shared goals or common aspirations. As a result, British ministers have either had to portray the outcome of each round of negotiation as a UK triumph – 'game, set and match' to reprise the Major soundbite – or, in circumstances where such claims were less credible, an instance where heroic British representatives had bravely prevented the others from advancing as far as would otherwise have been the case. Defiant obstinacy, in other words, became the principal alternative to boasts of European achievement – and one that in periods of rapid advance of the integration process, such as the later 1980s or the early 1990s, became the default mode of presentation. The rhetoric of shared progress or of mutual achievement was by contrast notable by its absence.

There is little indication, moreover, that successive British leaders suffered in public opinion terms from this adversarial approach. On the contrary, one of Thatcher's ministers believed that her forceful rows with her European counterparts 'were the next best thing to a war' in demonstrating her strength as a leader to the wider British public.<sup>31</sup> Nor was direct public disquiet at her European tactics a major element in her fall. Many of her senior ministers had lost faith in her approach by the late 1980s, hence the role of prominent pro-Europeans like Michael Heseltine and Geoffrey Howe in the party revolt that would lead to her resignation. But to the extent that the Prime Minister's approval ratings had dropped with the wider public, this seems to have had more to do with domestic centred controversies such as the botched introduction of the poll tax, than with her increasingly strained relations with other European leaders.<sup>32</sup> Fighting foreigners still seemed to go down well with much of the UK public. Similarly, while John Major clearly suffered from the deep internal party divisions over Europe that would characterise his premiership, there is little to suggest that his crushing electoral defeat in 1997 constituted a repudiation by British voters of the increasingly abrasive tactics he had resorted to at European level.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 244.

<sup>32</sup> Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 2019, 471–726.

<sup>33</sup> David Butler, *The British General Election of 1997* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

Public acceptance of Britain's spiky rapport with its partners was accompanied by a strong disinclination to take pride in, or feel any loyalty towards, European accomplishments. Common European institutions or policies were overwhelmingly viewed as something that had been devised by others, often in the teeth of UK opposition, rather than agreements to which British representatives had been party. As such the British public, its press, and its political elite, felt free to criticise and complain about, rather than take responsibility for, those aspects of the EC/EU that were deemed to work less well, and to derive little pleasure from that which worked - or in the latter case to claim national credit for positive outcomes rather than attributing them to European action. The general air of disbelief in Britain at the Nobel Committee's 2012 decision to award the EU the Nobel Peace Prize illustrated the problem well; the even more serious public failure to realise that there was an EU dimension to the peace process in Northern Ireland, which might thus be adversely affected by Brexit, underlined it further.<sup>34</sup>

More broadly Britain's geography, history and culture all combined to obstruct any sense on the part of most of the UK's inhabitants that they were a central part of a wider European collective. As an island off the coast of the European mainland, Britain has often liked to tell itself – accurately or not – that it has a choice of whether or not to involve itself in European politics. Its historical self-imagery meanwhile glorifies those moments when it has either stood proudly aloof from European affairs – the 'splendid isolation' of the late nineteenth century would be the most obvious example – or those when it has boldly defied the threat from the continent. The defeat of the Spanish Armada, Napoleon, or World War Two and especially 1940 when Britain perceived itself as standing alone in the face of Hitler's challenge, all feature prominently in the second category.<sup>35</sup> As a result, deep involvement in the running of Europe was not necessarily seen as good thing; indeed it was a retreat from a period when Britain's reach was global not regional. And adversarial relations with Europe's other main players were a normal a state of affairs – a throwback to the glories of Elizabeth I, William Pitt or Winston Churchill – rather than an anomaly to be ashamed of. Even the English language played a role, most obviously because of the way that in common usage 'Europe' is employed in a fashion that does not include Britain, but

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<sup>34</sup> For the Nobel prize episode, see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20677654> (last accessed 3 May, 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, *Island Stories*, esp. 82-7.

more substantively because its ever-growing standing as a world language reinforced the British population's disinclination to learn foreign languages, thereby obstructing easy identification with other European cultures and reinforcing the extra-European pull of fellow English-speaking cultures including the United States. The manner in which the Conservative Party's transformation from the 'party of Europe' to a largely Europhobic entity ran parallel to its growing ties and fascination with the US Republicans is just one illustration of how much this last mattered.

None of these factors led directly to Brexit. But they ensured that, despite decades of membership, the UK's status as a member of the EC/EU was still a contested and controversial notion. A serious outbreak of political infighting, between and within political parties, about the UK's position in Europe thus remained a real possibility. Furthermore, these and many more 'fragilities' in Britain's sense of belonging within the European integration process, help explain why so many in the UK seemed to accept, even take pride in, the way the country had become a perpetual outsider in a system that it had originally intended to lead. Newspaper headlines about British isolation in Brussels became badges of honour, rather than an embarrassment.

### **A Positive Tale**

Too narrow a focus on this pattern of dissent and confrontation can, however, distort the record of Britain's four decades of EC/EU membership as much as it enlightens. For a start, simply to focus on the multiple instances of British discomfort with or in Brussels, is to ignore the very significant ways in which the UK was able to shape, even lead, the integration process during its years as a member, and the fashion in which involvement in the EC/EU contributed to economic, political and cultural change within Britain itself. Each of these aspects of UK membership need to be looked at a little more closely, and used to temper the awkward partner narrative.<sup>36</sup>

To some extent the impact of Britain on the European integration process can be connected to those individuals who have worked within the European institutions. The UK has supplied a string of influential Commissioners, from Christopher Soames in the 1970s

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<sup>36</sup> For a fuller development of these ideas see Ludlow, 'Not Just an Awkward Partner: Britain's experience of EC/EU membership since 1973' in Martina Steber (ed.), *Historicizing Brexit. Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021 forthcoming).

through to Chris Patten in the early years of the twenty first century, and a reasonably successful Commission President in the person of Roy Jenkins. Further Britons have served as the President of the European Parliament, as leaders of the party groups there, or as the head of less well-known European institutions like the European Investment Bank. Even more crucial have been the large number of UK nationals who through their occupation of senior posts throughout the European institutional landscape have helped to alter patterns of work in all of the Community/Union bodies and to dilute the initial Franco-German administrative traditions with significant and largely positive habits imported from the British civil service and political culture. Needless to say, the British have not been alone in pushing for change in the way in which the institutions of the Community/Union operate. Numerous other national ideas and habits have also been injected into the mix. And not all of the innovations promoted by *fonctionnaires* of British origin have proved entirely successful. But it should hardly come as a surprise that a member state of long standing with administrative and political traditions as strong and as distinctive as those of the UK, has managed to transfer some of these traditions to Brussels, Strasbourg or Luxembourg, largely to beneficial effect. Amongst the changes most closely associated with the 'British effect' have been better habits in the preservation of official documents, more extensive minute-taking and the wider circulation of such minutes, a more systematic pattern of briefing senior officials prior to important meetings, and a greater degree of informality in interactions between staff.<sup>37</sup> It was for instance Jenkins who decided that the incoming Commission should meet for the first time in an informal setting away from Brussels, a practice retained by subsequent Commission presidents.

Alongside the impact of individual Britons and British administrative practices, it is also possible to discern policy areas where the UK has left its mark. The foremost example is the establishment of a Single Market in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a goal championed by Thatcher, and closely associated in its implementation with Arthur Cockfield, the Internal Market Commissioner in the first Delors Commission.<sup>38</sup> But other key policy initiatives for which the UK has successfully pressed, significantly affecting the shape and operation of the Community/Union in the process, include enlargement, foreign policy cooperation

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<sup>37</sup> Éric Bussière et al., *The European Commission 1973-86: History and Memories of an Institution* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014), 157–65.

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Cockfield, *The European Union: Creating the Single Market*. (London: Wiley, 1994).

(especially in the 1980s), the TREVII process which foreshadowed much of the Justice and Home Affairs agenda of more recent times, and the broadening out and modernisation of the association policy with the EC/EU's African, Caribbean and Pacific partners. Once again British influence blended with the ideas, innovations and improvements suggested by other member states, and administrative trends that developed within the Community institutions themselves. In so multilateral a system it is hazardous to attribute too much to the efforts of a single member state, however forceful. But there is more than enough evidence of UK policy priorities having a measurable effect on the overall policy mix of the EC/EU to contradict the notion that the UK has always been a frustrated, semi-outsider, compelled to watch as others built a Europe with which it had little sympathy. Instead, the British have actively contributed to the shape and operation of the EC/EU institutions, and to the policies that they have carried out. The awkward partner was also an influential and constructive one.

Participation in the integration process also shaped Britain. Disentangling how much of the change that occurred in the UK between 1973 and 2016 is attributable to EC/EU membership, and how much, by contrast, reflects internal trends or policy decisions or other international entanglements is almost impossible. But a strong case can be made that EC/EU membership was an important factor in the country's ability to cast-off its previous reputation as the 'sick man of Europe' in terms of economic performance, and instead become one of the more dynamic European economies.<sup>39</sup> Being part of the Community/Union was not the only reason that Britain's economic performance in the latter part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first was as good if not better than that of France and Germany, having been much less good between 1945 and 1973, but it was a significant contributory factor to be placed alongside domestic economic reform, North Sea oil and the boom in the financial market sector. Ironically, therefore, the belief that the UK economy was likely to outperform its Western European rivals so central to the case of those favouring Brexit, may well have had its roots in a British growth surge partly attributable to EC/EU membership itself!

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/SMF-CAGE-The-Growth-Effects-of-EU-Membership-for-the-UK-a-Review-of-the-Evidence-.pdf> (last accessed 3 May, 2021)

EC/EU membership also played a part in altering the travel patterns, eating habits, and career trajectories of many Britons, and, especially in the early twenty first century, began to alter the demographic make-up of the UK itself. Between 2008 and 2016, for instance, the number of Poles living in Britain doubled, turning the Poles into the single biggest group of immigrants in the UK.<sup>40</sup> This in turn had knock-on effects not just on the UK labour market, but also on more everyday questions like the range of products stocked by British supermarkets – the appearance of rye bread in our local Lidl was attributed to demand from Poles living in the area - or the challenges confronting local educational authorities. In much the same period, the number of Britons deciding to retire to Spain also doubled.<sup>41</sup> Both the identity and numbers of those leaving the country and those arriving were thus significantly affected by European rules enabling EU citizens to move freely around the bloc. And multiple aspects of daily British life were altered by EC/EU membership. To take just one obvious example, the manner in which football, the UK's most popular sport, was organised, played and watched, was transformed, in part by the influx of foreign players and foreign managers facilitated by EU membership, but also by the European Court of Justice's Bosman ruling of 1995 which irrevocably altered the manner in which the transfer system functioned. The extent of change is well illustrated by the fact that, from 1888 until 1997 the managers whose team won the first division or later premiership title were exclusively British; since 1998, by contrast, Alex Ferguson has been the only British title winner (albeit 9 times) sharing the honour with rivals from France, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Germany and Chile.<sup>42</sup> EU membership has not been the only factor at play here, with some aspects of the change attributable to a wider globalisation of sport in general and football in particular, but the precise manner in which this transformation occurred in the UK was significantly shaped by the ease with which football professionals from continental Europe could settle and work within Britain.

Even more importantly EC/EU membership played a crucial role in the Northern Irish peace process that is only being belatedly recognised now that British EU membership has

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1061639/polish-population-in-united-kingdom/#:~:text=As%20of%20June%202020%20there,then%20decreased%20by%20June%202020> (last accessed 3 May, 2021)

<sup>41</sup> 'Number of Britons over 65 living in Spain more than doubles in 10 years', *The Guardian*, 29 June, 2017

<sup>42</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_English\\_football\\_championship-winning\\_managers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_football_championship-winning_managers) (last accessed 3 May, 2021)

ended.<sup>43</sup> The successful overcoming of the ‘troubles’ which had beset Northern Ireland since the early 1970s was one of the most important UK political achievements of the 1990s and the first decade of this century. But it was not one that at the time was much associated with EU membership. On the contrary, if any international role was pointed to, it was much more likely to be that of the United States and figures like Senator George Mitchell.<sup>44</sup> But with the benefit of hindsight the European dimension was much more important than was generally realised. For a start, many of the crucial discussions between John Major and then Tony Blair and the Irish Taoiseachs, Albert Reynolds, John Bruton and Bertie Ahern took place on the margins of European Council meetings, something that both averted the need for more pressurised bilateral meetings and underlined the degree to which the British and Irish governments were routinely working together as fellow European member states. Second, the process of lessening tension on one of the most militarised borders in Europe was greatly facilitated by taking place in a context where all of the countries of Western Europe were holding detailed collective discussions about how to lessen if not remove altogether border formalities and to facilitate movement, trade and communication across national boundaries. Third from the mid-1990s onwards significant amounts of EU money were specifically targeted at Northern Ireland and at the promotion of cross-border initiatives. Furthermore, the effort to lobby for this money involved conspicuous levels of cooperation in Strasbourg and Brussels between Northern Irish MEPs like Ian Paisley and John Hume who came from opposing political traditions and had seldom worked together.<sup>45</sup> And finally and perhaps most fundamentally the transformation of the Irish Republic from one of the poorest countries in Western Europe lagging economically far behind the British-ruled northern provinces of the island, to a ‘Celtic tiger’ wealthier and more prosperous than Ulster – a development that was inextricably tied up with the Republic of Ireland’s own experience of EC/EU membership – dramatically changed the dynamics of interaction between the two parts of Ireland.<sup>46</sup> The wider European framework

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<sup>43</sup> Giada Lagana, *The European Union and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Roger Mac Ginty and John Darby, ‘Third Parties: External Influences on the Peace Process’, in *Guns and Government: The Management of the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty and John Darby, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), 106–22.

<sup>45</sup> Vincent Dujardin et al., eds., *The European Commission 1986-2000. Histories and Memories of an Institution* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019), 426–28.

<sup>46</sup> For the first part of the story, see John Bradley, ‘The History of Economic Development in Ireland, North and South’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 98 (1999): 35–68.



thus played a crucial enabling role in the process that would end thirty years of bloodshed in Northern Ireland.

All told therefore Britain contributed more to the integration process and derived more benefits from it than the standard awkward partner label would imply. The UK's experience of membership was certainly bumpy and involved frequent clashes between London and Brussels, and between British representatives and those of the other member states. It was also accompanied by an ongoing debate within Britain about whether or not EC/EU membership was a good thing, and a conspicuous absence of the satisfaction at Europe's achievements that characterised the political debate elsewhere in Western Europe. But the sulky partner was also an influential one, and the country that so ostentatiously refused to warm to European membership was at the very same time being transformed by it, much more than most of its own citizens recognised. True such transformation was uneven, with some groups of the population more directly affected than others. A well-educated and well-travelled young professional, shaped by a year abroad funded by the EU's Erasmus scheme, and aspiring to a career and an eventual retirement which took full advantage of the European single market, was significantly more likely to view EU membership positively, than someone older and less educated, who had no aspiration to travel extensively and few cultural ties with continental Europe. To the latter the EU might well seem primarily a menace, a source of 'red tape' and immigrants, both of which threatened longstanding facets of English life. The differentiated nature of the EU's impacts, both positive and negative, help explain why the European issue was so divisive in British politics long before the 2016 referendum was held, and still more why the polarisation between Leave voters and Remainers after the outcome has proved so deep and enduring. A result that was for some a welcome escape from dangerous outside interference, was for others a threat to a whole way of life. But the depth of the division only underlined the ways in which EU membership had tangibly altered Britain and British life – and hence the magnitude of the change that would occur now that that membership had been ended.

### **Shorter-Term Contingencies**

A further danger of putting too much emphasis on the bumpiness of Britain's relations with the EU is that it can imply that Brexit was all but inevitable, the predictable end to a loveless

partnership, thereby largely draining of their significance the shorter-term political trends in the first part of the twenty first century which led to the 2016 vote. This too would be a mistake, for while there were certainly longer-term fragilities about Britain's position within the EU, Brexit cannot be explained without looking carefully at a number of important developments in the latter stages of Britain's forty six years within the EC/EU. Furthermore, to accept the notion of inevitability, is also to absolve from responsibility those politicians who took the fateful decisions that would lead to the vote and helped shape its outcome. It is therefore vital to identify those shorter-term factors that helped determine Britain's path to the 2016 referendum. Four largely party-political developments will be highlighted, as well as a crucial change in the previously rather abstract debate about sovereignty.

The first of the party-political developments that would lead to the 2016 referendum was the gradual transformation of the Conservative Party from the 'party of Europe' of Macmillan and Heath, into an overwhelmingly Eurosceptical body by the first decade of the twenty first century. This trend had already begun in the latter half of the 1980s, with the appearance on the Thatcherite right of the party of a belief that not only was Britain now on an economic trajectory that would see it pull well ahead of other countries in Western Europe, but also that EC policies unless kept in check might begin to impede the UK's success.<sup>47</sup> It was given a huge boost, especially amongst the party grassroots, by the circumstances surrounding Thatcher's fall from power in 1990, with many activists interpreting what had happened as their leader being stabbed in the back by a cabal of senior pro-Europeans. The movement was energised by the large-scale backbench rebellion against the Maastricht Treaty and more generally against the pro-European policies of Major's government.<sup>48</sup> And it would become the mainstream of the party during the lengthy period that the Conservatives spent in opposition between 1997 and 2010. Such Euroscepticism did not, admittedly, necessarily equate to support for a total British withdrawal from the EU. Enough Tory pragmatism remained for many senior Conservatives to baulk at taking this radical step. But it did mean that by the time Cameron became party leader in 2005, out-and-out pro-Europeans in the party like Heseltine or Kenneth Clark

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/207703> (last accessed 3 May, 2021)

<sup>48</sup> David Baker et al., 'Backbenchers with Attitude: A Seismic Study of the Conservative Party and Dissent on Europe', in *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government*, ed. Shaun Bowler, David M Farrell, and Richard S Katz (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 72–93.

resembled isolated relics of the past, criticism of most European policies and total resistance to any further integration had become the norm, and a vocal and growing minority were calling for the UK to leave the EU. The policies and politics of Cameron's two governments would be deeply shaped by this new reality.

The initial stages of this Conservative swing against European integration was counterbalanced by the movement of the Labour Party in the opposite direction – indeed the two processes reinforced each other, with Labour able to occupy the pro-European terrain that the Conservatives had vacated and the Conservatives encouraged in their Euroscepticism by the need to attack the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. But Labour's own commitment to the EU weakened substantially in the years after 2010, in part because many on the centre-left strongly disliked the treatment of countries like Greece in the course of the Eurozone crisis, but still more because of a desire by Ed Milliband and then much more obviously Jeremy Corbyn to distance themselves from the policies associated with the New Labour years. Corbyn's personal views furthermore were a direct throwback to the anti-Europeanism that had been typical of the Labour left during the 1970s and early 1980s. The result was a party that lost its appetite for talking about the issue, and shied away from criticising the ever-more sceptical stance of the Cameron government. Labour was not actually hostile to the EU, still less to British membership of it, but its leadership was highly reluctant to take a strong public position on the question.

Labour's growing silence left the Liberal Democrats as the only strongly pro-European force in English politics, although the Scottish Nationalists filled that space north of the border. At one level this should not have been a problem. Both halves of the Liberal Democrats ancestry, the Liberal Party on the one hand and the Social Democratic Party of the 1980s on the other, had been deeply associated with pro-European sentiment and the party's commitment to the cause seemed secure. But the party's own electoral fortunes took a disastrous knock from the 2010 decision to join the Conservatives in Cameron's coalition government – working closely with a right of centre party proved especially difficult for the party's much more centre-left leaning activists and voters – and, more particularly, from the u-turn which entering government compelled the party leadership to make on the issue of university fees. The outcome was a near electoral wipe-out in 2015 from which the party has still not recovered. At precisely the moment when the need for a strong pro-European voice in British politics was becoming most acute, the only

unambiguously pro-European grouping in England had thus been decimated and demoralised. The void where pro-Europeanism ought to have been in the UK public debate was striking.

In total contrast, the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the first 15 years or so of the twenty first century ensured that the anti-European voice in British politics had never been stronger. There had been anti-European groupings in UK politics before, notably the Referendum Party in the 1990s. And in terms of successfully securing seats at Westminster, UKIP was scarcely more successful than the earlier party had been, with only two MPs, both of whom had defected from the Conservatives. But UKIP had in Nigel Farage a far more effective campaigner than many of his predecessors, able to speak to many within the UK electorate who were disillusioned with the mainstream parties. Furthermore, UKIP's real importance lay in the pressure that it put on the Conservatives to maintain their Eurosceptic credentials and to avoid sliding back to the more pragmatic position that governing parties have often adopted on the question of EC/EU membership. Any softening of Tory criticism of the EU, many of the party's backbenchers feared, could easily lead to the party losing support to UKIP thereby endangering many of their seats.

The final contextual change that really mattered in explaining both the decision to hold an in-out referendum on EU membership and the outcome of that vote, was the rise of immigration as an issue linked to Europe. Controversy about who was entitled to work and settle in Britain was not new in the early twenty first century. It had been for instance a subject of considerable political debate in the 1970s also.<sup>49</sup> But in the earlier period, discussion had overwhelmingly focused on Commonwealth immigration, rather than migration from continental Europe, since the latter remained at a low-level. The high number of Central and Eastern Europeans who took advantage of free movement provisions to come and work in Britain after 2004 changed the situation dramatically, and led to a situation in which immigration and EU membership became tightly linked in the minds of many voters. This linkage, and the backdrop of the wider EU migration crisis, made much more concrete the longstanding Eurosceptic complaint about the loss of sovereignty

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<sup>49</sup> Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multicultural Nation* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 179–206.

entailed by European integration. Complaints about Britain losing the ability to control its own affairs go back to the very beginning of the debate about Common Market membership in the late 1950s, early 1960s. They had been at the heart of the ‘No’ campaign in the 1975 referendum.<sup>50</sup> But while the loss of sovereignty had always been an issue that some felt passionately about, it also suffered from being too abstract for many voters. What did losing sovereignty actually mean? Compared to the numerous highly concrete problems facing the UK in 1975, it largely failed to cut-through in the wider public debate. In the run-up to 2016 by contrast the inability of Britain within the EU to determine for itself who was entitled to live and work in the country became a highly visible and comprehensible embodiment of this loss of sovereignty. In the circumstances, the urge to ‘take back control’ became irresistible for many.<sup>51</sup>

All of this meant that when Cameron took the misguided decision to seek to end Conservative Party infighting over Europe and to halt UKIP’s rise by promising a referendum, the forces lining up to contest the referendum campaign were much less favourable to the pro-European side than had been the case in 1975. In 2016, the gap in funding between the two sides had largely disappeared; the press was much more evenly balanced; and there were far fewer supposedly apolitical organisations ranging from businesses to the Church of England willing to break cover and express a clear cut opinion on the issue.<sup>52</sup> Much would thus depend on the ability of the rival politicians to capture the public imagination and to win the trust of voters. And on this the Remain campaign fell down badly, not least because in the absence strong pro-European voices like Heath or Jenkins in 1975, the role of leading the argument for EU membership fell to figures like Cameron or George Osborne, his Chancellor, each of whom had spent significant portions of the previous decade speaking of the EU in highly critical terms. Their failure to carry conviction in a straight fight with Leave campaigners who had a much more consistent record of hostility to the EU was unsurprising. Nor were they able effectively to counter the immigration argument, given that their government had not contained migrant numbers, despite repeatedly promising to do so, and Cameron had failed in his efforts to secure an exemption from EU provisions on

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<sup>50</sup> Saunders, *Yes to Europe!*, 231–53.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Take back control’ proved to be the decisive slogan used by the Leave campaign.

<sup>52</sup> Saunders is good on the tilt of both business and the church during the first referendum Saunders, *Yes to Europe*, 155–82 & 210–30.

the free movement of people during his attempted 2015 ‘renegotiation’. The narrowness of the eventual 52% to 48% victory for Leave somewhat masked the reality of a poorly planned and executed Remain campaign.

### **Rejecting Exceptionalism**

The third reason not to over-emphasise the awkward partner narrative is that it wrongly implies that close cooperation is an easy process for other European countries. This is clearly not the case. Tight integration is never wholly natural or effort-free, involving as it does lengthy multilateral negotiation before obtaining a decision that might, in theory at least, have been possible to take unilaterally, and the acceptance of an outcome that is likely to be different from that which purely national needs would have dictated.

Frustration can also arise from the sheer impossibility of securing some hoped for change, and the inevitable frictions that occur when politicians and officials from different countries with different cultures are obliged to bargain with one another incessantly on questions of political and economic sensitivity. And working together can often be particularly hard for larger countries, better able to imagine different circumstances in which they were able to arrive at the hoped-for outcome through independent rather than collective action. All of this has meant that Britain is far from unique in having felt discomfort at the need for cooperation, frustration at the outcome of much European bargaining, and annoyance, bordering on outright rebellion, about some of the rules it has been obliged to accept. The long trail of newspaper headlines, stretching back to the 1950s, about ‘breakdowns in Brussels’, ‘late-night crisis negotiations’ or ‘last-ditch compromises’ should serve as a reminder that reaching common European decisions has never been, nor is ever likely to be, easy. The equally lengthy litany of infringement procedures that the European Commission has been obliged to take out against member states that fail to observe the commitments that they have entered into sends a similar message. British discomforts with the process, while distinctive, have certainly not been unique.

In such circumstances, pressing ahead with integration requires national governments and political elites constantly to explain to themselves and to their voters why this effort is necessary. How this is done will vary from country to country, culture to culture, and will also evolve somewhat according to the precise circumstances. But constant explanation and justification remain profoundly necessary, given the inevitable

frustrations and disappointments that accompany the practice of working closely with other countries. And it is here that successive British governments have fallen down badly, with little effort made to explain, justify, or sell Europe between the two referendums of 1975 and 2016.

This failure was made all the more acute by the fact that the original core narrative about why Britain needed to be part of the integration process became less applicable, in appearance at least, as Britain prospered within the EC/EU. Central to the UK's original turn to Europe was the notion that EC membership constituted the best antidote to Britain's postwar 'decline'.<sup>53</sup> Rediscovering a regional role, to put it differently, would help arrest the seemingly inexorable slide from global power to European laggard that the country had undergone during the 1950s and 1960s. This argument loomed large in discussion about why European membership was needed in both main political parties and throughout the British civil service in the years between Macmillan's first application and the UK's belated entry in 1973. It also assumed a prominent role in the rhetoric used during the first referendum which confirmed the country's European choice.

In the decades that followed, however, the very notion of decline was banished from the mainstream UK debate. The better economic fortunes of the country from the 1980s onwards, the way in which a series of military triumphs in the Falklands or as part of the First Gulf War coalition, replaced the slow retreat from empire of the early postwar decades, and the charismatic leadership styles of leaders like Thatcher and Blair, combined to make Britain much less prone to self-doubt and angst as it entered the twenty first century than it had been for much of the mid-part of the twentieth. This meant that the need for European membership as an antidote to decline diminished accordingly. Other justifications might, and almost certainly should, have been found. These could for instance have acknowledged the very limited capacity of any single country, even one that was no longer in decline, to effect meaningful change in the ever more multipolar world of the early 2000s or to confront challenges, like climate change, that manifestly transcend national borders. But by and large the British political class ignored the need, still locked in the cycle of endless sniping at the EU discussed earlier. As a result, when a referendum needed to be fought, and a strong case made as to why EU membership was beneficial, no well-

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<sup>53</sup> Aqui, *The First Referendum*, 11–13.

established narrative existed. Instead the Remain campaign in 2016 was obliged to rely on a narrowly economic justification, backed up by improbably precise Treasury calculations about how much non-EU membership would cost each British citizen. Compared to the well-crafted 'take back control' campaign, advanced by politicians passionately convinced of their case, it was little wonder that this lacklustre Remain campaign failed to persuade. The 2016 result in other words exposed not just the short-term failings of those who led the effort to keep Britain within the EU, but much more seriously the failure by successive British governments to construct and constantly reinforce a persuasive explanation of why the UK needed to cooperate closely with its European neighbours. The fault was not just limited to David Cameron but stretched back through the New Labour years to the 1980s at least, and perhaps all the way back to 1975. Britain no longer knew why it was within Europe, and as result voted to leave.

## **Conclusions**

Brexit was not an inevitable outcome. Britain, it is true, has had a bumpy ride as an EC/EU member. This has in part sprung from its distinctive history and culture, as well as its geographical position. The country has also felt, more strongly than many others, the countervailing pull of extra-European partners, especially the United States. But such fragilities, while not insignificant, neither prevented the integration process from being both shaped by, and shaping, Britain, nor condemned the UK and the EU to a foreordained divorce. Instead a full explanation of why the 2016 vote was held and of its outcome, needs to concentrate both on the short term set of political contingencies that had so weakened the pro-European voice in British politics and helped stoke unprecedented levels of Euroscepticism, and on the longer-term failure of Britain's political leaders to explain, justify and 'sell' EC/EU membership.

This in turn helps give the Brexit story its full significance in the wider narrative of European integration history. Had Britain's departure from the EU been the predetermined outcome of UK exceptionalism, it would have implied that there was little that the 27 remaining member states could have learned from it. All that could have been concluded was that de Gaulle had been right, and that Britain was too insular, too maritime, ever to have properly belonged within a European entity. But if it is recognised that Brexit was not the inevitable end to an aberration, but instead the product of a longstanding failure by



generations of British leaders to convince themselves and their voters of why their country needed to cooperate closely with its neighbours, then it does become something from which useful lessons can be learned. For it should stand as a reminder that integration is bound to be uncomfortable and to produce frustrations aplenty, and can hence only continue to enjoy the popular sanction upon which it depends, if the realities of interdependence and virtues of multilateral cooperation over unilateral action are constantly explained and reiterated. Britain has paid the price for forgetting this reality; other European countries would do well to learn from its mistake.

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