

Twelve priorities – and a dozen reasons to remain in the EU.

The debate about whether the UK should leave the EU tends to bring out the worst in people. It is not about ‘loyalty’ to one cause or another. It is not about ‘stopping UKIP’. It is about the issues, and there are many of them. Yes, it is about the economy but it is not *solely* about the economy. Yes, it is about sovereignty but not *solely* about sovereignty.

For my part, I have a number of priorities. I’ve outlined a dozen of them here. They all suggest that it is better for the UK as a whole if the country remains in the EU.

1. Immigration

Immigration is a serious issue – for the simple reason that our population growth is unsustainable. But the problem is not rooted in the freedom of movement for our fellow Europeans. It arises partly from the uncontrolled population growth in African and Asian countries and partly in the upheaval in the Middle East. These are worldwide problems. If European states are left to control immigration on a one-by-one basis, they will have to deal with it at their own borders. It is far cheaper and more efficient for Britain to share this problem with 27 other states, and to tackle illegal immigration in collaboration with the 1500-mile buffer of the European Union, than at Dover – and all along the south coast of England.

2. Sustainable self-sufficiency of food supplies

Before the UK joined the EEC, we imported two thirds of all our food. The EEC forced us to become more self-sufficient. Today only about a third of our basic foodstuffs are imported. If we leave Europe, importers will once again be free to import cheap food – for example, grain from the USA. Home-grown food suppliers will be undercut, and go out of business, as we cannot compete with massive prairies seeded from the air. We will soon become dependent once more on other countries selling their cheap surpluses to us (if they have surpluses). It is one of the most dangerous things I can imagine – for the bulk of our food to be produced outside our control, dependent on foreign markets. How vulnerable we will be if the world ever again turns hostile.

3. The economy

Very simply, the advantages of being within a trading zone outweigh those of not being in it. While some people say we could do more business with other partners – USA and China, for instance – we are trading with them at quite a high level as it is. There is no reason to believe we would do significantly more trade with these partners if we left the EU. Rather there are good reasons to believe that our trading partners value the fact that we are part of the EU. Thus there is every likelihood that trade will suffer twice-over if we leave – from a decline of business with EU nations and a reduction of investment from non-EU partners. Certainly that is what the IMF and other financial organisations have concluded.

4. If we realise we made a mistake and wanted to re-join...

If we are in such a good position economically that we can *consider* going it alone, then that is the result of forty years membership of the common market. That’s a pretty good argument in favour of the status quo. But if we leave, and things do not turn out as well for us as they have

for the last forty years, we will not be able to re-join the EU on the same terms. We will have to join the Eurozone, and thereby lose control of our currency. Why risk that? We are in the best position economically that we could possibly be, benefitting from the European trading zone with the safeguard of control of our own currency.

5. Reduced public spending

There seems little doubt that credit-rating agencies will downgrade the UK by a notch or two in the aftermath of a departure from the EU. We will lose our AAA rating. Money will become more expensive for the government to borrow, putting pressure on public finances. And we are already heavily in debt as a nation. Any decrease in tax revenues from declining trade will further increase the likelihood of the need for the government to reduce expenditure on the environment, health and education – more ‘austerity’. The residue of the money saved which otherwise would have been paid to the EU will not make up for the loss to public spending across the whole of government.

6. The break-up of the United Kingdom

Scotland will be quite justified in calling for a second referendum on the UK if, in the wake of being told we’re ‘stronger together’, the English vote to leave Europe. If the pro-European Scots vote to leave the UK and apply to re-join the EU, they will have to join the Euro. That will create a deeper divide along the northern border. There will be no talk of ‘Great Britain’ thereafter – for the island will be split in two economically as well as politically.

7. The risks to Europe as a whole

The UK leaving the EU threatens the whole of Europe. Europe will be weaker if it speaks with a divided voice. It will be less able to stand up to the super-states of Russia, China and the USA. Also, if we simply back away from the problems of the EU, they will continue to blight everyone in Europe, and that includes every Briton who continues to have dealings with a European state, or travels there.

8. Long-term energy needs

Our long-term prosperity is dependent on our having sufficient energy to transport people and commodities. This country has not yet woken up to the need to create more renewable energy. France and Germany both are well ahead of us in this regard. The UK voices that are advocating that we should leave the EU do not connect the prospect of our independence with our need for greater home-grown energy production – solar, wind and hydro.

9. British international influence

Our standing with the USA depends to a great deal on our having influence in Europe, and our standing in Europe depends on our relationship with the USA. Our membership of the EU thus underpins our international influence. While it might not appear to matter hugely if our influence declines, if the world ever again moves towards conflict, which one day it is bound to do, it will matter a great deal.

10. Collaboration counts

As a historian, when I reflect back across the centuries, the greatest challenges we have faced have been best dealt with collectively, not in isolation. Prioritising nationalist interests over and above those of other neighbouring states has caused a great many problems – from imperialism to dictatorship, censorship, persecution of minorities, the diminution of rights, and war. We should not be leading the way back to nationalism.

11. The backlash

If we leave the EU, we will have turned our backs on 500 million people. There is no way our reputation will be enhanced abroad from voting to leave – quite the opposite. Everyone from the UK will become that little bit less welcome everywhere else. Many European organisations will make their UK members feel less welcome, or lesser members, if indeed they permit the UK to remain a member.

12. What sort of message do we want to send to the world?

Ultimately this debate concerns the way you feel about the United Kingdom – we are staring at ourselves long and hard in the mirror. What is it you see when you look in the mirror? What do you want to see? Riches? Influence? Decency. That last one has not entered the debate very much, if at all. Since Elizabethan times countless foreign travellers have remarked that the British are ‘unfriendly to foreigners’. Do I really want to reinforce that message? Or do I want to offer the hand of friendship to others? I love my country. I don’t want its name to become a by-word for naked self-interest.

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