

Trade is not – and never has been – the reason for the European Union's existence

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*Britons voted to join the European Union in the mistaken belief that it would be little more than a Common Market, writes **John Charmley**. It has suited pro-European politicians to downplay the political motivation of the European project, and the result has been a debate that – depressingly – continues to revolve around economic data. These same politicians, he argues, have also blamed 'Europe' for their own inability to wield influence in the Commission and Parliament.*



As the wartime home of European governments in exile, Britain would have been in an excellent position to have presided over the creation of some sort of European union, but the only form of it Winston Churchill was interested in was a security one: as he wrote in December 1944, there was 'nothing but weakness' there. In opposition he welcomed moves towards European economic cooperation, but the idea of 'ever closer political union' which lay behind it, held no interest for Britain's leaders – a situation which was to obtain until the economic problems of the late 1950s made some of them wonder whether the Common Market might be the answer to them.

That commentators and historians still debate whether Churchill was in favour of 'Europe' and quote the same words to prove their case pro or contra illustrates the 'original sin' at the heart of Britain's relationship with the European project. As one of the 'Big Three' who won the war, and a country with an unbroken record of independence going back into the early Middle Ages, Britain had shared none of the traumatic experiences which made France – an almost equally ancient polity – feel that she needed to seek her future in a European political union. Her leaders, in so far as they gave any thought to the latter, assumed that as Britain was a Great Power, their own position in any form of European union would be a prominent one. But for them, the priority was economics, and it was the economic side of what was then called the 'Common Market' which was emphasised to the public.



Winston Churchill in 1950. Photo: [Gemeentearchief Weert](#) via a [Creative Commons 4.0 licence](#)

It is true that when the issue was debated in the Commons some argued that Britain was actually entering a political union, but they tended to be those such as Enoch Powell and Tony Benn who were opposed to the whole project. Those, such as Ted Heath, who favoured it denied that was the case. Those in favour of the Common Market downplayed its political aspects and emphasised economic ones. This created the impression in the minds of a largely disinterested public that a few 'extremists' were exaggerating things, and that 'Europe' was all about

economic prosperity. The problem was that Powell and Benn were right about it being a political project – and that the proposed economic benefits have never been very apparent.

By the time Britain entered the Common Market, the rules were set, and no one was going to change them substantially for the British, which meant that her terms of entry were not what she would have wanted. The first postwar economic crisis, which followed hard on the heels of Britain's entry, meant that Europe's economy did not continue to prosper. As the political dimensions of the project became ever clearer, a public which had never consciously bought them because they had never been sold them, was easily persuaded that they had been lied to by their leaders. The exact difference between being condescended to and lied to has never been defined, but in so far as the British press and public perceived anything about 'Europe' in the 1980s and 1990s, it was that it was over-bureaucratised, over-regulated – and over here.

Politicians reacted to this, on the whole, by emphasising British opt-outs from things such as the euro, rather than by identifying and emphasising what they thought the benefits of ever-closer union were. Their emphasis remained where it had always been, on the economic aspects – trade and investment. The advantage of this was that figures can be easily manipulated, not least to scare voters who do not know much about Europe and who may be sceptical about the politics, but do not want to be hit in their pockets. This has lent, and continues to lend, a pragmatic and utilitarian air to the debates about Europe in the UK. It may be that there really is no high vision of what a united Europe could achieve, or it may be that no one thinks it can be sold to the British electorate, but either way, the debate, as we move towards the referendum, continues to be conducted in the depressing way it always has been.

It is interesting that the one thing one never hears from our politicians is any sense that they have been pretty useless at European Union politicking. They join the wrong political groupings and complain they have no power; they fail to get their civil servants into the right Commission portfolios, and complain of a want of influence. It is easy for them to blame 'Europe' for Britain's seeming powerlessness over aspects of national policy, but it would be more honest of them to accept some of the blame for this; we can expect that [about the Greek calends](#). Thus it is that a country used to being a world power has seemed diminished and less powerful, and it was simple enough for opponents of the EU/EEC to attach the blame for these things to 'Europe' – far easier than politicians admitting their own deficiencies.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor of the LSE.

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