

## Alex Warleigh-Lack

# The European Integration Project – As Seen in the United Kingdom

### Introduction: S.O.S.

*'Where are those happy days? They seem so hard to find. I tried to reach for you, but you have closed your mind'.*

My opening words are, of course, not from Joey Tempest's rock crew, name-checked in the title of this Böll- Stiftung- project, but from those rather more nuanced Swedish observers of the human psyche, Benny Anderson, Stig Andersson and Björn Ulvæus. Any commentator on the UK public debate on the European project from a pro-European perspective – even a heavily and healthily critical one - is tempted to agree with the song from which those words are taken: S.O.S.

At the time of writing – late November 2012 – the UK stands on the precipice of withdrawal from the EU. The only referendum on the subject that has previously been held in the country – that on staying in the then-EEC, held in 1975 – reflects a long-dissipated coalition in UK society. At the present time it is difficult to see how, without radical intervention, a referendum on UK membership is not to be held, and, from the pro-EU perspective, lost. A survey published in mid-November in *The Guardian* – the UK's main non-Europhobic daily newspaper – showed that 56% of the UK public would vote to leave the EU if given the choice. Indeed, the 'out' vote was bigger not only in the Conservative Party, but also in the main opposition party, Labour.

Some politicians and other citizens actively want this to come about – many in the Conservative party, for instance, have taken an anti-EU stance as a badge of honour since the days of Lady Thatcher's term in office and subsequent defenestration. The UK Independence Party – UKIP – is eponymously and deeply anti-EU, and is rising in the polls. Others are prepared to go with the anti-EU flow if they see electoral advantage in this, but are not particularly committed to the Eurosceptic cause; this seems to be the case for many leading Labour Party politicians, for instance.

Only a few seem willing to enter public debate about the EU from a pro-European perspective, and these are easy to caricature as either out of touch and past their sell-by date (politicians of yesteryear, such as Ken Clarke) or as merely serving the interests of capital: most of the pro-Europeans who dare to come out on the issue are captains of industry, concerned with how a withdrawal from the EU might affect their businesses. This has rather limited appeal, particularly when there are greater numbers of people, or at least louder voices on bigger platforms, advocating that the UK should become a kind of tax-haven with Chinese-style welfare and safety standards. It may be that Tony Blair's promised involvement in this debate will change the situation – but after the Iraq War and the various inquiries into his conduct as Prime Minister, his standing at home is not what it was.

In addition, many pro-Europeans on the Left are disheartened by the EU's current trajectory. How can someone on the Left actively campaign for the proposed Financial Treaty? Or for economic governance based on the so-called six pack and European Semester, all of which will entrench neoliberalism rather than move away from it? How can we support an EU that seems bent on destroying the social fabric of weaker states and on constant under-achievement in environmental policy, rather than promoting a social Europe as Delors promised or delivering on the long-standing pro-environmental rhetoric? This matters because the European debate in the UK and elsewhere needs PASSION, and at the moment the only ones who have it are those seeking to take the UK out.

In this article I want to set out what I see as the main public criticisms of the EU in the UK. I then ask how this state of affairs has come about, and explain how mainstream views of the EU in the UK have coalesced over time. Finally, I want to set out how a campaign to keep the UK in the EU might – just might – be effective.

### **The Name of the Game: Euroscepticism**

It is difficult to caricature the claims made about the EU in British public debate, or what passes for it. Short of sacrificing orphans after shooting their mothers in front of them, the EU has been accused of everything imaginable. The European Commission even has a special unit in the UK with a brief to counter-act the constant propaganda put out by journalists with either an overt anti-EU agenda or at best partial knowledge. For instance, measures that the EU has taken ostensibly to improve the lives of its citizens – such as the Working Time Directive – are spun into a story of meddling in individuals' right to work and economic cost increases to companies and the general public, especially regarding hospital doctors 'obliged' to work no more than 50 hours a week.

Some of these issues can be addressed rationally on an individual basis, such as the whole 'straight banana' scandal. However, even when a case of misinformation is put right, this amounts only to a drop in the ocean. In the UK, everybody 'knows' that the EU is a bureaucratic giant, constantly meddling in our affairs, and corrupt – its own auditors never sign off its accounts. The EU is undemocratic (and of course it actually is, but not because it fails to replicate the Westminster model of parliamentary politics!), and, insofar as it has any real powers, it uses them for evil. It is run by foreigners in their own interests, brings the UK nothing but migrants and job losses for those who are already suffering economically, and because of all the above is far less likely to help the UK out of its economic problems than more trade with the USA, China and India. None of this renders making a pro-EU case easy, as I now discuss.

### **The Winner did Not Take it All: From Yes to Staying In to Get Me out of Here**

It might have been assumed in 1975 that the 'yes' vote to remaining a member of the then-European Economic Community had largely settled the question of public support for the EU. Anyone who held such a view was

soon disabused of it: the UK and its general public have never fully accepted the idea of a 'European project' as a public good in its own right. Membership of the EU has been seen at best as a reluctant necessity, economically beneficial perhaps, but essentially the EU remains, for the majority of the British, a big market whose political aspects require constant monitoring, and one which cannot compensate for the UK's loss of status as a great power. Indeed, it may even be that for certain sections of the British public, EU membership is so difficult precisely because it shows how different the world is from how those who considered themselves the 'winners' of World War II fondly imagined it, with the UK at the centre of what Churchill envisioned as a world of three circles of influence rather like London is the centre of 'Greenwich mean time'.

Having decided to stay out of the EU in its first incarnation as the European Coal and Steel Community, the UK found that basic policy deals (especially the Common Agricultural Policy) and ways of working did not suit us when we eventually signed up. The resultant repeated attempts to renegotiate the terms of membership meant that the UK demonstrated different policy priorities from those already established. This did not escape public attention, which was thereby primed to consider the EU as something which needed to be altered, or even tamed. The British case was not always without substance: for example, the row about the UK contribution to the EU budget, an issue which remains politically explosive today, was about terms of entry to the EU which *were* objectively unfair to Britain. The difficulties experienced in settling this row did nothing to endear the EU to the British public.

Although the UK has contributed to some of the EU's core goals – establishing the Single Market was made much easier thanks to UK advocacy and support, for instance – the UK has always been more out of step with most of its partners in broader economic policy terms. A key issue here has been the so-called European Social Model, about which even Labour governments have been sceptical; British governments have repeatedly resisted transfer of social policy to the EU on grounds of both national sovereignty and ideological difference, as they have favoured a more market-driven approach to employment and welfare issues than most of their continental counterparts. As is well-known, the UK is both a key driver of EU security integration, and also one of its problems, because its persistent Atlanticism has often put it at loggerheads with the other major player, France: a paradox of long duration!

The failure to be clear about what was at stake in European integration has also been a common feature of British politics ever since accession, perhaps with the exception of Margaret Thatcher's premiership – not least through her notorious 'No, no, no' speech to the College of Europe in the dying days of her period in office. Moreover, *an emphasis on costs, not benefits, of the EU, very early on became the default position regarding public discourse on membership*; the construction of the UK government as a bulwark against otherwise irresistible and rapacious EU forces has been a constant feature of British public diplomacy about the EU ever since the accession campaign in

1972. It is the first part of a seemingly-illogical 'common sense' about the EU which persists in public discourse.

The second and contradictory aspect of this 'common sense' view is that the EU is a persistent but ultimately inconsequential irritant, rather than a matter of great importance. Changing this view would require an act of great political leadership and a positive framing of the way that the UK has become 'Europeanised' not only economically but also politically and administratively. The only efforts made at explaining the profundity of European integration so far have been from the Eurosceptic right-wing, and this constrains the room for political manoeuvre for pro-Europeans: there appears to be no way to avoid explaining the depth and significance of European integration without 'confessing' how, on this point at least, the right-wing Eurosceptics have been more right than wrong. For example, even when he was a very popular and politically secure Prime Minister, Tony Blair calculated that it was electorally too risky to point out the political importance of EU matters to the general public to frame his thinking about joining the single currency, and this allowed the prevailing popular perception to be maintained.

Another way in which domestic politics places constraints on UK performance in the EU is linked to the internal politics of political parties and also to the wishes of powerful non-party actors, such as the popular press. Of course, this is not entirely separate from public opinion, but it is expressed in a different way, i.e. institutionally. Divisions within political parties can restrict a Prime Minister's room for manoeuvre. For instance, John Major's difficulties in maintaining party coherence over the EU shaped the UK's negotiating position on the Maastricht Treaty, and meant that the UK had to insist on opt-outs from policies such as the single currency and social policy. The more recent governments of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron have shaped their EU policies in order to respond, in great part, to pressure from newspapers, thereby ensuring that their opponents in Parliament had no opportunity to outflank them from a Eurosceptic position. (At the moment, this situation seems to be failing for Mr Cameron, as the Labour Party has connived with the Eurosceptics within the Conservative Party, to force his hand on negotiations about the next EU budget settlement).

### **Knowing Me, Knowing EU: How the British Think about 'Europe'**

For most British people, 'Europe' is somewhere else, not a continent of which they are part. This is not an inevitability of being a so-called island nation: Ireland, Cyprus and Malta are also islands...Rather, it is in part thanks to the laziness of politicians, advertisers and journalists – citizens enjoined to 'travel to Europe this summer' or 'find out what's happening in Europe' seem to have imbibed this here/there, UK/Europe distinction.

The existence of a shared language across the Atlantic has shaped public perception of shared culture and values between the UK and the US on which many on the political right have actively built in the last few decades; the US is routinely held up as an economic model, and 'Europe' is decidedly not. The lack of cultural understanding of the rest of the continent – despite decades of easy travel and 'continental' food in British shops –remains significant, and is

only worsened by the lack of UK attention to the learning of other European languages.

The last Labour administration made such education optional, with disastrous consequences: many pupils, particularly in state schools, simply gave them up because they were considered 'difficult' subjects, and their schools were only too pleased to facilitate this given their primary focus on achieving good league table rankings through their exam results, rather than on providing a good education as such. This monoglot culture – with the notable exception of many in so-called ethnic minority families, many of whom speak non-European languages as well as English – creates a situation in which both citizens and the media look to other English-speaking countries for sources of news and entertainment. In short, for many Brits, most of the rest of Europe remains 'countries far away, of which we know nothing' – to paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister in the run-up to World War II.

A leading British journalist, Peter Preston, has pointed out how unintended consequences of newspaper funding cuts, and the rise of infotainment stories, have reinforced this trend: it's much easier for British journalists to report on (or simply re-print stories about) Australian politics than Hungarian or Icelandic equivalents, which in turn shapes public perceptions of what and where matters, which then drives editors' assessments of which stories to run... The state of affairs is now such that non-UK businesses such as Lufthansa are even using it in their own advertising – the airline is currently running a big radio campaign based on trying to attract Brits to, and I quote, "a strange country called Europe (sic) where the government regulates everything and they have a funny 'th'".

### **I Have a Dream: Winning a Referendum**

Is the UK thus heading for the exit door? Unless huge political capital is expanded on a counter-movement, I fear that the answer is 'yes'. After decades of the drip-drip-drip of propaganda, it is very difficult to cut through the default public perception that the EU is both a burden and superfluous to real need. This is particularly so when many people in key political offices as well as the popular media have chosen to deepen such views on an almost daily basis. The likely referendum on British membership of the EU in some time between 2015-17 (after the next general election, which is due in 2015), is set to be a real milestone – and at the moment, as mentioned above, the majority of British citizens favour withdrawal.

However, like anything in politics, there are no inevitabilities, merely possibilities and probabilities. With the investment of great effort, and a mixture of overt and covert measures, the referendum can be won. Part of this will depend on the question that is asked: notably, the 1975 referendum was not about joining the EU, but rather about *staying in*. Timing will also be important: if the Euro-zone crisis seems to be on its way to resolution, or if global events make a life of 'independence' less attractive than it may seem at present, then this is likely to have an impact on the result.

Further contextual factors include the Scottish referendum on secession from the UK in 2014. If this goes the way of the Nationalists, then the rest of the UK may be in truculent mood when it comes to voting on the EU. On the other hand, a 'yes' vote in Scotland could also trigger a 'flight to Europe' – if campaigners can spin the world as it would then be to a 'United Kingdom' of only England, Wales and Northern Ireland as a place of insecurity, then this might help shape a positive response. In the debate in Scotland, if EU membership is considered there as a necessity for the newly-independent state, then this may also make people in the rest of Britain take stock.

However, it would be foolish to leave a campaign to such historical chance. There are some signs that the pro-European forces are waking from slumber after years of silence: as yet, political elites have not begun to campaign unambiguously in favour, but civil society groups are beginning to mobilise. This spark can be fanned into flame with judicious handling.

That means a multi-faceted campaign focused on British enlightened self-interest, shared interests with the rest of our EU partners, the improvements to our quality of life that the EU has provided and could reinforce, and the drive for an ecologically sustainable future. *There is absolutely no point trying to argue about 'European identity' in the UK.* In such a mono-lingual culture, with little general appreciation of cultural traditions and history, it just does not wash to tell people they belong together with Finns or Spaniards on the basis of Goethe, Aquinas, Spinoza and Classical architecture. More modern European culture is similarly unlikely to create bonds between the UK and the rest of Europe: artists like Daft Punk or Cascada may have great popularity, but they have not generated a wider sense of engagement with continental music, and the music that they sell in the UK is, where sung, in English. Any campaign which tries to emphasise this sort of notion will fail, and deservedly so on the grounds of political naivety.

British self-interest could helpfully be enlisted in the pro-EU cause by pointing out the 'costs of non-membership' (to borrow a phrase from the public affairs supremo and former MEP Tom Spencer). I'm afraid that this really does mean costs in economic terms above all else: the impact of exit from the EU, and hence in all likelihood the single market, needs to be rammed home by credible business leaders with high public standing such as Sir Richard Branson. The fact that 50% of our trade is with the rest of the EU and would be put at risk, with no likely replacement, is a potential killer argument, and the trump card of the pro-EU case. Noises from Beijing, New Delhi and Brasilia about how unattractive the UK would be as a place for investment in such circumstances would be extremely useful. This would also begin to help British people see how EU membership is woven into the fabrics of their lives.

Similarly, if NGOs and interest groups realise what they might lose if the UK leaves the EU, and campaign to stay in on the basis of how their causes have gained from EU membership, this may have a significant impact. Groups on environmental protection, gender equality, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, animal welfare and so on could easily point out how the EU has contributed positively to change in these areas of policy, even if it is

also true that the EU could, and should, do more for these causes. For example, in Ireland, where I used to live, it is well-known that EU accession for that country made the bar on married women working in certain professions illegal; very few people seem to be aware of its similar impact in the UK.

Telling a few home truths about the UK's real status in the world is also necessary. This would be extremely difficult and politically sensitive; yet, without it, I cannot see how the apparently-prevailing popular assumption that the UK is a 'big country' that can manage on its own can be countered. This is not 1945. It is almost sixty years after the Suez Crisis, and it is high time that the British public came to terms with this. However, this would best be done in the context of a public celebration of Britain and the rest of Europe, akin to the recent Olympic Games opening ceremony in London. This event is widely credited as having created a sense of national unity and pride, which the Games themselves then reinforced, and a similar event about the EU could only help, if handled sensitively.

A public shove in the right direction from Washington would help enormously, perhaps above all else except for the economic self-interest argument. It would counter the impression that the US would preserve the UK's so-called 'special relationship' after a 'Brexit'. Such interventions helped the UK decide to apply to the EU, and then stay in by helping the Foreign Office, which was pro-entry, outmanoeuvre the Treasury, which was not, and it is not fully appreciated by many Britons that much of the UK's diplomatic importance to Washington – insofar as we have any – is dependent upon our EU membership. We were urged to join in order to be Washington's friend in the Council, a fact which did not escape Charles de Gaulle. Behind the scenes action with British political and economic elites by US actors would be beneficial, but any public statement to this effect, carefully calibrated, would be even more so.

Who should lead this pro-EU campaign? Politicians are not generally trusted by the British public at the moment after a wave of political scandals, renegeing on manifesto promises, and financial impropriety which has affected all mainstream parties. This is also likely to undermine any role Tony Blair may choose to arrogate to himself. As a result, the spotlight needs to be placed on trusted politicians – of whom there aren't many, but Green MP Caroline Lucas is one – and people who appeal to the public more broadly. In addition to the sector-specific potential of NGOs and interest groups, people with public authority and credibility should step up. Could he be persuaded, Sir David Attenborough, the much-loved and respected TV naturalist would be a great candidate.

Celebrities from a range of cultures popular with young people would be particularly helpful; polls suggest that those aged 25-44 are most pro-European, and yet younger people are also less likely to vote than their elders. Those with high reputations such as David Beckham could also be helpful, but it is also necessary to include people with different skin colours and religious affiliations in the pro-EU campaign. The EU cannot afford to be seen as a

middle-aged white man's club. The use of social media would be crucial in reaching members of the public who don't see themselves as political or otherwise engaged: we need not to 'dig for victory', in the famous war-time phrase, but to Tweet for Europe!

A final aspect of a pro-EU campaign is the need to engage voters from the Left. In that regard, I think several steps could be useful, and I discuss them below.

Focusing on economic issues is necessary, but dry and relatively easy to lose in a battle of statistics with a 'she said this, he said that' flavour. It would also in all likelihood fail to spark the enthusiasm of voters and activists on the Left, who might see the economic case for staying in but worry deeply about the impact of entrenching neoliberalism even further through the integration process. At best, this would rob them of much of their campaigning passion. At worst, it could make them vote to leave the Union, in the hope that a Labour government would choose different economic policies, or at least that securing such change in the UK would be easier than trying to do so across the whole EU.

To make this part of a campaign work, it would be necessary to emphasise the benefits the EU has brought to those who are most vulnerable and to the environment, while highlighting the will of many EU states, even under right-wing governments, to do more to tame the markets – such as the vanguard group's adoption of a Tobin Tax. An EU which was set to undertake more similar measures and to really take steps to green its economy would make such a campaign much easier, of course, but what is there on the statute book now is enough to make a start.

An additional aspect of the campaign that could appeal to those on the Left would have to be an orientation to the future and how, in particular, it would be easier to build a fairer world for Britons, other Europeans and indeed everyone through cooperation in the EU. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU this year was received with much scepticism in the UK, and indeed elsewhere, and in truth it could more sensibly have been awarded in 1993, after the agreement of the Maastricht Treaty, or in 2005, after the first wave of 'Eastern' enlargement. But beyond matters of timing, and the EU's acknowledged contribution to the peace and security of the continent, such narratives about the past are less likely to have wide resonance with those on the Right than the rival images put forward by the Eurosceptics which recall the proverbial 'thousand years of history' of the UK since its last invasion, Empire and, inevitably World War II. This is especially the case for the younger UK citizens, who are, as stated above, those most likely to be pro-European and for many of whom the days of 1914-18 or even 1939-45 are from an era before the lives of their grandparents.

Finally, the exact wording of key messages in the campaign would be extremely important. For example, 'solidarity' is a word that remains popular with parts of the UK Left, but which in general appears old-fashioned or even counter-intuitive after almost 40 years of indoctrination into neoliberalism and



its more recent clothing as the Third Way. Never forget that when she was Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher really did say that there was no such thing as society, only individuals and families. However, alternatives to 'solidarity' can be found which convey much of the same substance in words which send fewer mixed messages: in this case, 'together' or 'togetherness' is likely to resonate more successfully, particularly in the residual glow of an Olympic Games during which even those on the political Right came to acknowledge the value of cooperation in community. Although it repeats the UK/Europe distinction, and thus panders to some of the popular misperceptions about the UK and its continental neighbours, a slogan such as 'Britain and Europe: Better Together for a Safer Future' might just work.

### **Conclusions: One of Us?**

Thus, and in sum, British popular discourse on the EU and UK membership of it is particularly difficult terrain for those seeking to plant pro-European seeds. Although there are regional differences in the country, and Scotland and Wales are usually considered less Eurosceptic than England and Northern Ireland, the overall context is one of increasing opposition to UK membership of the Union, based on a paradoxical so-called common sense view that the EU is a bureaucratic meddler offering extremely poor value for money, but also relatively unimportant. In this discourse, the UK could, it seems, leave the EU with few real consequences other than liberation from needless regulations. To change this, a campaign must point out the everyday involvement of the EU in citizen's lives, and exactly what would be lost by leaving in economic and other terms – with reinforcement from the US and other leading nations beyond our continent. However, beyond this, a campaign based on a positive message, led by credible figures with high public reputations rather than principally by politicians, will be necessary. It would need to be future-oriented, and offset by helpful mood music from Brussels – with luck, signs of economic recovery, but also skilful public diplomacy around deepening integration between now and the referendum even if the UK opts out.

This would have to focus on our partners' refusal to let us dictate to them how they should act, but also more positively on a repeated message that 'you' want the UK as 'one of us'. Like the character in the ABBA song who bitterly regrets a broken relationship that she left of her own volition, the UK might find itself metaphorically crying, and lying in its lonely bed. But, with the exception of pointing out the importance of the EU and its interwoven nature into our daily lives, that should not be emphasised during a campaign in the near future. It might, however, be a useful theme tune for another one about getting the UK to join up again in about 2025.

Alex Warleigh-Lack is Professor of EU Politics at the University of Surrey, where he directs CRonEM, an EU Studies research centre. He was Chair of UACES, the world's largest EU studies association, between 2006-9. He is also Associate Fellow at UNU-CRIS, Bruges. Professor Warleigh-Lack has published widely on EU politics and comparative regional integration, and has further research interests in Green political theory. Before entering academia, Prof Warleigh-Lack worked in Brussels for the then-Chair of the European Parliament Environment Committee, Ken Collins MEP. His email address is [A.Warleigh-Lack@Surrey.ac.uk](mailto:A.Warleigh-Lack@Surrey.ac.uk).



© Alex Warleigh-Lack



"With the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union"