

EU membership strongly benefits the UK, but pro-Europeans should push for a credible reform agenda to regain the confidence of the British public.

by Blog Admin

Today the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) releases a [report](#) on the UK's relationship with the EU: 'Staying in: a reform plan for Britain and Europe'. **Glenn Gottfried**, summarising the report, writes that while the UK receives a number of benefits from EU membership, the case for 'staying in' has not been made effectively to the British public. IPPR also propose an EU reform agenda, including a reduction in the size of the Common Agricultural Policy and strengthening the legitimacy of the European Commission – reforms which will have a much greater chance of success if the British government takes a more constructive approach to EU negotiations.



The European project is facing its greatest crisis since its inception in 1957. Faced with a continuing recession, and the consequences of austerity, European citizens are questioning the rationale behind integration. In the UK public attitudes are becoming more and more Eurosceptic. In [the latest Eurobarometer poll](#) just 33 per cent of Britons thought membership of the EU was a "good thing" – 17 percentage points below the EU average. At the same time, the political relationship between Britain and the EU has gone from bad to worse. David Cameron has ruffled a number of feathers amongst European leaders with his non-constructive approach to both resolving the eurozone crisis and the upcoming [budget negotiation](#). At a time when all seems nearly lost is there any way that Europe can rise from its ashes with Britain still a member?

Today the Institute for Public Policy Research released its [argument for a new direction in Europe](#), where British citizens should have their say on membership, allowing for the pro-European case to be made. Public demand for a referendum is growing and now seems inevitable as both the Conservative and Labour parties mull over the idea for their upcoming election manifestos. If any treaty changes occur to strengthen political union a referendum becomes unavoidable through the European Union Act passed through Parliament last year. A straight in/out referendum should be held once questions surrounding the eurozone are resolved and there are clear definitions of what both "in" and "out" means. Since 1975 pro-Europeans have not had to make their case – leaving a void for Eurosceptics to capitalise on what appears to now be a one-sided debate. Despite this, IPPR believes a strong case for Europe can be made with the approval of the British electorate.



Palace of Westminster (Credit: Arpingstone – CC-BY-2.0)

Pro-Europeans should be under no illusion of the aversion amongst British citizens towards Europe. The old arguments for membership will no longer resonate with the public. Europe may have helped foster peace and prosperity, but this reasoning is losing strength to younger generations. Debates from the past were too technical, mostly revolving around issues of the common market, monetary union and enlargement. The new Pro-European argument must provide compelling evidence of geopolitical,

economic and cultural reasons to convince the British public to vote in favour of staying in.

Geopolitically, Britain's influence will begin to diminish unless it remains part of a regional group. Its population is less than 1 per cent of the world total while its economy is less than 4 per cent of global GDP. In 2000 the UK was the fourth largest economy in the world. Emerging economies such as China, Brazil and Russia however are quickly expanding. By 2020 it's expected that Britain will be the ninth largest economy, no longer holding its place within the G8. Collectively however, the EU is 25 per cent of global GDP. Britain will continue to benefit from EU membership in areas of global trade and climate change – areas where the public still support closer links with Europe.

Economically, Britain still gains much from EU membership. IPPR estimate that leaving Europe could cost GDP to permanently be lowered by 2.25 per cent. Through continued membership and internal reforms, such as liberalising trade relations with emerging economies and relaxing rules across its service sectors, national income could increase by 7.1 per cent with an increase of 47 per cent in exports by 2020.

Culturally Britain has integrated with an increasing amount of people living, working and studying in Europe. There are 1.4 million Britons living in Europe while 2.5 million Europeans live within the UK. Many Britons choose to retire or own a second home in more hospitable climates such as the South of France or Spain. Despite having close relationships with other Anglophone countries and the Commonwealth, Britain remains geographically and culturally closest to Europe.

While the above points set a basis for continuing membership, pro-Europeans must acknowledge the areas in which Europe has failed. The EU has been plagued with scandals and incompetence through misspent structural funding and counterproductive policies like the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP). A reform agenda is needed to regain the confidence of the European and British people. The forthcoming summit on the EU budget is an excellent starting place for Britain to push for real change. Rather than threatening a veto, David Cameron should attempt a 'grand bargain' with the intention of Britain giving up the rebate in exchange for a smaller overall budget including a significant reduction in the CAP and savings from better targeted structural funding. The result would see Britain contributing less – not more – to the overall EU budget. The budget should also focus on growth, helping countries on the periphery of the eurozone make structural reforms to their economies through an EU-wide industrial strategy supporting investment in research and development and infrastructure. To assure the funds on these projects are spent efficiently and effectively it should be overseen by a new commissioner for growth.

IPPR argues that the institutions of the EU need greater legitimacy and accountability – starting with the Commission. The Commission's role should be revised to that of an impartial civil service implementing the mandates of the Council and European Parliament. It should also have the capability to examine and remove older laws which have become out-of-date to ensure newer laws and regulations are more effective.

Lastly, Britain must be more constructive in the places Europe can lead and make a difference, while leaving other areas best suited for the national level alone. It should emphasise areas like energy security, climate change, irregular migration and other global issues where collective bargaining power is needed. IPPR evidence shows that these issues are where the public is more inclined to support closer cooperation with Europe.

The relationship between Britain and the EU has always been complicated. Throughout the European project's existence successive British governments, and the EU institutions themselves, have done very little to make the Pro-European case to the British public. Those in support of Europe – including politicians, business leaders and the media – must now rise to the occasion to convince the public that the EU is worth saving. While it may be easier to outline the geopolitical, economic and cultural benefits Europe brings to Britain, they must also recognise where Europe has failed and where reform must take place. If they can convince the public that the future of Europe is not the status-quo, but rather an improved Europe encouraging economic growth and democracy, the case for staying in can be won.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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