

British influence in Brussels had been far greater than recognised



*Britain had far greater influence in Brussels since 1973 than has been recognised. For decades the UK was a driving and liberalising force when it came to the Single Market, enlargement, competition and trade, as well as foreign policy. **Jonathan Faull (Kings College London), Piers Ludlow (LSE), and Laurent Warlouzet (Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale)** outline the story of this*

significant and widespread British sway over the EU.

Britain had more influence during its four decades as a member state of the European Community/Union than has normally been recognised. As such the UK was able to do much to shape the policies, institutions and character of the Union. And the loss of this influence once the country ceases to be a member of the EU will be highly significant, both for the British themselves and for the EU that they depart from. Such were the conclusions of the 'British Influence in Brussels: Looking Back and Looking Forwards' event at the LSE on June 18 2018.[\[1\]](#)

The most obvious indication of British influence in Brussels was the way in which the UK succeeded in shaping a number of core EC/EU policies. Prominent amongst these was the Internal Market, the central policy of the European Community's mid-1980s revival. This was an initiative energetically championed by Margaret Thatcher's government and one the implementation of which was masterminded by a British Commissioner, Arthur Cockfield. It was also a policy about which both Germany and France were much more ambivalent. British support and backing for it were thus essential to its realisation. And given the Single Market programme's centrality to the direction of the Community/Union's development over the subsequent period, the UK can thus legitimately claim to have had a decisive impact upon the whole trajectory of European integration in the final decades of the 20th century.

This was not an isolated example. Another key instance of British influence has been enlargement: the UK was a consistent advocate of a rapid opening of the EC/EU to new member states, especially those of Central and Eastern Europe. Competition policy would be a further example: Britain's departure indeed may well call into question the underlying philosophy by which the case for and against corporate mergers has been judged, with market considerations losing ground to the desire to establish of 'European champions', i.e. companies big enough to compete globally. In trade policy also, the UK has been a liberalising voice of some weight. Looking further back, the British were important shapers of the Community's regional policy when it was first introduced during the 1970s. And even in an area like foreign policy coordination, there were periods, like the early 1980s, when the UK participated enthusiastically in EC level discussions and helped steer policy. The Venice Declaration of 1980, which took a major step towards recognising the need to involve Palestinian representatives in any Arab-Israeli peace settlement, would be a case in point.

Image from [Medium](#).

In similar fashion, the UK has over the course of its four decades within the European system exercised an important influence over the operation of the European institutions. This has not been solely, or even mainly, a matter of language. The gradual displacement of French by English as the *lingua franca* of the EU system has had multiple causes, with British EC/EU membership being just one factor amongst many. But while the influx of British civil servants certainly helped tilt the linguistic balance away from French and towards English, even more important has been the fashion in which UK-trained officials have altered the way in which Eurocrats have interacted, the way meetings have been prepared, and the way in which records have been kept. Anyone contrasting the official records of Commission meetings dating back to the lengthy tenure of Emile Noël as Commission Secretary General (1958-1987) and those overseen by his successor, the Whitehall-trained David Williamson, would immediately be struck by the massive increase in clarity and openness about disagreement. Likewise, the briefing notes with which European Commissioners were equipped when attending important international meetings were utterly transformed by a new set of practices introduced by Roy Jenkins' *cabinet* in the late 1970s and generalised by Christopher Audland, the British deputy secretary general. And altered paperwork was emblematic of a much wider impact on the way in which the Commission functioned.

This institutional impact stretched beyond the European Commission. In Strasbourg, British MEPs drew upon their extensive knowledge of House of Commons procedure to bring new ideas, new techniques, and new strategies to an institution which was in semi-permanent (and largely successful) quest for greater power and authority. In the Council of Ministers, a succession of British ministers gained reputations as shrewd and effective operators, benefitting also from the backing of a civil service machine whose coordination on European affairs was rivalled only by the French. UKREP – the British permanent representation in Brussels – was also highly regarded and feared. And British judges contributed much to the European Court of Justice. Few of the European structures, in other words, were unaffected by Britain's forty plus years of membership; each in their turn will be altered by the UK's departure.

Britain also did much better at playing the game of European politics than often realised. Needless to say, it did not win all the battles in which it fought, nor achieve all of the goals that it set itself. No state does. But it often proved effective in forging alliances with like-minded governments, often including the Scandinavians, and more recently the states of Central and Eastern Europe. Any attempt to read the history of European integration since 1973 as one in which all forward progress has been attributable to the Franco-German motor, with the British relegated merely to that of the ineffective brake, would distort much more than it enlightened. And on those occasions where the UK really was uncomfortable with the direction of travel taken by its partners, it proved highly successful in negotiating effective opt-outs. These can arguably traced back to its 1978-9 decision to refrain from participating fully in the European Monetary System and proliferated during the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century, eventually covering Euro membership, participation in Schengen, and important aspects of justice and home affairs provisions. Securing a comparable position of partial involvement, exempt from some European provisions, but still present at the meetings that matter, is likely to prove all but impossible once Britain has left the EU. Opting out will prove more effective than seeking partially to opt back in.

This story of significant and widespread British influence does, however, beg two further questions. The first, looking back, is why the UK chose collectively to disregard this capacity to shape the EC/EU system, preferring instead to see itself as the permanent malcontent, the perpetual loser in the European system? How, to put it differently, did the 'awkward partner' narrative, emphasising as it does the succession of spats between the UK and its partners, entirely eclipse the parallel but equally important tale of UK success within Europe? And what does this say about the British national debate and its self-perception as an international actor? Looking forward, meanwhile, the post-Brexit UK will have to think long and hard about how it seeks to replicate such influence in the much tougher environment of global trade negotiations, world level discussions of environmental or security issues or bilateral dealings with Putin's Russia or Trump's America. It will not be an easy task.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, not the LSE.

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[1] Laurent Warlouzet was building on ideas set out in *Governing Europe in a Globalizing World: Neoliberalism and its alternatives following the 1973 Oil Crisis*, Routledge, 2018 and 'Britain at the Centre of European Co-operation (1948–2016)', in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56, 1, 2018, pp. 1-16)