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Britain needs friends in the post-Brexit era. Alienating EU allies would be counter-productive

*Amid the posturing about trade, the fact that Britain no longer has a voice in the EU has gone largely unremarked. **N Piers Ludlow (LSE)** warns that alienating European allies by talking tough risks harming the UK's soft power and long-term interests.*

At the heart of Edward Heath's speech winding up the so-called 'Great Debate' in October 1971, when the Commons was asked to take the decision in principle whether or not Britain should join the European Economic Community (EEC), was an argument about participation. Western Europe's leaders, Heath reminded MPs, had recently agreed to gather in Paris in 1972 in order to take a number of important collective decisions, including the best policy response to the breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency system. As the leader of a country on the threshold of Community membership, Heath had been invited to attend. But such participation was [not inevitable](#):

If by any chance the House rejected this Motion tonight, that meeting would still go on and it would still take its decisions which will affect the greater part of Western Europe and affect us in our daily lives. But we would not be there to take a share in those decisions. That really would not be a sensible way to go about protecting our interests or our influence in Europe and the world. But to be there as a member of the Community, in my view, would be an effective use of our contribution of sovereignty.

In the event, of course, the House did not reject the motion that Heath was speaking in favour of, and so the PM was in Paris in October 1972 for the first ad hoc European summit of the 1970s. Moreover, he and his successors have been ever-present as European summitry has developed from an occasional happening to a regular event, becoming in the process ever more central to the operation of the EC/EU. But later this month the scenario of which Heath warned will come to pass, and Europe's leaders, now vastly increased in number and no longer confined just to the western portion of the continent, will gather in Brussels to debate the continent's future with no UK representative present.



The Channel. Photo: [raym](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Strangely, though, this eventuality does not seem to be causing much concern to either the British government or those commenting on the UK's position *vis-à-vis* the EU. The government's rhetoric – to the extent that it is concerned with the EU at all – seems focused either on the forthcoming negotiations about post-Brexit trade arrangements, or on emphasising the newly found freedoms that Brexit Britain will enjoy. Non-involvement in vital future decisions about Europe's future goes unmentioned. As a government that has just 'delivered' Brexit, this emphasis on what we have gained rather than what we have lost is perhaps understandable. But even as balanced and carefully neutral an observer as The UK in a Changing Europe can succumb to the same instinct. The sections in the recent [Brexit: what next?](#) report focusing on Britain's relations with the EU centre overwhelmingly on the future trade talks or on the various other practical arrangements for future policy cooperation that will need to be devised. The more general question about how Britain ensures – or if ensures at all – some sort of voice in Europe's collective course-setting is passed over in silence. We seem blithely unconcerned with our self-marginalisation on this issue.

This seeming indifference is a very recent development. The need for the UK to be involved in the debate about Europe's future was a central concern for nearly every British government until that of David Cameron. It was, as we have seen, a major consideration for Heath as he took Britain into what was then the EEC. It cropped up in the arguments about sovereignty during the 1975 referendum. It remained a significant factor throughout the Thatcher years. It was pivotal for Major, who in 1991, echoed Heath's own rhetoric when [declaring](#), again in Parliament,

There are, in truth, only three ways of dealing with the Community: we can leave it, and no doubt we would survive, but we would be diminished in influence and in prosperity; we can stay in it grudgingly, in which case others will lead it; or we can play a leading role in it, and that is the right policy. It does not mean accepting every idea that is marketed with a European label. It does mean trying to build the sort of Europe that we believe in...

And it clearly remained a priority for both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, despite their decision to remain detached from their neighbours' biggest policy experiment to date – the launch of the single currency. Only during the Cameron years did it become possible to ask whether Britain still wanted a significant voice in European collective endeavours. The Prime Minister's readiness to allow his French and German counterparts to take the lead roles in the attempted peace negotiations with Putin over the Ukraine while Britain watched from the sidelines – an abstention it is difficult to imagine being made by any of his predecessors – spoke volumes in this regard. But even Cameron was determined that the UK should retain an important say over matters that it regarded as in its vital interest. This explains the attempt, in the course of the ill-fated renegotiation of Britain's membership terms in 2015, to ensure that the Eurozone members could not take decisions inimical to the position of the City of London. It is thus only with the Brexit vote that we appear to have resigned ourselves to no longer being involved at all.

Should this be of concern to us? It should. Heath's basic point – that many of the collective decisions taken at European Council meetings will affect our daily lives, irrespective of whether we as a country are represented there or not – is as valid in 2020 as it was in 1971. Indeed, given the vastly expanded membership and policy remit of the EU we are no longer part of, compared to the still relatively small and politically limited EEC of which Heath was speaking, his point has greater potency now than it did when originally made. So we ought to be giving serious thought to what we can do to mitigate the dangers involved.

Part of the answer, clearly, will be to make maximum use of our diplomatic representation, not just in Brussels itself but in all of the member state capitals. For this reason, the government's pledge in 2018 to boost the strength of UK diplomatic representations is a sensible move. (The Commons select committee [report](#), however, criticised the length of time it had taken to deploy the extra staff, and questioned how many of them were truly additional.) To the extent that we can ensure that virtually every member state leader seated at the Council table is aware of British interests and concerns, we will have somewhat lessened the problem. Likewise we should welcome and seek to build on the widespread professions of enduring friendship that accompanied our departure last month. The more we can consolidate our status as more than just any other third country from an EU perspective, the better it will be. But the EU's track record as a neighbour ought to counsel against simply relying on its good will. Reaching a decision among 27 is always hard, and in a system where huge efforts are made to accommodate all insiders, there is not much scope to pay heed to the needs and views of an outsider, however close. Those not in the room inevitably matter much less than those who are present.

So we ought to be taking seriously the suggestions for additional mechanisms designed to promote close and continuous dialogue between Britain and the EU27, whether individually or collectively. These range from an [Anglo-German Treaty of Friendship](#) (called for recently by Norbert Röttgen of the CDU and the Conservative Tom Tugendhat) to the much more ambitious notion of [involving the UK in the European Security Council](#) proposed by Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. All such structures will have their flaws. And none can wholly replace the voice at Europe's top table that has been lost as a result of Brexit. But an active engagement with several schemes along these lines would signal that the UK is not indifferent to what happens on its doorstep, and wants as far as is possible to remain involved.

Equally importantly, the UK government needs to ensure that its posturing in the run-up to (and during) the negotiations over new trade arrangements with the EU does not send the EU a message of UK indifference – even hostility – or suggest a desire to diverge strongly from the European norm. Setting out a maximalist starting position, and trying to show your interlocutor that ultimately you have alternatives and can walk away, may be normal negotiating tactics. But they can easily become counterproductive to any effort to retain British influence in and over the EU if they sound too much like an aggressive affirmation of Britain's detachment. Can we really go on claiming to be close and friendly to our former partners, if we suggest, [as did Johnson last week](#), that our future commercial ties with them could be organised on a comparable basis to those between the EU and Australia? The mood music around the trade negotiations will also influence the wider political relationship, with the result that if we allow too deep a commercial chasm to develop, or even suggest that we wouldn't mind too much if it did, the likelihood of preserving strong political ties will also be seriously diminished.

As a sizeable and wealthy European country, Britain ought to go on having an important voice in the debate about the continent's future. Indeed – Brexit notwithstanding – such involvement remains vital both for us and for the rest of Europe. Our European neighbours would expect and want no less. But making certain that we retain some influence when so many of the crucial decisions will be discussed and decided in a forum in which we are no longer represented, will not necessarily be easy. It is therefore essential that the discussion now underway about the UK's own post-Brexit priorities pays heed not only to how we go on doing business with our neighbours and former partners, but also to the type of strong and structured political relationship which will maximise the chance of our preserving some say in the way in which Europe develops.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE.