

Britain Belongs in Europe

A Position Paper

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Summary

For all us Europeans, United Europe is the most fascinating and exciting political project of our time. Never before in history have so many people attempted to join forces and overcome age-old differences in a democratic procedure. Clearly, this is not an easy task. It is disruptive and will change our lives. But the result is resilient, as no European nation retains the strength to compete with the other big players in the global world individually. Europe is the way forward. We should not shy away from going ahead with it!

European governments have created a whole range of supranational bonds in the past, with differing membership. As of today, this includes the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Euro-Zone, the Schengen Agreement, the European Economic Area (EEA), and the European Union (EU). Quite obviously, the European Union is the most developed. The EU has become a political entity in its own right. Future Europe will be based on the European Union and will be new in a new world order. If we succeed in shaping it well, our future looks bright even in a rapidly changing world. If we fail, we will go under. And while nobody knows what it will look like in the end, one thing is certain: It will not be a European super-state, because the whole notion of sovereign states is being replaced by a far more complex model that allows regions, nations, supranational structures, civil society, and global markets to coexist and cooperate, while competing for power and influence. We, the citizens, are called upon to shape a new model of governance.

Some time in 2016 or 2017, British citizens will vote whether they want to be part of this venture. It is to be hoped the vote will be for Britain to retain its membership in the European Union, and with a margin good enough to bury the discussion. The British government as yet refuses to take a firm stand on this matter, and a number of other European governments do not seem to mind whether the UK chooses to be a member or not. This is wrong. It should be a matter of gravest concern to all governments, and to all European citizens. Citizens should voice their concerns, and responsible civil society and trade organisations, academia, and the media should make a strong case for Britain's ongoing membership.

The European Union needs reform

The European Union is governed by the Council. The Commission is there, and acts as it does, because the Lisbon Treaty (following its predecessors, signed by 28 governments and approved by 28 parliaments, and in some member states by popular vote) determined it to be there, and the Council instructs it to act. So if anyone is the culprit in the EU set-up, it is the Council. In the past, member states have pushed unpopular issues to the EU, obtained a majority or unanimous vote in the Council by way of political bargaining, left the Commission to execute the decisions and then lamented that the Commission was dictatorial and not observing the principle of subsidiarity. Admittedly, the Commission, too, has on occasion developed policies that may have been consistent with the Treaty but were unwise to implement for overreaching reasons. But in general, the Commission has had to take the blame for policies the Council had decided upon.

So anyone demanding fundamental reforms of the EU structure is right. But anyone who believes reforms could be brought about by reigning in the Commission, is wrong. What we need, is a change of attitude in the Council. This should be the place where European policy as developed by civil society, parliaments, governments, and the Commission, is decided upon. It may well be that this will only come about under pressure from outside. But it would be better if we got our act together on our own.

We should not aim at bringing the future of Europe down, but making it more competitive. Our set of rules, regulations and controls is surely near to perfect, but it is suffocating and detrimental to initiative and creativity. Given the momentous changes in the state of the art of governance, we should indeed revisit tasks to be performed and see who can best perform them. But in doing so, we must not look at exhausted role models of a bygone age. Talking of bringing decisions back to Westminster sounds out of place at a time when more and more are being left to Edinburgh, New York, and the headquarters of global corporations.

Indeed we must bear in mind what we can afford and what we cannot. But we must do this together. No one member state can flourish on its own. European solidarity is called for, not national egotism. The welfare state of old is neither workable nor affordable. All Europeans believe they should be protected from being impoverished. That some fear migration could topple the base, is understandable and needs to be addressed by the EU and all its members. The European social security systems are in need of reform aiming at an increasingly harmonised socio-economic model.

The European Union needs the UK to push reforms through. A high-handed attitude adopted by the partners' governments would certainly backfire on the Union as a whole.

It is in Europe's interest to keep Britain in

In the past, Britain's contribution has in many instances been decisive in moving Europe forward. We have shared the belief that together we Europeans can be agenda setters in world politics. Beyond these goals, we also have common values to defend in a world that does not share them.

Britain is more experienced in operating on the stage of world politics than most other Europeans. We should not miss out on this experience.

The European project would suffer if Britain were not part of it. The minority of anti-Europeans everywhere would gain undue confidence and believe in Europe's disintegration rather than its future. This would be of no use to anybody.

Germany in particular has a lot to lose. Three leading (national) economies at the forefront of realising the European project is certainly a more attractive option than just two. It is not in Germany's interest either to be seen as Europe's hegemon or to be left alone with France. Besides, Germany has much in common with Britain, in nearly every respect.

Europe needs Britain as a leader in the global Anglo-Saxon intellectual, scientific, and cultural community. Britain must keep the gates to this community open for us all.

Britain should not choose to leave

Britain has a lot to lose, too. It should not insist on unrealistic demands, be they procedural or of content. And most importantly: Political leaders in Britain should not shy away from telling people what their opinion is and why, and actively campaign for their opinion before the referendum. They should not wait for the winning horse.

Chances are that if the United Kingdom chooses to leave the European Union, Scotland will choose to leave the United Kingdom. What would happen in Northern Ireland and Wales, is anybody's guess.

Should Britain decide to leave, there will be no special deal. Britain will be isolated, and it will not be 'splendid isolation'. Britain will not have returned to an age-old base line of involvement with the rest of Europe, it will have reversed it. Britain, out of sheer necessity and political wisdom, has always been very much involved in European affairs. Its citizens should think more than twice before opting to divert from this policy. Ideas of becoming 'Singapore in the Channel' and/or strengthening special ties with the United States are neither realistic nor in Britain's interest. The U.S. in particular are going their own way, and, incidentally, the U.S. administration has repeatedly stated its interest in seeing the United Kingdom as part of the European Union.

Not everybody in the UK sounding the trumpet of withdrawal from Europe is concerned with the happiness and wellbeing of the British people. There are hidden agendas galore; the media who delight in running down anything to do with Brussels merit questioning what their real interest is. Beating up popular sentiment is one thing; analysing the pros and cons fairly is something very different. We must hope that those in Britain who want their country to be part of the European project, will get their act together and give their position a strong voice, before it is too late.

Britain belongs in Europe

The British government has made it a condition for the United Kingdom to retain its membership in the European Union that a number of reforms be decided upon. Four challenges have been named: Economic governance and the eurozone, competitiveness, sovereignty and subsidiarity, and immigration. But negotiations at government level will not bring about the changes we really need.

The whole European project needs a new thrust, and we must join forces to make this happen: we need civil society, the business community, and the state, to mean governments, parliaments, and civil servants at national, regional, and local level. We need academia, and the media. We need pressure groups and artists, philosophers, political scientists, and economists. In short, we need everybody, if Europe is to happen our way – it must be Europe bottom-up, not Europe by command of a conqueror, no matter where he might come from.

Britain in Europe is in effect a win-win situation. Both Britain and the rest of Europe profit from as close an alliance as possible between as many Europeans as possible. All the big European countries (and even, it seems, Turkey and Ukraine) are now joining up and should stay together. Britain is a major player in this game.

At the end of the day, we have many more commonalities than differences. We have thousands of years of history together. More than others, we share and uphold common values and beliefs. We believe in government by the people, and indeed we believe in subsidiarity – to mean any smaller unit taking priority over any larger one, not just national governments over the European Council and Commission. We believe that in a free, open, and democratic society, the individual is the principal, and governments are agents, and that a governance system which puts responsibilities on as many shoulders as possible is superior to a centralised system.

We do want to see whether matters dealt with by the European Commission could not be dealt with more efficiently within a smaller unit, be it national, regional, local, or indeed non-governmental. We all know that smaller does not necessarily mean national. These thoughts are shared in part by non-Europeans, too. But we Europeans have a unique chance to see them being decisive in creating a new societal order that meets the conditions for being sustainable in the world of the 21st century.

We have the basic form in place and the geographic, educational, intellectual, economic and human resources to lead the way.

The European Union is the most challenging, the most forward-looking in terms of global governance, the most prestigious. A country that is already a member and has every chance in the world to be one of its prime developers, should not voluntarily abdicate this chance. Its partners should do everything they can to prevent it from doing so. United, Europe can and will retain its avantgarde position in shaping the future. Fighting on its own, no European country will.

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