

Ever Closer Union — neither a goal nor an aspiration, but a process

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/05/04/ever-closer-union-neither-a-goal-nor-an-aspiration-but-a-process/

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*“Ever Closer Union” is frequently seen as an almost metaphysical aspiration with little political substance; or alternatively as a categorical imperative for the creation a “European Super-State”. **Brendan Donnelly**, who took part in the [LSE Commission on the Future of Britain in Europe](#) on the matter, writes that instead the phrase is best thought of as neither a cloudy aspiration, nor a detailed commitment, but rather a factual description of a process enshrined in the European Treaties. This process entails incremental sharing of national sovereignties between the member states, monitored and reinforced by independent EU institutions.*



When the Conservative members of the European Parliament first formed in the early 1990s a joint parliamentary group with the MEPs from the European Peoples Party, there was a certain condescending expectation on the British side that their continental colleagues were in for a bracing lesson in pragmatic politics from their hard-headed British colleagues. The reality of the newly established parliamentary group could not however have been more different. British MEPs rapidly realised that their new continental colleagues conducted their business with a ruthless and effective pragmatism. If anything, it was the British wing of the newly-established parliamentary group given to ideological anguish and soul-searching.

Some such misconception about continental political attitudes often underlies British attitudes to the celebrated passage in the opening lines of the Treaty of Rome about “an ever closer union between the peoples of Europe.” It is frequently seen in this country either as a vague, almost metaphysical aspiration with little in the way of underlying political substance; or alternatively as a categorical imperative for the signatories of the treaty, condemning them to the creation of United States of Europe in short order, with no possibility of adjustment to the Procrustean bed on which they have chosen to lie. Neither analysis is correct. Both in their different ways reflect common British misperceptions about themselves and their continental colleagues.

“The ever closer union” of which the Treaty of Rome speaks is best thought of as neither a cloudy aspiration, nor a detailed commitment, but rather a factual description of a process initiated by the Treaty. This process is one of incremental sharing of national sovereignties between the member states, a process monitored and reinforced by independent supranational institutions. The process of evolving sovereignty-sharing has been at the heart and core of the European Community and European Union ever since.



Those politicians and observers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere who wish Britain to remain within the European Union but to retain its unfettered “sovereignty” within the Union are wishing for the impossible. Not merely does membership of the Union ensure the sharing of a portion of national sovereignty with others, it also ensures that the quantum of national sovereignty pooled is an ever-increasing one. When Mr. Cameron calls for progress to deepen the European digital single market, he is calling, wittingly or otherwise, for an enhanced pooling of national sovereignties within the European Union. If the United Kingdom remains in the European Union after 23rd June and Mr. Cameron is successful in bringing about a digital single market within the Union, the UK will have made a significant contribution to the “ever closer union” of which the Treaty of Rome speaks.

In the first phase of the European Community’s development the national sovereignties shared were primarily in the economic, or more precisely trading area. By common accord the Single European Act laid the foundations for extending through the Maastricht Treaty the range of sovereignty-pooling into the areas of monetary integration and domestic security. The United Kingdom decided not to participate in the first of these developments, and only to a limited extent in the second. The mechanisms the member states decided to use for sovereignty-pooling in the monetary area were distinct from those used in the original Treaty of Rome, being more intergovernmental in character. In the area of domestic security the mechanisms initially used were largely intergovernmental, but came to correspond over time more closely to the processes of the Rome Treaty.

This chequered history well reflects the ability and desire of the member states over time to modify the scope and form of the process of “ever closer union” on which they are engaged. The strains imposed upon this process by British exceptionalism have not so far proved intolerable to either party. The European Union’s deep structure is of course one which continually nudges the member states towards further sharing of national sovereignties. But it is a misconception to imagine that the final destination of this process can or should be precisely specified today. Continental pragmatism on this matter contrasts amusingly with the obsessive British desire to discern a “telos” to the European Union from which they can dissociate themselves.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. Image: [European Commission](#).

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