


The trouble with unequal partnerships? How UK governments' views on representation in the EU have changed over time

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*This spring the EU is reconsidering, debating and reformulating its future foreign policy agenda. Drawing on her recent research, **Rinna Kullaa** outlines the role successive British governments have played in formulating common EU foreign and security policies in the past. She writes that if the UK votes to remain in the Union it can continue to play an active part in shaping the organisation's global role.*



It is often argued that the crucial democratic body of the European Union (EU) is the European Parliament (EP). Over time, the EP's role has increased from being a consultative body to one which has an institutionalised co-decision authority in EU law-making. After the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 and the abolition of the Western European Union (WEU) in 2011, the EP has been given an increasingly important role as an intergovernmental European assembly. In my [article](#) *The European Parliament and the UK Parliament: A Relationship in Foreign Policy* published in *Parliamentary History* I have studied British discussions about the UK's commitment to parliamentary scrutiny, representation and supervision, in which the need for a genuine debate over representation within the EU is highlighted.

British prime ministers have, in most cases, defined both the government's and the parliament's stance on European integration either through their personal power and role, or more through wide-ranging discussions in their cabinets. Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) did not regard the democratic role of the EP, which in 1990 had been constituted by direct elections for 11 years, as an appropriate safeguard of democratic representation in Britain. Her positions sought to polarise UK policy towards Europe into for-or-against stances, thereby making them a question of domestic politics and competences. Thatcher pitched her criticism at the European Commission together with the Labour party's positions in opposition, which she accused both of being incompetent. John Major (1990–7), on the other hand tended to include his cabinet members in debating European affairs. He held discussions before

European Council meetings, asked question about crucial problems of the [Maastricht treaty](#) which was to be ratified during the UK's EU presidency in 1992. Major sought cabinet consensus and included the secretaries of state in discussions about Maastricht.

The British EU presidency took an unusually substantial initiative and travelled to the then 11 member states to ensure that the treaty which created a new role for the EP would be ratified in time. This makes Donald Tusk's flights to five EU capitals this week ahead of a debate on immigration seem pale in comparison. By contrast, Tony Blair (1997–2007) did not tend to see a particular need to act through the cabinet on EU matters. He pointed out that the anti-European stance derived from Thatcher had been so strong among the Conservatives that Major had not been able to hold his own views on Europe because of his own party and his own government. Blair dealt directly for example with British ambassadors, and extended the role of the embassies as the representatives of the government.

Yet most British prime ministers, both Conservative and Labour, since 1948 favoured a common security, defence and foreign policy in Europe and were less enthusiastic about monetary and political integration. The WEU was created on a British initiative and included both an intergovernmental assembly and a council of ministers. Its purpose was mutual European defence, but it also promoted parliamentary oversight through its structure. Significant questions for British decision makers included representation: would jurisdiction reside in national courts or with the European Court of Justice, which had *sui generis* powers, and what was the actual extent of the powers of the Council of Ministers and the European Commission vis-à-vis national parliaments? In the long term it was important that integration did not go too deep or too far, and the most pressing rationale for mutual defence which had been the Soviet Union stopped abruptly existing in 1991.

In the changing times of the 1990s when NATO continued to exist as a semi-confused organisation for which the rationale had disappeared, directions on European integration for Britain seemed less clear. In the 2000s the Houses' parliamentary committees increasingly influenced the shaping of the British position through their scrutiny of European policies. They were effective in the scrutiny of the Common Foreign and Defence Policy (CFDP), arguing that the government should keep parliament informed of discussions concerning the CFDP, and that the quality of the democratic process depended largely on the relationship between the British national parliament and the government. Committees in the British parliamentary system have an upstreaming function and what emerged at the end of the 2000s was an influence by the committee of both Houses that, in principle, welcomed a European focus on foreign policy and security, but demanded consideration of national parliamentary oversight.

The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) brought in elements that made previous EU treaties more coherent and aimed to strengthen the EU's two foreign and security policies which were premised on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), that had grown out of a previous UK-French initiative. The ESDP was not a highly-developed policy, but by 2007 it had established ten active and two planned missions in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the western Balkans and the former Soviet Union. The UK parliamentary committees concluded that there was no need for a special referendum on the Lisbon Treaty and Britain should not abstain from these initiatives. EU structures scrutiny showed consensus between both Houses over the necessity for parliamentary approval of foreign and security policies at the wake of the Conservative-led coalition government of David Cameron.

Yet arguments originating from the Conservative's backbenchers in recent years have been that the UK's partnership with Europe has grown greatly uneven. In their narratives, Europe has managed to impose on Britain things it no longer wants. Considering that much of the EU today has been coined at crucial stages of for example the Maastricht Treaty by formidable Conservative PMs, this seems both astonishing and yet not at all surprising. The UK's position on integration overall has always been cautious, often pitted against federalism and preferring common foreign and security policy against equalising monetary and social policies. Yet, in considerations of common foreign and security policies Britain was often constructive and an architect.

It is difficult to now know if Britain is willing to lead in Europe again even in these terms. Britain possesses one of the most active networks of Foreign Office representations across the world, offering an example to the work of the EU's

European External Action Service missions (EEAS). British Embassies focus heavily in making over 300 connections per each individual diplomat a year representing British commercial interests. Perhaps, if anyone can go it alone, it is Britain. On the other hand, against the wider spectrum one wonders what would be the purpose of unilateralism in a world that has been global in terms of the ecology since the 1800s and in world politics since the 1970s?

Can there be common European interests in a multipolar world? A partnership that is not merely passive after the danger of the Soviet Union was removed? Is there such a Company that can allow differences to exist on its surface? These are the questions British politics is currently struggling with, and there are no straightforward answers. Perhaps the Council meetings over the British demands have created a process which allows surface differences around a unified core.

I would argue that no one knows more about uneven partnerships in a wider world than those left out of the Euro-Atlantic Community. On the EU's side, through the EEAS, there is an agenda more or less intact, executing more or less a unified vision. Contrast this with, for example, Africa and its relations in the multipolar and interconnected world. The African states that do not have such a cohesive vision, and no real institutional force that has the credibility enjoyed by the EU's institutions. In this light, for building models of more equal partnerships in the future I have more confidence in a global Europe than I do in a unilateral UK agenda, and hope for Africa.

This spring the EU is reconsidering, debating and reformulating its future foreign policy agenda. It is important because much of how well the EU will develop and be able to offer opportunities for future generations to come will depend on how well it learns embrace its role in the world. My research predicts that, if the UK stays in the game and is effectively led by the PM or his Cabinet, the UK would be an active partner of those efforts as well.

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This post is based on Rinna Kulla's Parliamentary History article "The European Parliament and the UK Parliament: A Relationship in Foreign Policy", available [here](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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