

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

## The Historical Roots of the ‘Awkward Partner’ Narrative

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Academic, political and even popular perceptions of the United Kingdom’s four and half decades as an Economic Community(EC)/European Union member are dominated by what is frequently referred to as the ‘awkward partner’ narrative. This emphasises the multiple clashes between the UK and its continental partners, the doubts about ‘Europe’ in British domestic discourse and, sometimes, the misgivings and annoyance about perfidious Albion felt amongst the other member states. The UK has thus seen itself – and has been seen by others – as a reluctant European, unsure in its commitment to the cause, and hence prone to squabble and fight with its fellow Community/Union members.

A detailed look at the UK’s track record as an EC/EU member state suggests however that reality has been rather more complex. The UK certainly has had its fair share of disagreements and rows with its European partners. The squabbles and crises highlighted by the awkward partner tale are real enough. But they have always been flanked by a much more constructive pattern of engagement – one where UK governments, British officials and UK political parties have been able to exercise significant influence over the course of the integration process. Such active participation has helped promote policies that the United Kingdom favoured – notably the establishment of the Single Market and successive rounds of Community/EU enlargement –, has enabled many British officials in Brussels to gain strong and largely positive reputations and has made the UK viewpoint an important factor in explaining what has and hasn’t happened in the Community/Union ever since 1973. The UK in other words has been an active – and successful – partner, as well as an awkward one.

There are many explanations of why this more positive tale of UK participation has been so systematically overshadowed by the standard awkward partner narrative. Some highlight the different political and bureaucratic levels at which the constructive and combative engagement has taken place: a lot of the positive contributions have been made at meetings that the media seldom cover or notice, whereas many of the rows have occurred at the highly mediated European summits. Margaret Thatcher’s strident disagreements with Jacques Delors or Helmut Kohl, or David Cameron’s attempt to veto the Eurozone’s first institutional response to the Euro crisis, have always loomed much larger in journalistic coverage of the European integration process than the constructive day-to-day contributions of less senior ministers or officials. Also important has been the UK’s decision early on in its EEC membership, and upheld more recently, to confront head-on certain central policy priorities desired by its partners that it was never likely to be able to alter. This occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and then again in the 1990s with Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). The highly predictable failure of such Quixotic attempts then all but eclipsed successful British influence over other, lower profile, policy areas.

Still more significant, however, has been a strong tendency amongst the British political elite, the British press and even the British public to prefer accounts which emphasised the confrontational aspects of British European policy and downplayed the country’s positive contributions. This lopsided reading appeared very early in the United Kingdom’s European experience and has persisted until now. And this is where the longer-term history of relations between the UK and its geographical neighbours comes in. Because in explaining why so many in

the UK seem to have instinctively interpreted their country's relationship with its ostensible partners through an adversarial viewpoint, historical tropes about the country's splendid isolation, brave resistance to continental tyranny and preference for empire or the United States rather than its continental neighbours would appear to have played an important role.

References back to the UK's nineteenth-century history matter in this context largely because of their implication that the country's apogee of power and prestige coincided with a period of detachment (or ostensible detachment, at least) from the rest of Europe. Few politicians, journalists or citizens know much about the foreign policy of Lord Salisbury. But a vague notion of Pax Britannica, plus the resonant sound of the 'splendid isolation' formula itself, has helped to sustain the idea that active engagement with its neighbours of the type that has characterised UK policy since 1973 (if not much earlier) is a sign of how much the country's prestige, position and sense of self-worth has declined from the heyday of Empire. Becoming European seemed, as one former commissioner put it to me nearly thirty years ago, an option resorted to 'for want of a better alternative' (*faute de mieux*). This contrasted strongly with the experience of many other EU member states for whom joining 'Europe' was a step away from inglorious isolation, and a way of re-engaging with those moments of national history when Spain, Poland, Hungary or Austria had been European powers to be reckoned with. The UK's own 'return to Europe', in other words, was a recognition of weakness, a gesture of resignation, rather than a welcome escape from enforced marginalisation. In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that for many the reality of this enforced participation, this loveless marriage, has been the litany of squabbles and disappointments that make up the awkward partner narrative.

Still more resonant and ubiquitous have been references to the era of the Second World War. Overuse of allusions to 1939–45 is, in many ways, a feature of British culture more widely, perhaps reflecting a school system in which that historical period is one of the very few that all children study, often more than once. But even against this backdrop, the sheer number of rhetorical nods to the Second World War in the debate about the UK and Europe is striking. Pro-Europeans were not immune. Harold Macmillan talked of the early EEC as 'giving them [the Germans] on a plate what we fought two world wars to prevent' – although in his case, the desire to avert either German or French dominance of the new grouping ultimately became a reason for the UK to join rather than to stay outside. It was on the other side of the debate, though, that this rhetorical strand was most in evidence. This was true at the very outset of the 'great debate' in UK politics, with opponents of Macmillan's 1961 application, in their efforts to block EEC membership, taking out full page advertisements featuring Viscount Montgomery, who was not shy about using vehemently anti-German language, replete with allusions to both world wars. Similarly, glances back to the Second World War remained commonplace during the 1975 referendum campaign, albeit more prevalent in constituents' correspondence with MPs than in official campaign documents. An unofficial poster used by some Scottish young conservatives, though, pulled no punches, featuring a Swastika surrounded by the wording 'where they failed 1939–1945 they can succeed by Treaty of Rome'. Comparable language recurred in the late 1980s, most famously perhaps with Nicholas Ridley's claim that the EC was 'a German racket to take over the whole of Europe'. In 2016 *The Sun* could dismiss the outcome of David Cameron's renegotiation with the EU with the *Dad's Army* inspired front-page headline, 'Who do EU think you are kidding, Mr Cameron?' And the 'Hitler' analogy was again notoriously deployed by Boris Johnson in the course of the 2016 referendum campaign. Nor is there any sign that the outcome of the 2016 referendum has killed the trope: it is now reported that hard-line Brexiters, disillusioned with the current Prime Minister's proposed concessions to the EU, have taken to referring to their party leader as 'Theresa the appeaser'.

Alongside the repeated allusions to the Second World War and the UK's 'Finest Hour', has been a less frequent, but nonetheless persistent stream of historical analogies with earlier moments of peril from continental threats. These include nods to the UK's role in resisting and then defeating Napoleon, in defying the Spanish Armada or in fighting the French during the

Hundred Years War. The attraction of being able to play with the language of Shakespeare's history plays, or, for cartoonists, to adapt James Gillray's satirical images of Napoleon, only added to the appeal of using these longer range historical comparisons. More often though they were combined with Second World War analogies. In 1961 the *Daily Express* asserted 'the nation that resisted Napoleon and Hitler is not prepared to submit to Professor Hallstein [the first president of the European Commission]'; over half a century later Johnson's 2016 outburst also mentioned Hitler and Napoleon in the same breath.

Such language mattered (and matters) for at least two reasons. The first is that by framing UK involvement in the process of integration as the continuation of centuries of conflict and enmity with Germany, France and other continental powers, it helped create an expectation of discord and strife. The awkward partner narrative seemed normal or predictable; the constructive engagement, an aberration, if noticed at all. The efforts of Margaret Thatcher, John Major or David Cameron to resist and block various aspects of European integration became Churchillian struggles against a new continental threat, isolation in Brussels or at European summits a proof of the UK's rightness and moral superiority, rather than something to be ashamed of or needing to be explained away.

Secondly and more insidiously, the placement of the UK's European experience in a continuum of conflict all but drowned out the widespread continental European narrative about integration being a process which promoted peace and helped overcome the enmities that had led to European war. This was a line that some of those involved in the early promotion of British EEC membership had been keen to popularise. One of the 'Keep Britain in Europe' posters in 1975 for instance read: 'forty million people died in two European wars this century. Better lose a little national sovereignty than a son or daughter. Vote Yes to keep the peace.' But this message failed to ever make much headway in the UK – hence in part the mystification of much of the UK press (and David Cameron's conspicuous absence from the prize ceremony) when the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. The EC/EU, it seems, was easier for the British to interpret as the continuation of past struggle, rather than its antidote.

The final strand of historical allusion that shaped British attitudes towards European integration was that which repeatedly contrasted the natural rapport with 'kith and kin' in the Empire/Commonwealth (and sometimes too the fellow English-speaking United States) with the seemingly much more artificial ties with Europe. Perhaps unsurprisingly the most vocal exponent of this line in the early debates about the United Kingdom and Europe was Lord Beaverbrook and the *Daily Express*. One of the paper's columnists thus asserted, in the course of the UK's first application to the EEC in 1961, 'cross the English Channel tomorrow and you will be abroad. Cross to the other side of the earth . . . you will be at home'. Ties with the former empire were also reinforced, in the view of another contributor to the *Express*, by the sacrifices made by Dominion servicemen in the course of both world wars. 'Oceans separate their homelands from each other and Britain. . . . Yet they came, and tens and hundreds of thousands came with them, to fight for a country that they had never seen. Just because that country was Britain.' And yet now, the implication was clear, the UK was proposing to desert such countries in favour of many of those that the fighting had been against. By the time the UK actually joined the EEC in 1973, admittedly, some of this unvarnished empire sentiment had faded, although Commonwealth nostalgia never disappeared entirely. But the temptation to look upon Europe as a source of difficulty, for the redress of which the UK needed to look to its more distant friends, continued to lurk not far below the surface of political debate. Mrs Thatcher's extraordinary outburst in 1999, reported in *The Times*, captures it well: 'we are quite the best country in Europe. . . . I dare say it – I'm told I have to be careful about what I say and I don't like it – in my lifetime all our problems have come from mainland Europe and all the solutions have come from the English-speaking nations of the world that have kept law-abiding liberty alive for the future.'

None of these views, of course, suffice in isolation to explain either the outcome of the 2016 referendum or the discomforts of the UK's experience within the EC/EU in the longer term. But

realising how historically rooted has been the adversarial mode of thought that many in the UK have used to analyse the integration process does help explain why UK politicians, journalists and public alike have been more interested in confrontation rather than cooperation in Brussels. The awkward partner narrative is not a fiction, but it isn't a wholly representative view either. It does however fit well with how many in this country have chosen to see the UK's European ties, whether prior to EC membership, during the forty plus years within the EC/EU, or, no doubt, in the troubled years that lie ahead.