

The UK and the European Union

Britain has now been a member of the EU for 37 years – during which time the EU has grown from 9 to 27 members, including former authoritarian states in southern Europe and former state-socialist states in eastern Europe. The EU's policy agenda has similarly expanded very considerably, to include monetary union for the majority of member states, financial regulation, energy security and common policies to limit climate change, cooperation in fighting cross-border crime and terrorism, and closer cooperation in foreign and defence policy. Five revisions of the original treaties since 1986, most recently the Lisbon Treaty (of 2009) have strengthened the authority of the Brussels institutions (the Commission, the Council of Ministers and its Secretariat, the European Parliament, etc.), and in particular provided additional powers for the European Parliament. Under the Lisbon Treaty the EU now has an appointed President of the European Council (Herman van Rompoy, the former Belgian Prime Minister), and an External Action Service to represent EU common trade and foreign policies in third states.

Within the UK, however, the EU has remained stubbornly unpopular. It is widely seen as a threat to British sovereignty and independence, as a financial drain on the UK economy, as a set of non-democratic institutions run by 'bureaucrats', and as dominated by France and Germany against British interests. In recent years popular scepticism about the EU (and the underlying 'project' of European integration) has spread across most other member states; British disillusion is no longer exceptional. The Commission *is* bureaucratic; the Council of Ministers negotiates, sometimes at inordinate length, between entrenched national interests; the common budget remains heavily biased towards agricultural support, and disadvantageous to the UK.

On the other hand, no British government has made the case for closer European cooperation since the 1975 EC Referendum, which gained a 2:1 majority for staying in the Community which the UK had joined two years before. Nor has any British government attempted to set the agenda within the EU, rather than waiting for others and complaining about the priorities they pursue. The UK debate on sovereignty is oddly unbalanced. Our sovereignty is significantly limited by our dependence on the USA for intelligence cooperation and nuclear missiles, though these are largely accepted without comment. The USA also maintains a number of military and intelligence bases in the UK.

France and Germany have worked hard at building a partnership between their governments over the past 40 years. The UK has not invested any comparable effort in closer relations with its neighbours across the Channel, or in persuading its public that we share common values and interests with these neighbours.

Liberal Democrats are instinctive internationalists. We believe in closer cooperation among states, and are opposed to nationalist attacks on other states and governments. The EU is the most effective framework for international cooperation yet developed. It now has a heavy agenda: in foreign policy, towards Russia, the Middle East and Africa; in economic and financial coordination; in managing pressures for immigration; in sharing limited capabilities in defence; in supporting economic development in the countries to its south. Its prestige within its member states is low,

however, and its policy-making capacities remain limited. The UK will face another delicate negotiation over the EU budget in 2011-12.

Question to consider

1. How can we more effectively make the case for closer cooperation with our neighbours to a stubbornly sceptical public?
2. Can we make the case for particular partnerships with other EU states – with France in defence, for example?
3. What proposals should we make to revitalise and reform the EU institutions?
4. What should be the EU's top policy priorities, in terms of commitment from member governments and spending from the common budget?