

# Cameron's self-imposed isolation is of little surprise given the history of the UK's troubled relationship with Europe.

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**Bart Cammaerts** argues that David Cameron's actions at the recent EU summit in Brussels are best seen in the context of the UK's long-standing reluctance towards greater integration with Europe. It is no surprise, therefore, that a two speed Europe is now a reality.



UK elites totally misunderstand the political dynamic in Europe, but this is not new. Let's just say that the total isolation of David Cameron at the recent EU summit is just another episode in the contentious and problematic relationship between the UK and the rest of Europe or 'the continent'. In many ways the elites, and let us not forget a large part of the British population as well, still considers itself as distinctly different and dare I say somehow superior to those strange people living on the other side of the channel.

Forgive me for my ironic tone, but I don't think I'm far off the mark here and there is of course a historical legacy feeding such sentiments going way back to before there was even any mention of the EU or the Euro for that matter. From the beginnings of the embryonic EU state until now, Britain as a country has always positioned itself as reluctant European and there are historical reasons for this, such as the Empire and even the French (and other lesser known European) revolution(s). We do things our own way on this island, thank you very much!

History, however, does not stop at the Eurotunnel. Each European country has its history, its wars and its particular character amplified by stereotypes and caricatures. Despite this, and – it must be said – in great part because of two bloody world wars, continental Europe fully embraced the old adagio *Unus pro omnibus, Omnes pro uno* [One for All, All for One] or as you wish: together we're stronger than on our own, but without denying our quirky particularities (i.e. the subsidiarity-principle). I could also refer here to the inscriptions on the First World War memorial in Diksmuide, Belgium:

| *'Nooit meer oorlog; Plus jamais de guerre; Nie wieder Krieg; No more War'*

By invoking this sad and dark legacy I do not aim to make a cheap point here, I just want to argue that this historical legacy does play a huge psychological role in how the EU, not so much as an institution, but rather as an idea and principle is perceived by political elites and the population at large in various European countries. In a sense the Balkan, the Baltic republics and Eastern Europe, after distinct conflicts, occupations and bloody wars also signed up to this idea of a united but diverse Europe, partly out of economic necessity, but also because it provides a common framework to overcome belligerent tendencies and a bloody past. Sure, there are tensions and conflicting interests within Europe, between large countries and small, North and South, liberal and socialist, but in the end the political project and the Euro which is intrinsically linked to this project will always prevail over 'the markets' or populist tendencies going against it. To use Thatcher's famous words; 'There is no alternative!' or put differently the alternative is unimaginable and a return to a dark past.

And it is precisely this that the British will never understand. Hence, the constant speculation in recent months about the end of the Euro in the UK media, from the Daily Mail tabloid-press to the BBC's Newsnight. Will it survive the Greek crisis? Italy, too big to fail, but if it does it will be the end of the Euro, etc. The Euro will not disappear and the UK will never give up its pound sterling, but I argue that that is not the issue. What is more the issue here is the precise relationship of the UK with the European project as such. If we skim the media in different European countries the verdict is quite clear:

| *'Europe marches on, Cameron stands still' (Volkskrant – Netherlands)*

| *'Non-Euro countries agree with budget pact, Brits TOTALLY isolated' (De Morgen – Belgium)*

| *'Cameron distances himself from accord to strengthen Europe' (El Pais, Spain)*

| *'Brits make a step towards leaving the European Union' (die tageszeitung, Germany).*

If it is not obvious yet, the moment has come where 'Europe' does not care anymore about what the UK thinks or wants and the two-speed Europe has become a reality, with that difference that it has now become one speed for the UK and another for the rest of Europe – very reminiscent of the 70 'mph' limit, driving on the 'wrong' side of the road, having different plugs, feudal landownership rules and more inequality.

This last point is not put there merely to mock, but also to develop a more fundamental argument. In recent months the political discourse in the UK against the EU has been primarily focused on clawing power back from evil Brussels. But what is actually meant by this? In essence, this refers to destroying better protections for workers imposed by the EU, to being able to ignore green policies set by MEPs and the Commission or to safeguarding the interests of the City against seriously regulating the banking sector and taxing financial speculation. As such, the Pyrrhus victory of Cameron in Brussels resisting further European integration is in reality a defeat for workers of all collars, the environment and for those who want a fairer and rebalanced economic system.