

Making the Case for Britain in Europe

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11 February 2016

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Since it was founded almost a century ago Chatham House has born witness to, and at times helped shape, profound changes in our world.

Two world wars, the end of Empire, the creation of the United Nations and of the European Union, the formation of NATO, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. An era that has seen the rise of new world powers, alliances, conflicts and threats and the blistering pace of technological change that is revolutionising our economies and shrinking the world. News has never travelled faster.

In as little as four months' time, the people of our islands will make their choice about Europe. The most important decision we will have taken for at least four decades about our place in the world.

Labour In for Britain, led by Alan Johnson, is already making the case for us to remain part of the European Union by setting out how Britain is better off in because of the jobs, growth, investment, security and influence it brings us, as well as the rights and protections it has given to workers and consumers across the continent.

Today I want to talk about why I believe that Britain's global influence is strengthened by our membership of the European Union. It promotes interdependence through trade, advances our economic security, works collectively to tackle conflict and other global challenges and helps protect us from crime and terrorism.

Those who are campaigning for Britain to leave, in my view, profoundly misunderstand what will best serve the British national interest.

There is nothing patriotic about diminishing the United Kingdom's ability to make its voice heard by other nations. Narrow nationalism is not the same as patriotism. And stumbling out of Europe and pulling up the drawbridge would only serve to harm our position and influence in the world.

Nigel Farage seems to believe that we can somehow return to an imaginary golden age. I've given it careful thought and I think he'd be happiest going back to 1957 before parking meters, life peerages and the integrated circuit were invented and a time, incidentally, when the British Government was resisting calls for an Empire Trade Conference because it wanted to develop stronger trade relations with the newly-formed European Economic Community.

Now, on trade, it is claimed that we could negotiate our own, better deals with the rest of the world if we left, ignoring the fact that we already have really good trade deals precisely because we are members of the European Union. Trade which opens minds as well as markets.

The EU currently has or is negotiating trade agreements with 90 per cent of Commonwealth countries; so much for the argument that being in the EU prevents us from having better trade relations with the Commonwealth.

The EU is a huge market of over 500 million people. So why on earth would we want to exchange the certainty of the deals we currently have for the uncertainty of the deals that we might not secure?

Then there are the other voices supporting the Leave campaign.

Those who want to see the back of the kind of regulation that protects British workers from a race to the bottom.

And those who think that the answer to the trade question is to be like Norway.

It is said that like them we can have access to the single market without all the other stuff, but what does the experience of Norway tell us?

In order to have that access to the EU single market, Norway has to pay a membership fee – the same incidentally per capita as we do – has to accept two-thirds of EU legislation including free movement, but unlike us has absolutely no say over the rules.

That sounds like a really bad deal to me.

The truth is that the risks of taking any one of these versions of a leap into the unknown would be huge.

The truth is that we cannot turn the clock back.

The world has moved on and so must we. And Britain is always at its greatest when we are a confident and outward-looking trading nation.

Since the 1975 referendum, Britain has been through considerable economic change.

Some people have had a hard time, especially as older industries have declined or vanished altogether. Whole communities that were built up around a single employer, generations of the same family in the same workplace, suddenly found their jobs had gone and with it their sense of identity and pride.

But we know that things would have been worse, not better, if we had been outside the EU.

Almost half our total exports – £200 billion of goods every year – go to Europe precisely because we are part of the single market, and the supply chains and those servicing those exporters' help create jobs too.

We export all over the world precisely because of those trade agreements Europe has been able to secure with other countries.

Look at the strength of London as a global financial centre, the openness and diversity of our society, our talent for creativity – the UK computer games industry which didn't even exist 40 years ago now generates £2bn a year in global sales and supports nearly 30,000 jobs – the worldwide reach of the English language; all these things help to make us the fifth biggest economy in the world.

And what's more, being part of the EU has helped us to deal with some of the consequences of these changes by providing a framework of employment rights that protects workers in every European country.

It was Jacques Delors, the then President of the European Commission, who made that speech about his vision of a social Europe to the Trades Union Congress in 1988 which helped to change the attitude of the Labour and trade union movement towards Europe.

And Europe was as good as its word in bringing us paid holidays, improved maternity and paternity leave, limits on working time and better protection for agency and temporary workers.

It is a really striking example of how, by working together, we can prevent a race to the bottom that globalisation, left unchecked, could bring.

And it is why the voices of Britain's trade unions and their members will be heard increasingly loudly as the referendum campaign unfolds.

Even the global financial crash which shook people's faith in the ability of governments, regulators and institutions to protect them and their interests, brought home to us the need for more cooperation with other countries, not less and stronger multilateral institutions, not weaker ones.

For example, if we are going to deal with the problem of big companies that pay very little or no tax, Europe is a very good place to start.

Now, it is not just economic security that our membership of Europe is so important for. It is now also a bedrock of our national and international security.

The European idea has helped to keep the peace on a continent that previously had been at war for centuries. Any one of us who has visited the graveyards of the First and Second World Wars in France, Belgium or elsewhere understands the significance of this achievement.

Row upon row upon row of the flower of two generations of Europeans. The gravestones bearing the name, regiment and age of the fallen – how young they were – or just the poignant inscription “A soldier of the Great War. Known unto God” because no-one else knew whose brother, son, uncle or father lay beneath the immaculately cared for ground.

Europe's founders were determined to end this history of European slaughter, and out of the ashes of the Second World War emerged the Schumann Declaration, inspired by Jean Monnet and Robert Schumann.

It read: “The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations” and it resolved to make a future war “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.”

For me, as for many, this was and remains Europe's greatest achievement and it is one we should never take for granted.

And it has achieved much more besides. Europe provided a powerful incentive to the former communist states of central and eastern Europe to embrace political pluralism, and in so doing created a hugely powerful alliance built on the values of democracy, respect for human rights, free media, the rule of law and individual freedom.

It has given us a louder voice as we confront threats to international peace and security.

Just look at how Europe was able to coordinate its response to the Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine.

The EU suspended cooperation with Russia in several areas and imposed sanctions. It froze assets, banned all imports from Crimea, imposed a ban on major Russian institutions and introduced an arms embargo on Russia.

The financial and economic sanctions are clearly biting on the Russian economy and the ceasefire in Ukraine is, for now, largely holding. The situation remains unstable, however, and the Minsk agreement has yet to be fully implemented. But it is precisely because of Europe's collective response that we have been able to exert real pressure and have an impact.

And efforts towards the creation of an EU-wide energy union will, over time, weaken Russia's dominance as an energy supplier in Europe.

Let's be clear. President Putin would shed no tears if Britain left the European Union. He would see Brexit as a sign of our weakness and of the weakness of European solidarity at the very moment when we need to maintain our collective strength.

Or take the nuclear deal with Iran; a huge European foreign policy success. Led initially by Cathy Ashton, and in the final stages by Federica Mogherini, the EU's diplomatic leadership was instrumental first of all in paving the way for the deal and then in putting in place the diplomatic effort to make it stick, coupled with the full force of the EU-wide sanctions regime.

The recent lifting of those sanctions, following verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran has taken the required steps, is a testament to the power of collective European diplomacy.

There are other examples too.

The impact of the EU sanctions on Burma, where next month we expect finally to see the peaceful transfer of power from the military to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy – unthinkable just a few years ago.

And the collective effort to reduce the effects of piracy off the Horn of Africa through Operation Atalanta, run from the EU Naval Force Operational Headquarters at Northwood in Middlesex, which has made a big difference.

These displays of solidarity do, however, remind us just how big has been our collective failure in Syria with the continuing slaughter and the huge flow of refugees. President Assad's decision to attack his own people has claimed the lives of a quarter of a million Syrians.

It has now been compounded by Russia's indiscriminate bombing campaign, which Human Rights Watch say includes the use of cluster munitions. Russia's denials that they are using them would have much greater force had they signed up to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) - the international treaty that prohibits their use, transfer and stockpiling.

As the recent terrible events in Aleppo show, the Russians are killing Syrian civilians. It is completely unacceptable and it must stop so that the parties can put a ceasefire in place.

What each of these examples teaches us is that we need stronger international cooperation, not weaker. At this moment in this century, it would be an extraordinary folly to turn our back on this vitally important international alliance if we wish to help shape world events.

Last week NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, said this:

“Britain is a global player and a strong EU will also make sure that NATO has a strong partner in the European Union when we are facing the same security threats...”

Our national security is served by both our membership of NATO and of the EU. To walk away from our membership and leadership of the EU would be a grave strategic error because Britain's role in promoting international peace and security around the globe is greatly enhanced by being part of Europe.

And leaving Europe could also put the UK itself at risk. There are voices in Scotland who would use any opportunity arising out of this referendum to have another go at breaking up the United Kingdom. Let us be clear, if that were to happen it would greatly diminish our standing in the world.

Co-operation across Europe is also essential given the terrorist threat we face. The European Arrest Warrant is a really good example of the benefits of cooperation with our European neighbours.

Before it came into existence, those who had committed crimes here could flee elsewhere in Europe and hope that convoluted and lengthy legal processes would prevent them from ever being returned to face justice. One of those eventually convicted of the failed 21 July 2005 attempt to cause explosions in London was returned to the UK from Italy under a European Arrest Warrant.

Only this week, the Director of Europol Rob Wainwright warned that Brexit "...will make Britain's job harder to fight crime and terrorism because it will not have the same access to very well developed European cooperation mechanisms that it currently has today".

Underlying all of these questions is the greatest challenge that peoples and countries face at the beginning of the 21st century.

How do we come to terms with, and respond to, the interdependence of human beings that more than anything else defines our world at this moment in history?

We can already see the implications.

Events in what once would have been regarded as a far-off land now reach our television screens or our mobile phones in seconds, and it is not much later that the consequences start to be felt on our shores.

And it does not matter whether human beings moving across the globe are fleeing war or persecution, the effects of climate change – too much water, not enough water – or simply seeking as human beings have done throughout the course of history the chance of a better life, we are going to have to deal with the consequences.

We are 7.2 billion people on this small and fragile planet of ours. By the end of this century we are forecast to be 11 billion.

We only have to look at what has been happening on our continent these past few months to see what that future could bring. The flow of refugees has put the Schengen agreement under enormous strain and has tested Europe's solidarity to the limit. But imagine what would have happened – what would be happening now on the continent of Europe – if the European Union did not exist.

The fact is that in Europe, as elsewhere in the world, we not only have a moral interest in preventing conflict, stopping dangerous climate change and promoting economic development to overcome poverty in developing countries, but also a practical interest in doing so.

And to succeed in these tasks we have to make the global institutions we have created work to deal with all of these things.

The choice is very simple. Either we seek to do so in cooperation with our neighbours, near and far, through bodies like the European Union and the United Nations, or we will struggle to deal with them separately

So we must choose between the fear that we have somehow lost our identity, our influence and our place in the world because we have chosen to be part of the European Union, and the experience that being in Europe has actually amplified, extended and increased Britain's voice in the world.

And in so doing it has given us the best means we have of dealing with the problems we face.

In 2005, when the Labour Government was campaigning for debt relief and increased aid in the run-up to the Gleneagles summit, it was the decision of European development ministers to agree commitments on both that helped to move other nations to commit more.

When I led the British delegation to the climate change talks in Bali two years later, I saw what an impact the EU uniting behind a single proposal had and how much stronger that was than all the countries acting separately.

These two examples from my direct experience illustrate precisely why Britain's voice is strengthened by being part of the European Union and not weakened.

I have changed my view on Europe since 1975. I have been on a journey, not least because Britain has been on a journey too.

We live in a changing world and if you look at the future challenges we face I believe the case for Europe is stronger now than ever.

We have not lost our identity. The fact that we are not a member of the Euro nor part of Schengen shows that we can defend our national interest.

In an increasingly interconnected world the divide between foreign and domestic policy will become ever more blurred and whether it is fighting climate change, reducing poverty, dealing with conflict, water, land, energy or the consequences of migration, they all will require an internationalist outlook.

The story of Britain over the last century is one of a nation at the heart of world affairs. It is the story of a country that has been at its best when we have been outward looking and confident.

In the 20th Century we helped build the institutions that have given us the chance to make progress: the UN, EU, NATO.

In the 21st Century we cannot afford to reduce our influence or isolate ourselves or shut the curtains and close the doors and wish that the rest of the world would go away.

This choice will ultimately be about whether we look to the future and Europe with optimism or not.

I am sure that Britain's national interest and place in the world is best served by remaining part of the European Union, and I hope you will join us in making this case in the important months that lie ahead.