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Understanding the background to Brexit: Brief history of UK-EU relations

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EVS465/EVSn5065: Brexit: Politics, Policies and Processes

This is a
NO BREXIT
ZONE
Because no, you're not on *Newsnight*.
If you wish to discuss Brexit, please make like
the UK and leave.

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Introduction

- EU as a **toxic, one of the most divisive and emotive issues** in British politics (division between parties + deep divisions within the parties).

- According to some, fundamental conflict/cleavage in post-war British politics is not so much between left and right as between those who believe that Britain's future lies with Europe and those who believe it does not.

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What is Brexit?

- **Oxford English Dictionary** (2016): The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.
  - Who coined it?
  - Technically inaccurate.

- Brexit = a **series of overlapping processes and debates taking place at many levels and involving multiple actors across the UK and the EU.**

- It confronts the UK with many questions and debates on **identity, society, political economy, trade, security, party politics.**

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brexit *n*

(toht-l krap)

The undefined being negotiated by
the unprepared in order to get
the unspecified for the uninformed.

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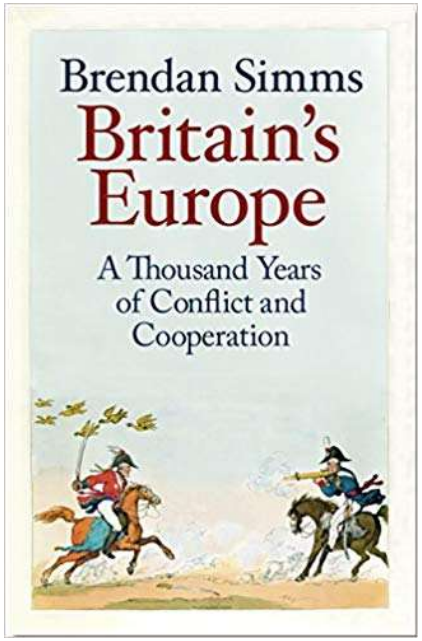
When is Brexit?

- Brexit-related processes and debates are **not limited to a certain time frame.**



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What is so special about Brexit?

- **Ideal topic though which to understand a changing UK.**
  - Brexit as a critical juncture?
- **UK and Brexit as a fascinating case study for the social sciences.**
  - UK: long a good case study in international relations, political science, political economy.
- **Pointers to the future of the EU and global politics.**

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Why did the UK join so late?

- **Britain was involved in some way from the start.**
  - Winston Churchill: United States of Europe (September 19, 1946. University of Zurich)

We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living. The process is simple. All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong and to gain as their reward blessing instead of cursing.

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Why did the UK join so late?

- **Insular mentality.**
- **Power and prestige.**
  - Imperial hubris
- **Strategic lessons from the 2WW.**
  - British narrative of 2WW important: the UK standing alone.
- **Europe as only one of the three circles of British power.**
  - UK at the heart of 3 overlapping circles that defined its place in the world: Europe, US and British Empire.

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Why did the UK join so late?

- **Unsure of its role in the world.**
  - Imperial hangover
  - 1962: Dean Acheson (former US Secretary of state). Speech at US military academy West Point.

    Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role. The attempt to play a separate power role — that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'special relationship' with the United States, a role based on being head of a 'commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity, or strength — this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct policy as weak as its military power.

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Why did the UK join so late?

- **Shifting economics**
  - Profound shifts in the UK‘s trading patterns.
  - Establishment of EFTA (1960)

- **Doubts across the political spectrum.**
  - Both on the left (*The Durham miners won’t wear it*) and on the right.

- **UK’s political and constitutional set-up.**
  - No codified constitution.
  - Majoritarian system of govt.
    Confrontational political system.
    Adversary politics.
    Westminster-style zero-sum mentality.
  - Parliamentary sovereignty.

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" LOOK WHAT I MADE OUT OF THE SPARE WHEEL"

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Why did the UK join so late?

- **Cultural and demographic differences.**

- **Repeated attempts at membership**
  - 1961: First British application for EEC membership (Harold Macmillan).
  - 1963: First French veto against British membership.
    - deep-seated hostility" towards European construction; American Trojan Horse.
  - 1967: Second British application for EEC membership (Harold Wilson).
  - 1967: second French veto against British membership.
  - 1971: Third British application for EEC membership (Edward Heath).

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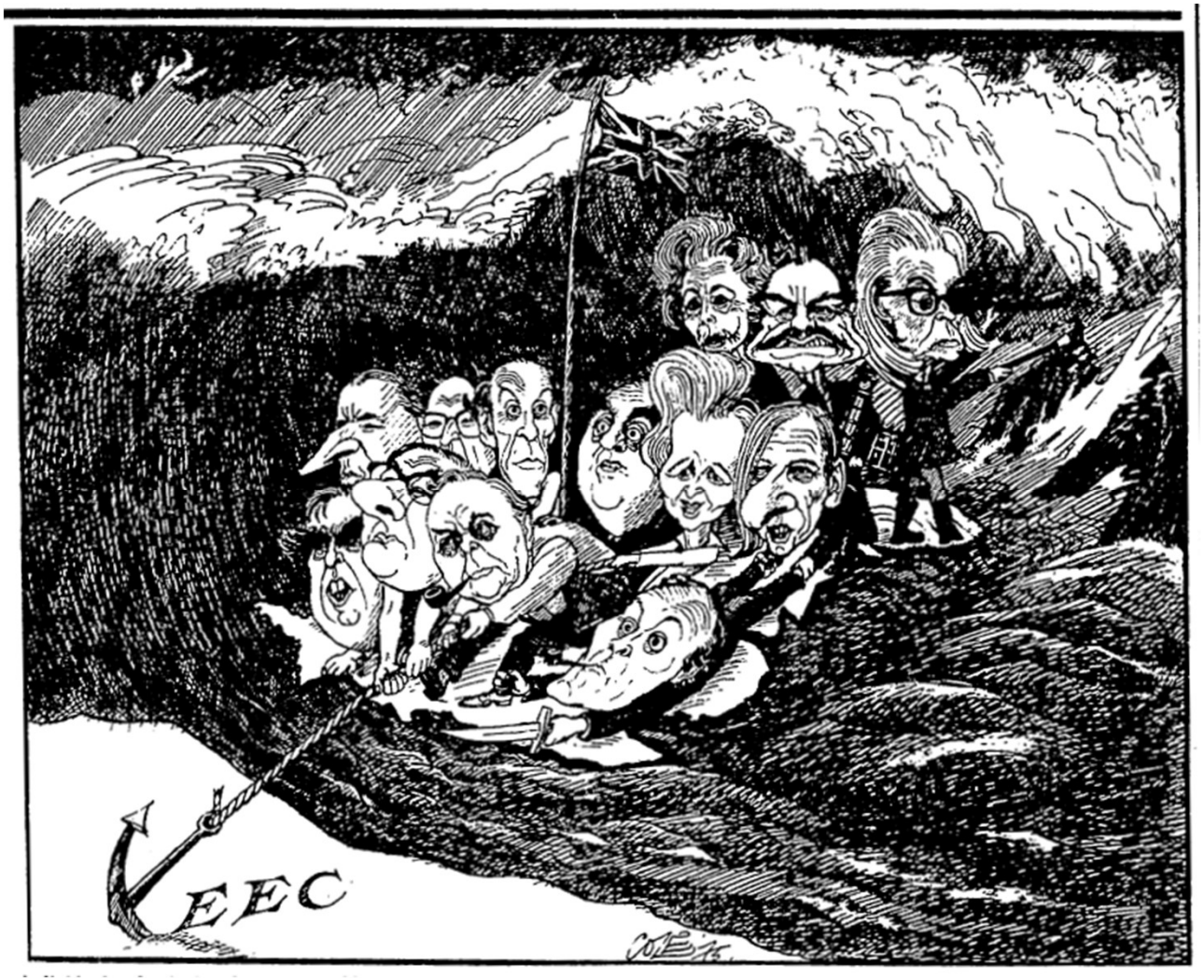

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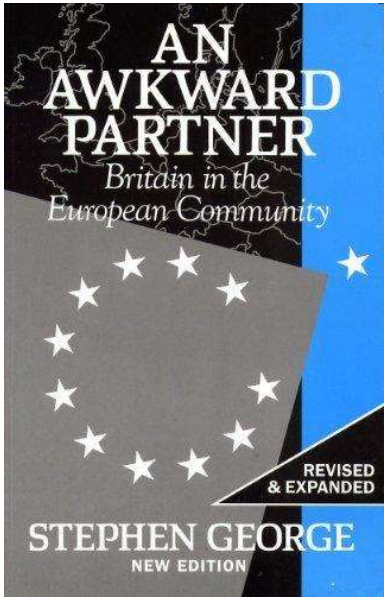
The UK as a two-faced European

- **Two-faced** (Janus-faced) approach: awkward partner but at the same time (sometimes) a constructive one (quiet European).

- Good example of this approach: **Margaret Thatcher Speech at the College of Europe in Bruges 1988.**



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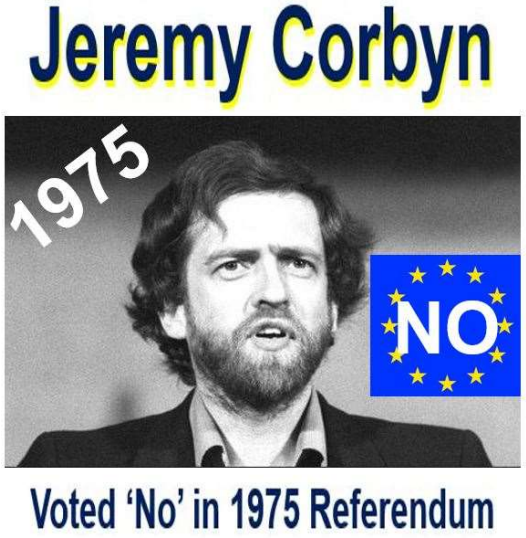
Awkward partner

- **Struggling to fit with the EU's set-up.**
  - BBQ (Bloody British question); rebate.

- **Trying to fit and change the EU caused tensions in UK politics.**
  - 1975 referendum.
    - Organised by Labour Party (Harold Wilson)
    - In favour of continued membership (66% voter turnout, 2/3 said yes)
    - Remain supported by Britain's three main parties and all its national newspapers



- **Transactional approach to the membership.**

- **The UK has secured many opt-outs.**
  - Feeling of unfairness and special treatment.

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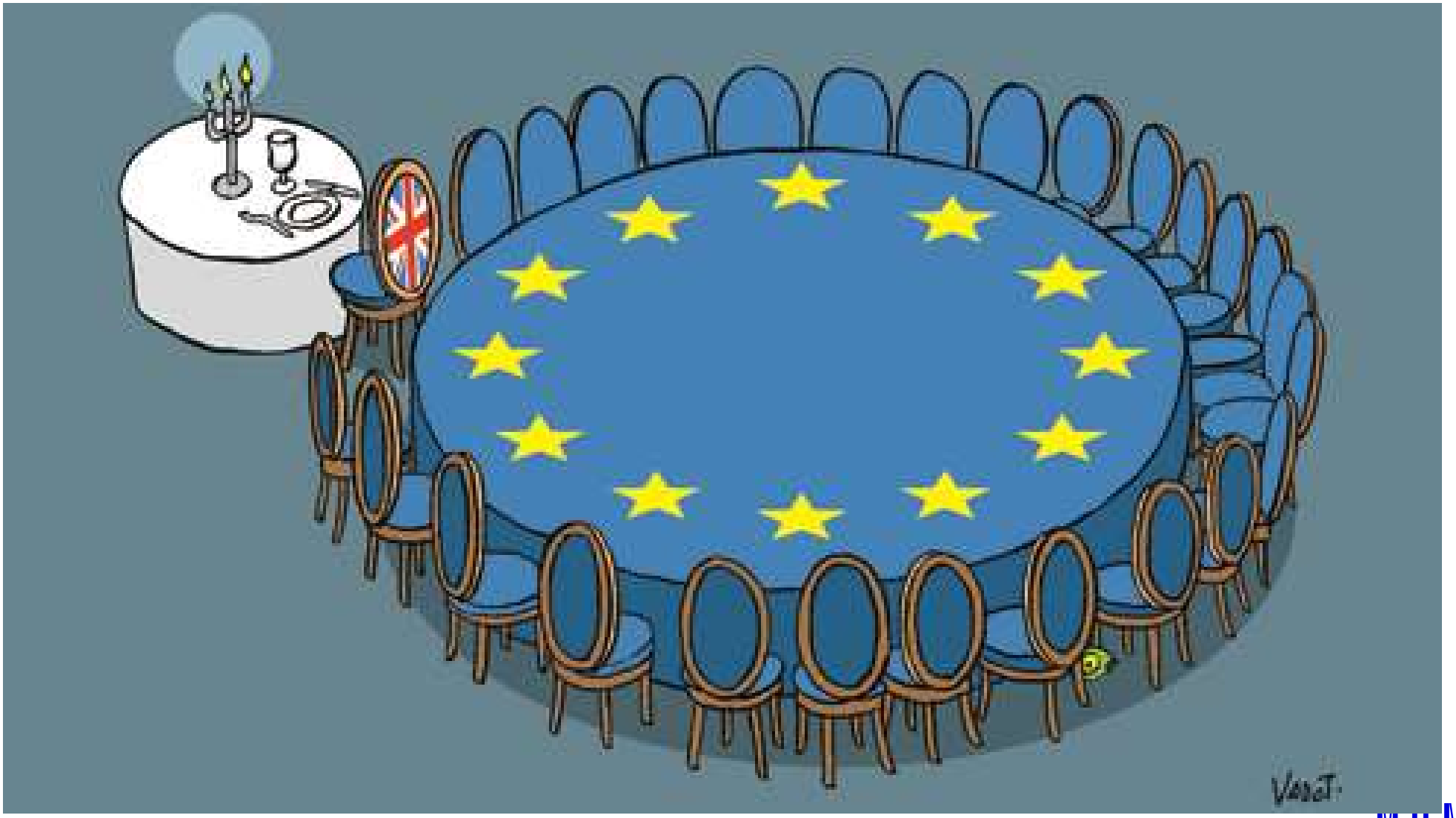

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Awkward partner

- **EC/EU has been the bane of many PMs' time in office.**
- **Public and media debate defined by Euroscepticism.**
  - Constraining public debate.
  - Negative, alarmist and sensationalist approach by the British media.
- **UK as the bad cop of European integration.**
  - Willing to say no; shield for others
- **UK has too often looked to the US.**
- **Awkward because of its size.**

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A short history of Britain's relationship with the EU

UK: We want a rebate on the fees
EU: OK
UK: We don't want to be in the Euro
EU: OK
UK: We don't want to be in Shengen
EU: OK
UK: We want a restriction on benefits until people have worked here for some time
EU: OK
UK: We want to stop child benefit being paid for children who aren't in the UK
EU: OK
UK: We want to kick out people who come here but don't work and can't afford to support themselves.
EU: That's fine, you already can.
UK: We want loads of preferential treatment that other countries don't get
EU: Errr, can't really give that without everyone agreeing
UK: Don't give us what we want and we'll leave
EU: That's a bit of an over reaction, but your choice
UK: OK we're leaving
EU: Bye then
UK: Now we're leaving, we want all the things we had before
EU: Errr, no, it doesn't work like that
UK: Don't give us what we want and we'll leave with nothing,
EU: (Scratches head) OK, umm, well, yeah
UK: We're serious, we'll walk away with nothing to teach you a lesson
EU: Bye (again)

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Quiet European

- Effective member state.
- Had to assert itself to be taken seriously.
- Atlanticism as the norm in EU.
- UK has won on many policy areas.
- Good enforcer of EU laws.

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History of UK-EU relations: key moments

- History of UK-EU relations. For a timeline and key moments, see, for instance:
- https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/factsheet-on-timeline/
- https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-26515129

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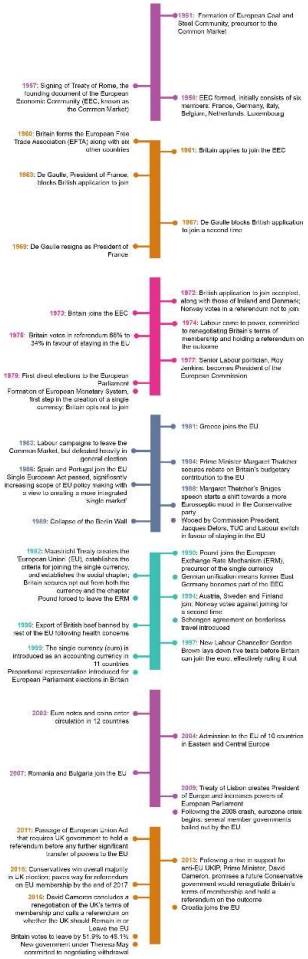
1951: Formation of European Coal and Steel Community, precursor to the Common Market
1957: Signing of Treaty of Rome, the founding document of the European Economic Community (EEC, known as the Common Market)
1958: EEC formed, initially consists of six members: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg
1960: Britain forms the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) along with six other countries
1961: Britain applies to join the EEC
1963: De Gaulle, President of France, blocks British application to join
1967: De Gaulle blocks British application to join a second time
1969: De Gaulle resigns as President of France
1972: British application to join accepted, along with those of Ireland and Denmark; Norway votes in a referendum not to join
1973: Britain joins the EEC
1974: Labour come to power, committed to renegotiating Britain's terms of membership and holding a referendum on the outcome
1975: Britain votes in referendum 66% to 34% in favour of staying in the EU
1977: Senior Labour politician, Roy Jenkins, becomes President of the European Commission
1979: First direct elections to the European Parliament
Formation of European Monetary System, first step in the creation of a single currency; Britain opts not to join
1981: Greece joins the EU
1983: Labour campaigns to leave the Common Market, but defeated heavily in general election
1984: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher secures rebate on Britain's budgetary contribution to the EU
1986: Spain and Portugal join the EU
Single European Act passed, significantly increasing scope of EU policy making with a view to creating a more integrated 'single market'
1988: Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech starts a shift towards a more Eurosceptic mood in the Conservative party
1989: Collapse of the Berlin Wall
Vowed by Commission President Jacques Delors, TUC and Labour switch in favour of staying in the EU
1990: Pound joins the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), precursor of the single currency
German unification means former East Germany becomes part of the EEC
1992: Maastricht Treaty creates the 'European Union' (EU), establishes the criteria for joining the single currency, and establishes the social chapter; Britain secures opt out from both the currency and the chapter
1994: Austria, Sweden and Finland join; Norway votes against joining for a second time
Schengen agreement on borderless travel introduced
Pound forced to leave the ERM
1996: Export of British beef banned by rest of the EU following health concerns
1997: New Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown lays down five tests before Britain can join the euro, effectively ruling it out
1999: The single currency (euro) is introduced as an accounting currency in 11 countries
Proportional representation introduced for European Parliament elections in Britain
2002: Euro notes and coins enter circulation in 12 countries
2004: Admission to the EU of 10 countries in Eastern and Central Europe
2007: Romania and Bulgaria join the EU
2009: Treaty of Lisbon creates President of Europe and increases powers of European Parliament
Following the 2008 crash, eurozone crisis begins; several member governments bailed out by the EU
2011: Passage of European Union Act that requires UK government to hold a referendum before any further significant transfer of powers to the EU
2013: Following a rise in support for anti-EU UKIP, Prime Minister, David Cameron, promises a future Conservative government would renegotiate Britain's terms of membership and hold a referendum on the outcome
2015: Conservatives win overall majority in UK election; paves way for referendum on EU membership by the end of 2017
2016: David Cameron concludes a renegotiation of the UK's terms of membership and calls a referendum on whether the UK should Remain in or Leave the EU
Britain votes to leave by 51.9% to 48.1%
New government under Theresa May committed to negotiating withdrawal
Croatia joins the EU

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Thank you very much for your attention

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