

# A not so awkward partner: the UK has been a champion of many causes in the EU

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*Britain's difficult relationship with its European partners has led often to it being described as 'an awkward partner', a term popularised by Stephen George's 1990 book on UK-EU relations. But people often misquote George by calling Britain 'the' awkward partner. As **Oliver Daddow** and **Tim Oliver** argue, Britain is not the only awkward member of the EU. They do not deny that Britain can be more awkward than most, but we should not overlook the fact that other member states have also been awkward and that Britain's relationship with the EU has often led to positive outcomes for both.*



Few EU leaders will have Britain in their good books after David Cameron's tense and drawn-out renegotiation of the UK's EU membership. They will not be the first to feel that way. Britain's relations with the rest of the EU are rarely cast in a positive light. Inside and outside the UK, London's relations with 'Brussels' and other EU capitals are often characterised by vetoes, rows, stand-offs, allegations of blackmail and stubbornness. 'No other large partner is as grumpy', opined David Rennie in a [2012 pamphlet](#) for the Centre for European Reform.



Perhaps most famously of all, Britain is said to be '[an awkward partner](#)' in the EU. The title of Stephen George's classic 1990 textbook has routinely been trotted out as a catch-all term for all manner of ills in the UK's troubled relationship with the process of European integration. George's book suggested that Britain had attained the label 'awkward' within a year of gaining membership of the European Communities in 1973, but that the roots of its awkwardness can be traced back to London's hesitant and aloof attitude to European integration which date back to the origins of integration in the 1950s.

George's choice of book title remains apt in a very real sense. However, people have often taken it too far and frequently misquote it. It is not uncommon to find references to Britain as '*the* awkward partner', and George himself uses that term on p41 of his book. It is understandable why, given Britain's size and significance in debates about Europe's future. However, it seems that George deployed the indefinite article 'an' in part because Britain is not the only member of the EU that can be awkward. This is more than a semantic argument. In the interests of promoting an informed, democratic and balanced debate in the lead-up to the EU referendum ('Brexit or Bremain?'), the supposed economic, democratic and security costs of EU membership have to be weighed up in voters' minds against the respective benefits. This article suggests that too often insufficient space has been made in UK debates for consideration of the virtues of its EU membership, and that the 'awkward' epithet unnecessarily draws attention away from both the nature and depth of Britain's contributions to the EU.

## An Awkward Partner

George identified four principle factors that helped develop and sustain the 'awkward' label. First, the fact that Britain came late to membership and had many problems adjusting to the method of governance in the Community. Second, domestic political constraints which held back British leaders from launching and/or selling pro-European initiatives to an apathetic domestic media and public. Third, an awkwardness on the part of British elites schooled in the 'winner takes all' Westminster system in coming to terms with the horse-trading and coalition-building found elsewhere in Europe and the standard way of reaching agreement in Brussels. Finally, an ideological preference for a 'special relationship' with the US as the UK's main international partnership. Underpinning all of the above, George identified at various points through his book a fifth factor around the tone of Britain's national debates about Europe, which has served to underscore all of the previous factors in the minds of Britain's EU partners:[\[1\]](#) a

'condescending, and at times almost contemptuous' (p39) approach to integration in the early years. In this view, a Britain obsessed with Empire and the US treated Europe 'with disdain' and incessantly rehearsed historically 'negative attitudes towards the French' and 'fear and mistrust of the Germans' (p255). This went for policy-makers as well as the media, which has gone on to become one of the most [visible manifestations](#) or the 'face' of Britain's 'awkwardness' as seen from the outside.

George's 1990 thesis is one that has [strong contemporary relevance](#). The latest example has been David Cameron's renegotiation and referendum on whether Britain should remain an EU member state. Tussles over the rebate, opt-outs, half-hearted commitments to EU integration, seeing the EU as a transactional organisation, and a limited view of sovereignty – all of these go into the 'awkward' mix. Indeed, such has been Britain's reputation for being an awkward partner that [some opinion](#) has it that both Britain and the EU might be better off if the UK left. We do not doubt that the UK can be awkward and its recent behaviour has strained relations with the rest of the EU. However, is there a different picture that can be painted?



## A Constructive Partner

The most basic way of understanding the UK's part in the EU is to list what it has done to help fashion the EU in its present form, contributions that counterbalance Britain's opt-outs, obstruction and objectionable behaviour. The favourite example, and one made repeatedly in Britain, is the role Britain has played in creating the Single Market and the advancement of economic reform across Europe. That even some British Eurosceptics remain keen on the UK retaining access to the Single Market highlights how much Britain has invested in the project – politically, economically and not least emotionally. And London continues to push and push, especially on the free movement of services and capital.

What is often not appreciated in the UK is that a very British approach to the EU's economy has – for good or bad – shaped the EU. Margaret Thatcher's 1988 'Bruges Speech', delivered at the College of Europe, is often depicted in the UK and elsewhere as an epitome of Euroscepticism. This ignores the fact that the speech was quite well received at the time and contained plenty of analysis of Britain's historical contributions to Europe, dating back centuries. Only later did the Bruges Speech become a touchstone of Euroscepticism, as supporters of the now deposed Thatcher sought battles with pro-European advocates of the nascent EU emerging in the Maastricht negotiations. Reconstructing the Bruges Speech in the edit, a few of Thatcher's attacks on the creep of Brussels socialism would come to be remembered, while her positive words about the British in Europe were airbrushed from

history.

Ironically, however, Thatcher's vision of a deregulated free market broadly came to encapsulate what the EU later became. Some in British politics might liken the European Commission to a bastion of state socialism, but that sounds absurd to people in countries such as Greece or Eastern Europe where the EU and the Commission have helped drive austerity, privatisation and deregulation. Feelings that the EU has become a servant of Anglo-Saxon economics were so strong in France that they played a part in France's 2005 rejection of the European Constitution.

[Other examples](#) might include the EU budget to which the UK remains one of the largest net contributors despite the much-resented rebate. The rebate highlights what some of Britain's critics consider its most destructive contribution: the idea of *juste retour*. This ignores that the EU has long faced, and will continue to face, awkward demands from its member states for a fair return. The UK has been one of the strongest backers of reforming a budget that once favoured *juste retour* for French farmers, amongst others. As a result, while it remains far from perfect, the budget today better reflects the needs of the modern EU. Britain has been a forceful advocate of EU enlargement, a position which helped open the EU to the citizens of Central-Eastern Europe. The free-movement this allowed might in retrospect be considered a mistake by some in the UK, but the original enlargement project – one combined with an expansion of NATO – was something [Britain backed very strongly](#).

Britain has also been a keen advocate of concerted EU action on climate change. Animal welfare legislation across the EU is in large part a product of British efforts. Britain has a more than satisfactory record of [implementing EU law](#). Part of Britain's problems with the EU is that it is too often a good European when it comes to EU law, the enforcement of which provokes a never-ending litany of complaints. In Brussels, British ministers and officials have been widely respected for their analysis and negotiating skills. It was those officials who when tasked to do so delivered the most detailed and insightful ever analysis of the EU's powers in the British Government's 2012-14 '[Review of the Balance of Competences](#).' The work of the EU committees of the House of Lords show an attention to the detail of EU law and policy found in few other EU national parliaments. No wonder ministers and officials from other EU member states are left wondering about Britain's Janus faced attitude: an often negative and poisonous domestic public face that is not reflected in the more pragmatic, constructive private face British ministers and officials show in EU business.

There is a long recognised habit in the EU of member states hiding their own objections to proposals behind Britain's willingness to be the member who says no. British Eurosceptics complain that Britain has been and can be outvoted, ignoring that a Westminster style zero-sum mentality of win/lose is not how the consensual system of the EU (or of many other EU member states) works. It also ignores that the UK has been [closer to most final EU policy outcomes](#) than most other EU governments. That Britain has over the past few years found itself [somewhat at odds](#) with EU decisions reflects in no small part a disengagement by UK government, but thanks to the consensus system Britain is still on the winning side 87 per cent of the time. British membership has never been subject to moves to isolate it as a result of the success of [far-right political groups](#) or worried the rest of the EU because of a government clampdown on civil liberties and media freedoms. Britain has never failed to ratify an EU treaty, unlike several other states traditionally seen as more pro-European, such as France or the Netherlands. Granted, David Cameron did veto the 2011 proposal for a new treaty to deal with the Eurozone's problems, but his approach pales in comparison with General de Gaulle and the 1965-66 'empty chair crisis' he created that very nearly brought European integration to an end. Nor did Britain bring the Euro to the verge of collapse. Britain might have barracked from the sidelines or been sullenly indifferent to efforts to stabilise a currency whose collapse would have badly hurt the UK. But the UK's reaction was a sideshow to the blazing rows, mass protests and strained relations found inside the Eurozone.

Accusations that the UK is a US 'Trojan Horse' display an ignorance of how the USA – a European power since 1945 – has had a hand in European integration from the very start and doesn't wholly depend on the UK for relations with the rest of the EU. In backing the US over the Iraq War the UK was not alone in the EU, with the then governments (if not necessarily the citizens) of sixteen of the current twenty eight member states [supporting the war](#) in some way. UK commitments to the USA have undeniably been in part about the UK seeking to pursue the role of a global

power. But they have also been part of wider European efforts to maintain the US commitment to the security of Europe. Soldiers from Britain and other European nations died in Afghanistan to show their countries' commitments to the future of the Atlantic alliance and the security it brings to Europe. Much to the frustration of the USA, that security commitment remains necessary because European states have varying levels of enthusiasm for defence spending and have repeatedly failed to cooperate on defence. [Germany's 2012 veto](#) of the merger of the defence firms BAE and EADS is one of many examples of how European defence cooperation has not been hampered by the UK alone.

For all its Euroscepticism the British media also contains the likes of the FT and the Economist, famed for some of the finest coverage of EU and international matters. The British press might be forthright and frequently nationalistic and in some cases xenophobic, but it also lacks the deference that some media elsewhere in the EU show the idea of European integration. If a media is there to ask tough questions then the UK's media has asked them. But the press has also spread misinformation about 'barmy' Brussels directives, as the [Leveson Inquiry](#) amply pointed out. Britain also suffers from the rest of Europe being able to read and follow its media while the media of other member states is rarely followed outside its borders. How many in the UK or elsewhere in the EU are aware of such examples as an [Italian newspaper](#) comparing the EU and Angela Merkel to a Fourth Reich?

Despite the above, some in the rest of the EU might view the UK as an obstacle best rid of so the EU can more easily integrate. Such an outlook should not use the UK's awkwardness as an excuse for wider weaknesses in the EU, some of which the UK has played a part in, but where blaming the UK overplays its influence. Just as in the UK blaming the EU for Britain's problems distracts from Britain's home-grown problems, so too do any attempts to view the UK as the EU's main obstacle overlook the Union's wider failings and the awkward behaviour of other member states. To take one example, a British withdrawal would do little for the European Parliament's attempts to assert its democratic mandate. In the [2014 European Parliament elections](#) UK voter turnout ranked nineteenth of twenty eight member states. Voter turnout across the EU is low and has been in steady decline. If British voters are removed from the 2014 elections voter turnout increases from 42.8 per cent to 43.7 per cent. This would have been only slightly higher than the record low of 43.24 per cent turnout in the 2009 elections.

## Conclusion

We do not doubt that Britain, more than other EU member states, treats EU membership as '[an accounting exercise more than an affair of the heart](#)' and that Britain has difficult relations with the EU as a result of history and domestic structural reasons. What should be of concern is that debates in the UK and elsewhere in the EU appear to have reached the point where the narrative is so stuck in a negative one-sided story of awkwardness that we need to be reminded of what Britain does and has done for the EU and how that compares to others. This is certainly true for the UK. A Dutch commentator once noted that the UK's debate about its EU membership suffers from a mentality of '[narcissistic victimisation](#)': a sense amongst the British that only Britain suffers at the hands of the EU, only Britain sees the way forward but is thwarted by the EU, and only Britain has the experience and nous to see the opportunities and dangers at the global level.

Tony Blair used to say that the belief that Europe happens 'to' Britain, while Britain has no capacity to exert agency in the EU, speaks to a lack of national self-confidence. It may be more than that – a widespread lack of understanding of how the EU operates to make and implement legislation. It also comes as news to the rest of the EU who have, amongst other things, committed the last few years to saving the Euro, living in fear of Russian hostility on its eastern borders, been pursuing trade deals with the USA and emerging powers, and where along with the UK four other EU members share a place in the top ten of the World Economic Forum's [ranking of global competitiveness](#) despite also being hamstrung by the same EU membership.

At the same time, the rest of the EU should not think a Brexit would only raise awkward and painful questions for Britain. The EU too would lose one of its most influential and important members, a member that has done more for the EU than it credits even itself with. A Brexit would raise awkward questions about the EU's unity and do little to solve some of the underlying structural problems facing the Union in the 21st century.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE. Image by [Tom](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0).*

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[1] Page references from the paperback reprint of the second edition of George's *An Awkward Partner* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

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