

Our time in the EU was a calamity for Britain and a disaster for Europe

As de Gaulle recognised, it would have been better for everyone if we had never joined the European Union

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Charles de Gaulle was right: Britain should never have joined the EU. Thanks to his turbulent years at Four Carlton Gardens, he understood us better than our own establishment ever did.

We stood apart, a free-trading, Atlanticist and global island with a very different conception of Europe's future. We were never going to fit into the Jean Monnet model of EU state-building or even his own more nation-centric version, De Gaulle argued when he gloriously vetoed our application twice during the Sixties. And so it turned out. Our approach was exactly what Brussels was seeking to stamp out.

Why didn't we listen? Why did we waste 47 frustrating years as ambivalent members? To future generations, the opportunity cost will look staggering. If anything, Le Général underestimated how hard it would be for the UK to become European: he thought we would have to undergo a fundamental transformation of our economics and politics. He assumed we would never try; but in fact our political classes, declinists desperate for a post-imperial outlet, did their best, trashing our political system and the democratic compact between people and government. In the end, even that wasn't enough.

The reality is that the EU has never been about genuinely free trade: it has always been about the construction of a new state, supposedly to avoid war. That meant bringing down internal borders and harmonising, while erecting a Zollverein. The British couldn't understand this: whereas we saw a liberalising and pro-competition programme, it was actually an attempt at using internal commerce as a vehicle for a political project.

To use Hayek's terminology, the vision was constructivist. One assumption was that trade was a top-down exercise, permitted and promoted by bureaucrats, rather than a spontaneous, truly international process. Another was that whoever controlled money was the true sovereign, and therefore that the EU should have its own currency.

We will never fully recover from our long, debilitating membership of the EU. Historians have a term for this: it's called "path dependence" or "branching histories". The past matters and changes us irrevocably.

It's not just that our destiny would have been radically different had we never joined or had we left in the Eighties: all important periods in our history leave an indelible

mark. We still drive on Roman roads, and Londinium remains our capital; post-Brexit, we will continue to use kg and cm. Just as critically, every important period of history has only ever ended at great cost. Did Eurosceptics fully grasp the costs of disengagement from the EU? No. Do we still believe that Brexit is the way forward regardless? Absolutely.

On economics, Neil Kinnock had the last laugh. We have absorbed swathes of the European social-democratic model, not least high minimum wages: the Vote Leave agenda was very different to [the Bruges one outlined by Margaret Thatcher](#) in 1988.

In one of the most powerful speeches of the 20th century, she argued that “we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level, with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels”. Yet we are now leaving, and the size of the state is unlikely to shrink, even if competitive pressures will, in time, incentivise a pro-growth supply-side agenda. The EU’s protectionism towards any economy it doesn’t control – rationalised as “defending the integrity of the single market” by inane “trade experts” – is forcing us to hire customs agents.

The precious common law heritage that helped ensure the rise of freedom and the blossoming of the Industrial Revolution has been permanently impaired. Yes, the Government will roll back the European Court of Human Rights (a non-EU institution) and other excesses, but decades of membership of the EU’s legal order have changed the legal profession. Britain as a whole has become blander, less unique and less eccentric, our approach more Cartesian and rationalistic.

EU membership has also accelerated the decline of Scottish and Northern Irish unionism. Yet while the end of the UK would be a high price to pay for regaining our self-government, Brexit would really just be a casus belli, rather than the primary driver of any rupture.

Some of the permanent changes from our time in the EU were hugely positive, of course: we will benefit enormously from the millions of hard-working Europeans who have made Britain their home. The City was turbocharged after the euro launched in 1999, and its dominant position will now be very hard to undermine.

But it’s not just that we should never have joined: the EU should have kept us out for its own good. Yes, in the short term it benefited from having us. We handed over billions in transfers. Its mercantilists saw us as a captive market. Its ideologues believed our membership proved Europe was the EU, the legitimate continent-wide hegemon, the successor to a great civilisation. This fooled them into thinking they could expand without dilution, absorbing Eastern Europe.

That fatal conceit means that [the EU project is now in crisis](#). The *acquis* is no longer guaranteed, at least when it comes to territory. More countries would have to leave before full centralisation (one way of making the euro viable) is possible, but that is anathema to Brussels.

UK membership also served as a crutch for the EU. We were a bridge to America, a decentralising influence, a reformist force, especially in trade in services and agriculture. Some countries used to hide behind us, knowing we would defend markets and national interests. All of that is gone, and yet the EU has refused to adjust. It will become more socialist and anti-innovation, accelerating its decline. There will no longer be any counterweight to the Franco-German axis. Brussels remains infantilised geopolitically, dependent on US subsidies to Nato, sucking up to Russia, China and Iran.

Brexit will be a positive shock for Britain, jolting the country out of its stupor; but it has left the EU reeling with disbelief, its central convictions overturned, its certainties blown to smithereens. Like all bureaucratic dinosaurs, it cannot adapt, even to an extinction-level event. Why didn't it listen to de Gaulle?