

# The UK's opposition to European integration is still framed around the legacy of its past.

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Britain's membership of the European Union continues to be the object of public debate in the UK. **Oliver Daddow** assesses the history of British opposition to European integration, arguing that current debates are still themed around the legacy of the UK's historical semi-detachment from Europe. He notes that the UK's entry into the European Economic Community in the 1970s had as much to do with maintaining the country's place at the top table of international diplomacy, as it did with the economic benefits expected from membership. The UK still appears to be unable to define its national identity with respect to the European project.



Amidst all the talk of an in/out referendum on UK membership of the EU, people seem to have forgotten that the British have never truly felt themselves part of 'Europe' at all. The word is shorthand in British discourse for all manner of continent-related threats and opportunities, depending on era and speaker. What unites all their understandings, however, is the difficulty they have encountered in defining a clear, consistent and practical approach to continental affairs based on a coherent notion of British identity. Rehearsed *ad nauseam* in every European speech by British prime ministers for decades and more, the British still seem unable to define their national identity with respect to a European project which is more often than not represented as being 'over there'.

As Andrew Gamble has observed, Britain's self-defined role as 'balancer' located outside Europe was quite well established in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. London schemed against a variety of continental enemies from the Spanish to the Austrians and latterly the French, 'reserving its energies for the more exciting tasks of conquering the rest of the world'. This Disraelian 'Boy's Own' interpretation of Britain's global adventurism has died hard, if at all in some quarters, making London's later acquiescence in a European role all the more contested. Britain, said Disraeli, does not participate in European affairs, it merely 'interferes' in them when 'her position requires it'.

The rise to prominence of a major existential threat in the form of Germany in the twentieth century brought home to the British the rectitude of Conservative prime minister Neville Chamberlain's 1930 observation that splendid isolation could be no guarantee of security, especially if one had no friends but lots of enemies. 'We were isolated but not insulated...we cannot separate our fortunes from those of Europe'. After 1945, with America firmly in place as an influential ally, not to mention Western Europe's security guarantor in NATO and economic saviour via the 1947 Marshall Plan, Britain drew a very different set of lessons about the conduct of international politics from former continental adversaries and allies alike. While Jean Monnet and his global networks, not least in the US, devised cooperative



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ventures such as the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Defence Community and European Economic Community in the 1950s, Britain basked in the glow of the coveted 'special relationship' and focussed on 'managing' retreat from an increasingly threadbare Empire. In Winston Churchill's 'three circles' model of British foreign policy, the Europe circle always came last on the list in Whitehall.

Despite sudden and chaotic decolonisation, along with Washington nudging Britain in a European direction, memories of Britain's global pre-eminence were never very far from the surface of British political debate or cultural repertoire. [Contemperate takes](#) on Britain's nostalgia for former glories indicate the impact 'History lessons patriotic in design' had on holding the British back from carving out a niche in the European circle. Britain's 'semi-detached' continental role was confirmed when it [stayed out of the EEC](#), only to be pushed into trying to board the bus in the 1960s by a combination of economic forces and reluctant recognition of its post-[Suez crisis](#) fall from the top rank of global powers. The aspiration to remain seated at the top table, however, was never scotched. It was evident, for example, in Labour prime minister's Harold Wilson's [judgement](#) that the UK should join the EEC 'not for the economic benefits...but to preserve Britain's position as an important international power, and keep it involved in the inner circle of diplomatic and strategic affairs'. In this view, Britain's global strategy remained intact, but new tactics were needed to realise it. 'Interfering' in Europe might be necessary after all.

Britain's European policy debates are still themed around the legacy of its past as an extra-European actor with clear but infrequently articulated European interests – strategically, politically and economically. This has resulted in a [conglomeration of rhetoric and practices](#) which are as confusing to the politicians selling them as they are to the public consuming them. On the one hand 'in' Europe, on the other not 'run' by it. On the one hand an exceptional 'island fortress', on the other a European security guarantor. On the one hand a deeply European heritage, on the other a global outlook focussing on the Commonwealth and the 'special relationship'. If the 2017 referendum result is 'out', it might be contrary to British interests, but it would at least be true to dominant cultural constructions of Britain's self-identity as an international actor.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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