

Alan Sked on the EU, part four: the myth that we rely upon the EU

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/10/alan-sked-on-the-eu-part-four-the-myth-that-we-rely-upon-the-eu/

10/06/2016

In the last of a series of pieces for LSE BrexitVote, Alan Sked asks why many Britons are convinced of the need to stay in the EU. He argues that Britain extricated itself from economic decline in the 1970s thanks to domestic policies and not the efforts of the EU, and describes a technocratic elite of lobbyists and civil servants who thrive on the business of regulation.



We are not in the Eurozone, and cannot be subjected to any future plans for political or fiscal union there. So why remain in the EU? For the Common Agricultural Policy which puts up food prices and discriminates against small producers? For the Common Fisheries Policy which has destroyed our fishing fleet and fishing communities, not to mention fish stocks? For a Common Foreign and Security Policy which is an international joke?

Or to quote the words of the present President of the European Commission in an interview with *Die Welt am Sonntag* in March 2015: ‘...in terms of foreign policy we don’t seem to be taken entirely seriously.’ So why do so many British people take the EU so seriously? After all, when we abandoned empire in the decades after 1945, there was no political or economic trauma or even nostalgia for our long imperial past. Leaving the EU would cause no trauma either and certainly no nostalgia for rule from Brussels.

We should have a sense of historical perspective about this. That would also include recognising that at the height of the age of imperialism before 1914 the two countries with the highest standard of living in Europe were Norway and Switzerland, neither of which possessed an empire. And today, again, the two countries with the highest standard of living in Europe are Norway and Switzerland, both outside the EU. Life can be better off without empires or superstate ambitions.

One reason is that many among Britain’s financial and economic elites, including advertisers, lawyers and management consultants have grown used to a supranational lifestyle that disconnects them from ordinary mortals. These people make an absolute fortune out of negotiating international contracts and influencing EU directives which multinational corporations with large legal and HR departments can then deploy to squeeze out smaller competing firms and enterprises.



Jose Manuel Barroso and his team in 2013. Photo: [European Week of Regions and Cities](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

These multinationals also use thousands of lobbyists to negotiate special tax breaks (“sweetheart deals”) with certain member states – notoriously Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland — which allow them to pay next to no tax in other member states. Likewise top civil servants and politicians of member states have more in common with one another than with local electorates. Participating in endless meetings in Brussels, where they are put up in five-star hotels, driven around in limos and wined and dined ad nauseam must make their often mundane tasks – agreeing Commission proposals on everything from the size of lawnmower engines to the price of turnips to the size of cod quotas – seem highly significant, although, it is true, that sometimes their decisions can mean life or death for starving Greeks or starving migrants. Little wonder, therefore, that these European elites often seem to dazzle not merely themselves but even outsiders.

Academic research is well aware of the division between the masses and these European elites. In 2012, for example, Oxford University Press published a book entitled *The Europe of Elites. A Study into the Europeanness of Europe’s Political and Economic Elites* edited by Heinrich Best and other continental political scientists. It is frankly fairly unreadable, but one of its conclusions is to confirm the basic dichotomy between the political elites and the masses:

‘The decisive factor distinguishing between the positions of elites and non-elites towards a unified Europe is the empowerment or lack of control that collective actors attribute to a transfer of national responsibilities and authority to the European level.’

In other words, the elites want more federalism and the masses less.

Civil servants might be excused for wanting more European control. After all, the EU is run by civil servants, often it seems in their own best interests, and they are remarkably well paid. One fifth of them earn more than the British prime minister. Indeed, according to the *Times* (4 August 2015), ‘Childless EU officials in the “AD II” grade of middle management earn £97,388 and pay tax at 13.4 per cent.’ According to the *Telegraph* on 17 August 2015, the average salary of an EU official is thought to be £78,500, taxed at 16%. Just imagine what top ones with families earn.

According to the previously quoted article in the *Daily Telegraph*, 13,000 EU employees are issued with special EU credit cards for meals, hotels and incidental expenses while travelling on business. The total bill for these credit cards in 2103 was £85.9 million. 362 officials in Germany alone spent £1.53 million. According to the *Times* (9

November 2016), the cost of servicing EU pensions will go up by 5.2 per cent in 2016. The number of retired EU staff claiming a pension worth 70 per cent of final basic salary is expected to increase by 4 per cent next year, taking the annual bill to 1.6bn euros. The average pension paid to retired European officials is more than 3,000 euros a month and the average retirement age is 61.9 years. (A growing part of the bill is for retired MEPs who under a scheme agreed by the European Parliament in 2009, pay no contributions to their pensions—currently worth 153,760 euros for each five-year term served.)

Forget for the moment the myths about keeping the peace in Europe since 1945 (What was the threat? How and when did the EU deter it?) and extending democracy (have Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania become model democracies since joining the EU?). No, the real hold, if any that the EU has on the British public mind, is that Britain from the 1870s was a country in relative economic decline and that only membership of the EEC/EU saved it from going under.

In fact, the oft-repeated thesis of British decline since 1870 is historical nonsense. As Professor David Edgerton, now Hans Rausing Professor of the History of Science and Technology and Professor of Modern British History at King's College London, and the leading expert in the field, puts it:

'Techno-declinism is, intellectually speaking a nonsense. It produces explanations which, if taken literally, suggest that British science and technology collapsed around 1870. Oddly, most attention has been given to the years before 1914, when Britain was the most industrialised and richest country in Europe and dominated world trade. The international comparisons declinist historians provide are greatly misleading. They usually seek to explain things which were not the case with explanations that don't work.' (Read his *Science, Technology and the British Industrial Decline, 1870-1970.*)

Clearly, Britain at times suffered severe economic challenges. In the 1960s and 1970s these included militant trade unions, high taxes, and high overseas defence expenditure. But all of these were overcome by the actions of British governments. There was no EU input. Again, after the world economic crisis of 2008-9, it was a British government that nationalised some banks and introduced quantitative easing. Again, there was no EU input. Britain's problems were dealt with domestically.



Royal Marine commandos train with their Albanian counterparts during a Nato exercise in 2012. Photo: [Defence Images](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

Still, according to supporters of the EU, Britain somehow needs the EU to keep her afloat. This may well seem ironic given the catastrophic state of the EU today but its British supporters – the same people who first negotiated dreadful terms of entry in 1972, who then pushed us into membership of the ERM at a cost of many billions of pounds, and who wanted us to join the euro (and still do!) — will never be satisfied till Britain is totally submerged either as a whole or with Scotland and England as separate provinces of a would-be European superstate.

The EU today is in crisis and cannot cope with the many internal and external challenges facing it. It lives off an outdated mythology and has neither democratic credentials nor international influence to boast of. Nor should there be any fear of isolation when we leave. We would still be in the Security Council of the UNO, the WTO, NATO, the G7 and G20 and a hundred other international organisations. In any case, once we leave, our example will be followed by other states which will envy our new-found independence. The EU has much more to fear from Britain leaving it than do the British themselves.

This is the last of a series of posts by Alan Sked. They represent the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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