

Europe: a place of promise, not of threat



This Thursday is decision day for the UK and Europe. In the first of a special range of articles, we reflect on a remarkable creation of post-war idealism and what leaving it might mean

For 1,500 years the inheritors of the Roman Empire have been fighting with one another and in so doing have built a shared history and a shared political, intellectual and artistic culture that is unique for its variety in continuity. After 1945, they gradually resolved that what they shared was best perpetuated not by war but by peaceful economic and cultural interchange.

Encouraged by Winston Churchill to found a United States of Europe, they set out on a rather more cautious path, via the preparatory Common Market/European Economic Community (EEC), to the European Communities (EC), the explicitly political federation that the United Kingdom joined in 1973, and on to the European Union (EU), founded in Maastricht 20 years later.

Churchill did not expect Britain to be a member of Europe's United States because he still presumed that Britain's destiny lay with its empire – for which, in 1940, he had contemplated a future lasting 1,000 years. Those who now wish the UK to leave the EU still share that presumption, and they may still invoke Churchill's authority, even though, since he spoke, the empire has been dismembered and swallowed up by a worldwide economic system that is even more comprehensive.

The inability to reconcile themselves to the loss of that past – or even to acknowledge its hold over them – accounts for much of the bitterness of the Europhobes. Unable to conceive of their country as no longer president-for-life of its own comfortable club but an equal partner in a common and demanding enterprise, and indulged by governments happy to pass on to “Europe” the responsibility for such necessary but unpopular measures as fishing quotas or trading standards or safety regulations, they have infected the public discussion of European policy with a sullen resentment.

If relations between the UK and the rest of the EU have been awkward, if our partners have been slow to realise the promise of the single market and have pressed ahead with a premature currency union, if directives remain counterproductively over-detailed, that is all at least partially due to the failure of the UK to articulate a different vision of “ever closer union” and its necessary underpinning by shared policies in defence (including border controls), foreign relations and the democratic representation of the will of the European peoples.

In all of these areas, successive UK governments – at least those of a Conservative stamp – have intervened or negotiated from a standpoint fundamentally at odds with that of all their partners and of the European institutions themselves. They have assumed that there is no such thing as a “European project”, or, if there is, it is a malevolent conspiracy by power-hungry bureaucrats; that the union is, or ought to be, a static trade agreement between unchanging parties; and that the principal concern of the UK should be to resist integration (which the global market will force on us anyway) rather than mould it into its most acceptable form.

UK governments have seemed obsessed with opt-outs and national vetoes and have seemed reluctant to speak positively of the union’s institutions or to publicise their work (when was a plenary or committee debate in the European Parliament last seen on British television news?) or even to encourage the study of the union’s languages.

So it is no surprise that UK citizens, 12.5 per cent of the EU population, are seriously under-represented in the staff of the European Commission, of whom they amount to only 4.6 per cent, or that the UK electorate regards the European elections simply as an opportunity for a local protest vote and as a result is under-represented in the parliament as well, since a third of our MEPs belong to Ukip, the party with the worst attendance and voting record in the union.

The Prime Minister’s recently negotiated exemption of the UK from the principle of “ever closer union” merely gives formal expression to what in practice has been the UK’s role in the EU for many years. However, it is unlikely that David Cameron discerned the Kantian resonances of that phrase for those who first formulated it, since otherwise he could scarcely have been so anxious to dispense with it.

According to Kant, an international political order guaranteeing permanent peace can be only an “idea” to which in practice we can get only “continually closer”: it is a direction of travel, not a goal whose attainment in space and time we can fully imagine. Far from being a blueprint for a superstate, the phrase announces that such a state cannot be achieved in any specifically foreseeable future. (If the EU were to become a state in the same sense as its members, its budget, currently 1 per cent of its GDP, would have to become 40 times bigger than it is.)

Kant’s prophecy is as realistic as it is idealistic and, though made more than two centuries ago in the middle of a brutal and cynical European war, it is still capable of inspiring those who are unaware of its source: two-thirds of UK citizens under the age of 40 see their future in continued membership of the EU. In that future, “European” is a term that does not obliterate diversity but affirms it as the distinguishing mark of an ancient civilisation, while “ever closer union” is not a threat but a promise: a promise of more certain peace, wider circles of friendship, and more effective cooperation.

To those who have grown up in the EU and have escaped the post-imperial identity crisis of their parents and grandparents, Europe offers what it offered our ancestors before the empires and before the Reformation: a place in which to be English (or Welsh or Scottish or Irish) alongside others, as different but equal parts of a larger whole.

For the under-40s, the inscription “European Union” on their burgundy-coloured passports is a visa that opens up a continent of differences: the Aegean coast (and the Andalusian), French bakeries and the sparkling laboratories of Max Planck Institutes, olive groves and Scandinavian timber stands, Italian autostradas and the Opera House in Prague, vineyards and beer-halls and pavement cafes and endless invincible football teams – and the freedom to move through it all, to work in it, study in it, settle in it, marry in it.

Nowhere on earth can show within a similar space such human variety; subtending it everywhere are the traces of the Christian and Jewish past that has bound it together; and visible through them, often enough, is the Roman and Greek inheritance that has formed our invisible legal and cultural institutions.

The European Union is a capacious if rambling house that has been millennia in the building, and the nations of the Atlantic Archipelago, with their own traditions of inventiveness, commonsensicality, mastery of words and love of their natural environment, belong firmly within it.

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