

**“‘A troublesome partner.’ Using examples, to what extent would you say this comment accurately describes the United Kingdom’s membership of the EU since 1973”**

Since the mid-1980s, the transfer of state powers to a EU level and reforms affecting the distribution of power in EU policy have challenged the sovereignty of member states. Since the United Kingdom joined the European Union through the Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, it has been seen as the most awkward partner in the ‘club’ and has been a force for disintegration within it.<sup>1</sup> This was particularly apparent during Margaret Thatcher’s premiership.<sup>1</sup> This view however, neglects an appreciation of the importance of accommodationism within the UK approach to EU developments. The UK/EU relationship from 1945-present will be profiled in the contrasting terms of uncooperativeness then accommodationism with an attempt at explaining the reasoning for the actions of the ‘troublesome partner.’<sup>1</sup>

Plate 1: Thatcher in 1975 in pro-European campaign  
Source 2

At the time of Britain’s accession in 1973, EU membership was seen as essential for the reversal of economic decline. Since then, UK governments have encouraged the EU to develop into a large free trade area, but have sought to limit EU competences and revenues in attempts to ensure that sovereignty is not diminished and that the UK governmental system, as a whole, is not affected.<sup>1</sup> Because of this particular conception of state interests and the possession of a broadly different idea of what the EU should be in comparison to continental ambitions for various forms of integration, the notion of the UK being an ‘partner’ bear considerable weight.<sup>3</sup>



One present issue that aligns itself with the notion that Britain is the EU’s ‘awkward partner,’ per se, is the ‘wait and see’ approach with regard to the possibility of EMU. This non-committal policy creates many dilemmas. Firstly, it confuses prospective and current inward investors, (exemplified by car manufacturing) and the British public as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it brings about the question of the implementation of a ‘two-speed’ Europe with an ‘inner core’ of nations whose integration is accelerated. Further fudging of the issue will inevitably mean that Britain’s voice in Europe in terms of shaping the Union’s future monetary and fiscal policy is significantly diminished.<sup>4</sup> If Britain’s future is within the Euro, this policy is unquestionably harmful to Britain’s future interests.

This all, not surprisingly, stems from Britain’s initial main reasons to join the European Union. The first predominating reason for the UK’s integration was that it was ‘essential to reverse severe economic decline’ and ‘maintain global power status.’<sup>1</sup> The second, was obviously sign up for a ‘club’ that entailed ‘accommodation to core developments,’ which is a ‘necessity in order to fulfil the original aims of membership.’<sup>1</sup> It was obvious that following the Suez crisis, Britain had been marginalized in Superpower relations, and coupled with squabbles within the Commonwealth it was recognised that membership of the EC would ensure her standing in international politics, whilst reassuring a domestic audience of continued state prestige.<sup>1</sup>

It is, perhaps, rather ironic then, to remember that Winston Churchill (interestingly, voted the greatest ever Brit according to a recent BBC poll) was the one who first mooted the creation of a EU superstate. In a speech to the Zurich university in 1946, Churchill called for a 'kind of United States of Europe' to prevent any more wars between neighbouring countries.<sup>5</sup> In 1948 he chaired the International Co-ordination of movement for the Unification of Europe Committee at the Hague, attended by 800 delegates. This meeting laid the basis for the European Special Council, European Deliberative Assembly, a European Human Rights Charter and the European Court of Justice. It took a long time for Britain to be accepted within the European Union that was founded in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome. This was because of two vetoes for membership by the French premier, Charles De Gaulle.<sup>6</sup>

Plate 2 and 3: Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill  
Source 5



Formerly, the two countries were allies throughout the two World Wars but De Gaulle opined that Britain was too close to the United States for membership of the EU. Also he believed that Britain would not be fully committed to the Union. With hindsight, he was broadly correct on both fronts.

Plate 4: Edward Heath on bringing Britain into the EU  
Source 2

When Britain applied for the third time, through the Tory PM, Edward Heath, (pictured right) she was accepted into the Union. From 1973 onwards, British/EU relations have been interesting for bystanders, and infuriating for hardcore federalists.



British governments in the period of 1973-79, despite large Eurosceptic factions, largely followed a policy of accommodationism and did little to harm EC integration, or the UK's standing within it.<sup>6</sup> The Heath government made a show of defending the national political tradition, whilst negotiating the terms of entry that humbly complied with the Treaty of Rome.<sup>1</sup> The Wilson government renegotiation of 1974-5 was trumpeted as a triumph for UK interests in order to head off Eurosceptic critics and underpinned the credibility of effective UK power within the EC.<sup>1</sup> This move however, posed only a very limited challenge to the initial terms of entry and specifically included renegotiations to any previous concessions on Commonwealth trade.<sup>1</sup> Wilson also backed down on some issues as well, but had them sanctioned by winning the 1975 referendum on continued membership of the EC. This was indeed a time when Margaret Thatcher was a supporter of the EU, 'I would fear for our future if we were to withdraw.'<sup>2</sup>

The Callaghan Labour Government, who presided over the Britain's post-war economic nadir with the 'winter of discontent,' according to Bradbury (1996) 'indulged in Eurosceptic rhetoric for domestic party conferences.' This ignores the 'strong rapport with West Germany on EC matters,' however. The culmination of this was to join the European Monetary System in 1979 and the only reason why Britain did not then join the infamous ERM was because of economic disarray.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it should be remembered that until the 1980s, the capacity of UK membership of the EC to be 'troublesome' was limited since the EC remained a weak economic organisation. The following decade, including Thatcherism, The Sun and a backward looking Labour party were to provide a much more fundamental challenge to the UK approach to EC membership.<sup>4</sup>

The 1980s in the UK were dominated by Thatcherism. The three successive Thatcher governments of 1979-90 threatened to make the UK a genuinely 'troublesome partner' and a force for disintegration within the EC.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, however, that this did not represent an intensification of an existing trend, but a new challenge at the heart of the government to a hitherto prevailing disposition to be accommodating to EC developments; views which had previously languished on the backbenches moved onto the front benches.<sup>4</sup>

During the period of 1979-86, Britain reinvented itself. The unionised, class-ridden, reactionary army of industrial warriors was transformed into a flexible and individualistic workforce aided by deregulation and entrepreneurial ambition.<sup>6</sup> At its core, Thatcherism relied upon the activation of national potential, envisaging a limited role for EC membership. Her treatment of the EC as an 'arena in which the UK could demonstrate its rejuvenated national vigour.'<sup>1</sup> Implications included hostility to any deepening of integration that could threaten national autonomy. It was on these grounds that Thatcher was well known as an 'agnostic' with respect to the 'European dream.'<sup>1</sup>

However, until 1986, Thatcherism was, on the whole, accommodating with regard to the EC. The Thatcher governments claimed that the EC had started to reflect UK interests and ideals, initially suggesting that there could be an ideal marriage between EC membership and Thatcherism.<sup>1</sup> At 1984, in Fontainebleu, Thatcher managed to negotiate a 66% rebate on UK VAT contributions, reducing the fiscal burden of membership.<sup>1</sup> Following this, the creation of the Single Economic Area (SEA) and the Single Economic Market (SEM) in 1986 allied with Thatcherism's philosophy of the free market and promotion of enterprise culture. Mitterand's suggestion of the UK being in the slow lane of a 'two-speed Europe' went down well with Thatcher.<sup>1</sup>

In the period of 1986-90, the implications of the limited UK influence over the agenda for the deepening of integration became clear. Three developments occurred which posed dilemmas for UK policy. First, there were pressures to move towards EMU and some kind of political union.<sup>1</sup> Both of these projects threatened to circumscribe the capacity for state assertion demanded by Thatcherism, as well as the credibility of national sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Second, membership of the ERM came to be seen as an essential prerequisite for participation in EMU. Thirdly, a social element was brought into the SEM, symbolised by the Social Charter. This contradicted the Thatcherism's *raison d'être*; deregulation of the Labour market and reduce the level of state welfare.<sup>1</sup>

Previously, the UK had distanced itself from the ERM, but now it was an area of political importance. Indeed, along with the Poll Tax debacle, this issue brought down the Conservative governments greatest post-war leader.<sup>4</sup> Thatcher outlined her opposition to new

EC developments in Bruges, 1988. A further speech was at the Madrid summit in Summer 1989. She wielded the cabinet axe and draughted Hurd and Major in, to create a stronger Eurosceptic axis.<sup>4</sup> She departed from the previous 2 terms in which there was broad agreement over EC issues. The final straw for Thatcher was at the Rome summit in October 1990. Here, she openly opposed the abolition of Sterling to the Delors Committee, and resigned after strong criticism from Heseltine and Major. In summary, then, it was only the late Thatcher years that constituted the only period in which UK EC policy broke from accommodationism, preferring instead to obstruct new EC developments.<sup>1</sup>

Plate 5: Jacque Delors  
Source 5

It is apt to bring in the role of the British press in European matters. Of all of the British press, only the Mirror and the Guardian strongly support the single currency. All others have either reserved views, or are rabidly eurosceptic (the Sun, Telegraph and the Mail.) The readership of all 3 easily outnumbers that of the aforementioned papers that are firmly aligned to the left. BBC slightly left of centre and appear slightly pro-euro.

The infamous 1990 'Up yours Delors' headline in The Sun, was one of Kelvin Mackenzie's most infamous headlines, ranking with 'Gotcha' as one of the most controversial. 'Tell him where to stuff his Ecu' said Trevor Kavanagh. With a readership of 3.5 million alone, Kavanagh, the current political editor, was recently called 'the most powerful journalist in Britain.' 'Dim' Wim Duisenberg (the president of the ECB) is another of the Sun's creations.



The Major premiership largely remained more accommodating towards integration, much more than critics would suggest.<sup>7</sup> It is generally acknowledged that he played a difficult hand quite well up to 1995. His accommodating policy allowed Britain more influence in decision-making. The 1992 Treaty at Maastricht exemplified this. Firstly, Major ensured UK participation in the principal development of EMU. This ensured that the UK remained at the 'heart of Europe.'<sup>7</sup> More importantly, he negotiated an opt-out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of EMU. The further negotiation of another opt-out regarding the Social agreement of the treaty showed that Britain was still a 'troublesome partner,' per se. It should be recognised that Major led a successful effort to accommodate the UK to core projects whilst maintaining the credibility of sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>

UK expulsion from the ERM on 'Black Wednesday', September 1992, galvanised the backbenchers and hostile Tory eurosceptics.<sup>4</sup> This was a huge embarrassment for the Bank of England and made a billionaire of an American investor. Indeed, George Soros was the man 'who broke the Bank of England,' perhaps pushing back UK membership of EMU several years.<sup>4</sup> A Major speech in September 1994 made a speech in Leiden, which restated the UK preference for a Europe of sovereign nations, in direct contradiction to the German government. This was a U-turn on the previous comment in 1991,

"My aims for Britain in the Community can be simply stated. I want us to be where we belong - at the very heart of Europe, working with our partners in building the future. That is a challenge we take up with enthusiasm."<sup>2</sup>

In December 1996 he reaffirmed the Leiden speech with this comment,



“I believe that the European Union must be a partnership of nation states, with Community competence where it is needed, but only where it is needed. This is more than a free trade area, but very much less than an embryo European state.”<sup>2</sup>

With Blair’s premiership the policy of ‘cautious accommodation’ to the EU has continued. If Blair thinks the British will vote ‘yes’ in the polls, he will hold a referendum on joining the Euro.<sup>6</sup> Recent speeches in Germany have called for a full UK role ‘we missed the opportunities to integrate, which were not in our nation’s interest.’ Also, William Hague’s well-known mantra of ‘In Europe, not run by Europe’ has been altered by Tony Blair. His philosophy of, ‘In Europe, running Europe’ is perhaps more practical and beneficial for our nation’s future.<sup>6</sup> It also shows a yearning for power. Delors recently said that Blair would be an ideal first president of the ‘United States of Europe.’ This is no doubt on Blair’s mind.<sup>6</sup>

Plate 6: Tony Blair in 1982 as a ‘Eurosceptic’  
Source 5

‘President’ Blair, back in 1982. Fighting the 1982 Beaconsfield by-election, Tony Blair declared in an election leaflet: "Above all, the EEC takes away Britain's freedom to follow the economic policies we need. I support withdrawal from the EEC (certainly unless the most fundamental changes are effected)."



It was not Blair, a Europhile, who changed the Labour party from its anti-EC ideas, however. It was a combination of Neil Kinnock and Delors’s ability to win over the TUC in 1988. This EU hypocrisy can also be seen with Thatcher, Norman Lamont, and Major.

Plate 7: The Euro Source 5



It is important to remember that ECU membership is without a shadow of doubt, the single most important political debate since the Act of Union in 1707 for the nation’s sovereignty. If Europe is our future (70% of our trade is within the EU), shaping it to our interests is of crucial importance.

Critical decisions need to be made, most importantly with regard to entering the Euro. ‘Troublesome’ factions within the ruling political establishment remain, notably Gordon Brown, arguably our greatest post-war chancellor, and Sir Eddie George, the respected Governor of the Bank of England. The latter may be worried about losing his job however! In contrast, the CBI, ‘The voice of British business,’ is in strong support of the Euro.

## **Conclusion:**

Concluding this essay is difficult. I would first state however, that a ‘cautious partner’ is perhaps a more apt way to describe Britain’s membership of the EU. It is vital to recognise that all of the other nations are not all fully accommodating. The Danish rejection of the single currency last year, the fact that France is the largest EU law-breaker (including its own illegal continued ban of British beef) and the rejection of the Nice accords by the Irish are all good examples of other ‘troublesome’ factions.<sup>8</sup> People who argue of Britain’s troublesome

nature should examine the EU budget first. It is telling that the UK contributes a net 5.5 billion Euros, the second largest contributor after Germany with 11 billion Euros. France, in comparison puts in 1 billion, whilst, Ireland and Spain are the greatest beneficiaries. *Communautaire* not 'troublesome partner' is perhaps a better way to put this.<sup>8</sup>

The main argument of the essay is that the public opinion of the UK being a 'spanner in the works of EU development' is partly incorrect. Accomodationism, 'with caution,' is broadly the path that the UK has followed since 1973. The policies to keep Britain in the EC in the 70s, the first two terms of the Thatcher government, Major's premiership and particularly that of Tony Blair, illustrate the accomodationism with caution principle. Perhaps the advent of Euro-creep will soften the public opinion to the single currency and Britain will change from being 'run by Europe' to 'running Europe.' It is probably in our nation's interest to do so.

**(2054 words)**

### References:

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'Dim Wim' Duisenberg not much credibility. Mackenzie. Present editor Trevor Kavanagh 'the most powerful journalist in Britain' – Wall Street Journal. as with current political editor Recently UK has considerably outperformed the rest of the EU. Unemployment level significantly less than Germany, France, Spain, Italy. In 1990s UK reclaimed place held up to the mid 1960s as the fourth largest economy in the world. CAP – France claims large amount of this. BSE crisis and hypocrisy of the French.



#### Issues

Historical – England unconquered since 1066. British empire on which the sun never set. Delusions of superpower status. Sovereignty important. What of the commonwealth. 'Special relationship' with the US. Culturally far more in common with Uncle Sam than with the rest of the EU. General dystopian view of EU 'integration.' – it will descend into chaos. Too many factions and disagreements between countries. Benefits – UK taken over half of EU inward investment over the past decade. Done rather well in that respect. Pounds and Ounces vS Kilograms. 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest EU law breakers behind the French.



Different tax structure and economy to the rest of the EU. Oil based economy. Shell and BP large constituents of UK economy.

Uncertainty about further EU expansion. Latvia, Poland etc. Do we want to fund them?? Out of 1% of GDP. Lots of hypocrisy with regard to economic criteria in EU affairs. The ERM, day Soros broke the Bank of England – worried.

'Dim Wim' Duisenberg not much credibility. 'Up yours Delors' Kelvin Mackenzie. Present editor Trevor Kavanagh 'the most powerful journalist in Britain' – Wall Street Journal. as with current political editor Recently UK has considerably outperformed the rest of the EU. Unemployment level significantly less than Germany, France, Spain, Italy. In 1990s UK reclaimed place held up to the mid 1960s as the fourth largest economy in the world. CAP – France claims large amount of this. BSE crisis and hypocrisy of the French.



EU 'interfering' in our affairs. Heathrow T5 and night flights 'against EU human rights.' Hugely

Channel still profound psychological barrier. Situation would be a lot different if Britain connected to the mainland. Ireland argument can be excluded since receives so MUCH EU funding. Inflation highlights constriction of pan European interest rates. Sir Eddie George recently said joining Euro would not be risk free. Euro creep...