



European Union: A Better View

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Britain and Europe have been at odds for centuries. The English Channel didn't stop the Romans or the Normans, but it did stop Napoleon and Hitler. Ever since the rise and fall of the British Empire, nationalistic Brits have tried to stay aloof from the back and forth of nations and states on the other side of the water. But we joined some of them anyway, in letter if not in spirit, to boost the European Union to its present status. Now many are having second thoughts.

Chaos and confusion over refugees and migrants is only the most urgent of the problems the union faces. The euro sovereign debt crises still cast a gloomy pall over business life on the continent, where northerners suffer fits of apoplexy at the lazy and corrupt ways of southerners, and southerners react with mutinous despair at northern calls for yet more restrictions on their habits and customs. British bankers once hoped to rule them all from the City of London. Now they look elsewhere.

With this as background, British voters could be forgiven for wanting out. Yet I think this would be a mistake. Let me explain why.

First, let's agree that the EU is in dire need of fundamental reform. Its democratic deficit should shame every political idealist in the union. The European Parliament, with its farcical commute back and forth between Brussels and Strasbourg, is failing to check the bureaucrats, who are running wild as they throttle business life in their domains with tiresome regulations that cost taxpayers billions to impose and enforce. The advantages that accrue from shared technical standards and the single market are jeopardised by the extra costs they impose.

The problem here is structural. Members of the European Parliament can only exercise democratic control over the bureaucrats if they have a supranational mandate to do so. But they don't have. The national delegations are answerable to their respective national electorates. For UK voters, the humble efforts of the British Conservative MEPs under the wise leadership of Ashley Fox are more attuned to the signals coming from the Her Majesty's Government in Westminster than to any continental influence. All MEPs dance to national tunes.

Politically, then, the EU is a structure with a borrowed mandate. Economically, too, it's a giant that stands on national legs. The single market and the common currency benefit the strong more than the weak. So now they tend to benefit Germany. Increasingly the union resembles an economic empire run from Berlin. No wonder those proud members of the island race who fondly recall their finest hour are inclined to resist the yoke. They don't understand that Germany is economically and industrially the stronger power. The British bid for power through the financial strength of the City ended in shambles in the crisis of 2008, and now Britain is struggling to get back into the great game. At best we can hope to catch up, more or less. But vainglorious talk of overtaking Germany anytime soon is best politely ignored.

Today a more urgent argument for staying in the EU is neither political nor economic but strategic. For now we need to view the place of European civilisation in the world with concern for its future.

The place of Europe between America and Asia once dictated our military strategy. The role of NATO was to harness Europe and America together to resist any push from the east to unify Eurasia. During the Soviet era that became a cold war strategy. Today we see a weakened Russia struggling to accept European political and economic advances into the Baltic States and Ukraine. This may not seem to leave much work for NATO, but given the military weakness of all the European states except Britain and France, and the massive nuclear arsenal that Russia still fields, NATO still matters. Europeans dare not disarm further.

Europeans can face military threats through NATO. But their respective nations can meet other security dangers only if they stay united in solidarity as civilians to tackle them. As we contemplate our shared history and Christian heritage, many of us sense emerging peril from a slowly gathering storm of militant Islamists who seek to extend a nascent caliphate into the heartlands of Europe. Their challenge is stealthy and still veiled, for the most part, but their ambition is continental in scope and deadly in its intent for any who will not bow to Mecca.

For this reason, British authorities are right to be alarmed that militants might mingle undetected among the migrants and refugees who now stream north as far as Calais. Humanity demands that we look with sympathy on refugees and with understanding on migrants, but we can only regard the militants and jihadists with extreme prejudice. Our way of life is far too valuable to take the risk of a few jihadists too many among the innocent newcomers.

We must control the flow of migrants to the UK. That's why our prime minister, David Cameron, is seeking to reduce our attraction for migrants by restricting the payment to them of welfare benefits. Only when we can reasonably assimilate the migrants we do let in can we reduce the national risk we face from jihadists. But as always in such matters, a forward defence is best. Together with our European neighbours, we should seek to hold a southern line against the flood.

This, to my mind, is a convincing reason for continued British membership of the EU, with all its obvious drawbacks. If the union were to dissolve in bickering and bitterness, if millions of migrants in France and the Low Countries were then allowed to provide safe haven for jihadists, who then passed through the channel ports to invade our isles, our pose of splendid isolation would be to no avail. We would be infested, and too easy for mainlanders to cut off as a quarantine zone. We must fight alongside our continental neighbours to cherish and uphold our common bond against all who, with foul intent, would seek to impose a harsher and more brutal polity upon us.

In the end, this may be the strongest reason to endure the EU for long enough to sort it out in concert with our friends. Then we can hope to flourish together in sunlit uplands, unsullied by the wilder devotees of Allah. (Apologies for my shameless misuse of Churchillian tropes.)

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