

AN AWKWARD EUROPEAN

Peter Saunders writes a 30-point guide to why Britain will always be appended to the edge of the continent rather than be a part of it

Late last year, British Prime Minister David Cameron antagonised most other European leaders by vetoing a proposed new treaty intended to strengthen EU tax and spending powers. As a result, the other 27 EU members are now developing plans for tighter fiscal integration without British involvement.

This is not the first time the United Kingdom has proved an awkward member of the European club. In the 1950s, when the European Economic Community (EEC) was formed, Britain stayed out; when it later changed its mind and applied to join, France's Charles de Gaulle twice refused to allow it in.

When eventually it did join, in 1973, it wasn't long before the United Kingdom considered leaving again. A referendum in 1975 confirmed membership, but then the United Kingdom began a series of struggles to either change the rules, or to get itself exempt from them. Margaret Thatcher secured a rebate that has rankled with other members ever since, followed by Britain opting out of the social chapter. Finally, having tried but spectacularly failed to peg the pound to a common European exchange rate, the United Kingdom stayed out as 15 other states swapped their currencies for the euro in 1999.

Why has Britain been such a reluctant and awkward European? The answer lies in history.

The United Kingdom of England and Scotland has existed for more than 300 years.¹ The union of England and Wales goes back more than 450 years, and England itself became Europe's first nation-state more than a thousand years ago, when Athelstan became the first West Saxon king to extend his rule across the entire country in 937AD. This is

a very old country—unlike many of those that make up the modern European Union.

Italy and Germany, for example, only became unified nation-states in the second half of the nineteenth century (and Germany divided again between 1949 and 1989). Belgium separated from the Netherlands in 1839. Many central European states—Slovenia, Croatia, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic—were submerged in the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I, briefly enjoyed national independence (sometimes in unstable federations such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia), and then fell under Soviet domination. The three Baltic states became sovereign nations after World War I but were fully absorbed into the Soviet Union after World War II.

Other countries were submerged in other empires. Bulgaria and Greece at various times came under Ottoman rule. Finland was a monarchy within the Russian Empire until 1918. The Republic of Ireland was annexed to the United Kingdom until 1921.

None of this means there is a weak sense of national identity in these countries. Quite the reverse. Countries like Ireland and Poland, which have struggled for autonomy for centuries, probably have a sharper sense of their nationhood than Britain does. But historical continuity has produced in Britain an institutional strength and persistence that is often lacking in other countries.

Institutions of law, politics and economy that have evolved over hundreds of years are not

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lightly replaced by new ones, freshly minted in Brussels. It's a relatively simple matter to swap your currency for a new one if it has only been circulating for a generation or two, but the pound sterling is the world's oldest currency, dating back to the Anglo-Saxons. Giving up a constitution that has hardly had time to bed down (Italy 1947, Germany 1949, France 1958, Greece 1975, Portugal 1976, Spain 1978, and the former communist states of eastern Europe post-1990) may be no big wrench, but terminating constitutional arrangements that originated with King John is a much bigger step.

Historical discontinuity on the continent has been compounded by repeated invasions and revolutions. Many European nations have seen their borders redrawn many times as a result of warfare and conquest, and their public institutions have repeatedly been uprooted as new masters have ousted old ones. Largely thanks to its physical separation by a 20-mile wide strip of water, England has not suffered foreign invasion for almost a thousand years, and there has been no revolution or civil war since the seventeenth century. Pooling your national sovereignty can appear attractive when for much of your history you have been under the heel of other nations, but giving up a thousand years of uninterrupted self-rule looks reckless.

Centuries of invasion and conquest have bequeathed a degree of homogeneity across the continent that Britain does not share. Napoleon, for example, imposed a uniform legal code in Europe which is alien to Britain. More trivially, he also got the whole of Europe driving on the right and measuring distances in metres, just as a century later, Hitler put the whole of continental Europe on Berlin time. EU harmonisation often involves little more than minor tweaking for continental states with a common heritage, but it can entail huge upheavals for Britain.

Britain's relative security behind its sea boundaries has had other consequences too. English kings rarely needed to maintain the large land-based armies that the scattered princedoms and fiefdoms of Europe needed to defend themselves.² As a result, feudal duty declined much earlier in England than on the continent.

The early emergence of a single, centralised authority also imposed a uniform system of law across the whole nation, and together with a universal system of weights and measures and a common currency, this proved crucial for the emergence of capitalist industry and trade.

The free sale and purchase of land, free contracting of labour, and free movement of people and goods across the country were all common in England long before Chaucer's day. From very early on, England was a highly individualistic, mobile, capitalist country.³

This combination of enduring tradition on the one hand and robust individualism on the other has made Britain a very awkward European. In many respects, it would slot in better as the 51st state of America than as the 27th state in an emerging federal Europe. De Gaulle recognised this, which is why he vetoed UK membership to the European Union in the 1960s. He saw Britain's liberal, individualistic version of capitalism undermining the more statist, European model,⁴ and he worried that the United Kingdom would prove to be an American Trojan horse. Sarkozy's recent remarks about the City of London show little has changed in French thinking in the 50 years since.

Britain's historical differences with Europe are not limited to economics, however. They can be seen in law and politics too, and in everyday life and culture, for the Brits have never really thought of themselves as part of the continent.

A famous *Punch* cartoon depicts a newspaper headline reading: 'Fog in the Channel, Continent Isolated.' It neatly captures the way Britain thinks of its relationship with continental Europe. It is the only country in step. In the spirit of that cartoon, I offer here 30 examples, arranged alphabetically, of how Britain never did, and probably never will, fit into Europe. They are only illustrations (readers will be able to think of many more for themselves), but taken together, they reveal a country appended to the edge of a continent rather than living at its heart.

1. Agriculture

When Margaret Thatcher demanded a rebate on Britain's contribution to the EU budget, the

United Kingdom was paying in more, and taking out less, than any other member state. The reason was the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which gobbled up half of total EU spending.

The CAP was designed to protect inefficient, small-scale French agriculture by imposing tariffs and quotas on cheaper, imported food and subsidising home producers. Although there have been changes in the intervening years (including payments to farmers for *not* growing anything), this is still essentially the model, and the United Kingdom gains little from it. Less than 1% of the population works in agriculture (Britain is the third most-urbanised country in the European Union, behind Belgium and the Netherlands), and British farming tends to be more capital-intensive and large-scale.

Europe's hotel owners know that there are two kinds of breakfast: English and continental.

2. Aristocrats

Most European countries executed, appropriated or banished their aristocracies some time between 1789 and 1945, but Britain never got around to it. One result is Britain still has the House of Lords, which is unique among Europe's second chambers for its total absence of elected members.

There is no democratic argument that can support this, and everyone agrees that if the country were starting out again from scratch, it would never invent an upper house like the Lords. But there is no agreement over what might replace it, for the Lords actually functions remarkably well as a revising upper chamber. There are two reasons for this.

One is that, once appointed, members cannot easily be controlled by the party whips. They are a remarkably independent and wilful bunch who persistently raise awkward questions when governments have driven ill-thought-out legislation through the Commons. The other is that many of their lordships are also highly experienced. There is a lot of wisdom on those red benches.

A friend of mine was ennobled by Blair in 1997 so he could speak for the Home Office in Lords debates. I went to see him perform once, in a debate on prison reform. He was grilled by no fewer than five former home secretaries, as well as several leading figures in penal policy. As he noted ruefully afterwards, the home secretary in the Commons never had to face opposition like that.

3. Breakfast

Europe's politicians may appeal to a common EU heritage, but Europe's hotel owners know there are two kinds of breakfast: English and continental. One contains eggs, sausage, bacon, mushrooms, beans, fried tomatoes, and black pudding. The other consists of bread and jam.

4. Car industry

Britain doesn't have one. Lots of cars are still built in Britain, but the companies are owned by the Japanese, Americans or Germans. Even Land Rover and Jaguar are now owned by India's Tata. So while Germany has Volkswagen, BMW and Mercedes; France has Peugeot, Renault and Citroen; and even Italy has Fiat, there is no volume carmaker left in Britain.

It wasn't always like this. In the 1950s, I used to collect Dinky and Corgi toy cars. I had Sunbeam Rapiers, Humber Snipes, Hillman Huskies, Austin Princesses, Standard Vanguard, Morris Oxfords, and Singer Gazelles, all British makes. I only had one foreign car, a Renault Dauphine. It looked strange, and it kept breaking down.

5. Chocolate

In the nineteenth century, an Englishman, John Cadbury, invented the emulsifying process needed to create solid bars of chocolate. But the Europeans took chocolate-making to a more sublime level, and what passes for 'chocolate' in England today is regarded with horror on the continent. Most European chocolate contains only cocoa and butter, but the British add other vegetable fats.

When Britain joined the EEC in 1973, a battle started over whether UK chocolate should be sold as 'chocolate substitute.' It took until 2000

for Brussels to rule that ‘chocolate’ could contain up to 5% vegetable fats. After that, the Italians distinguished their product from the English version by labeling it ‘pure chocolate.’⁵

6. Church of England

The whole of Western Europe started off Roman Catholic. After Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg, some northern parts of the continent embraced Protestantism, while most of the south remained Catholic.

Only in England did the Church *both* break from Rome *and* remain Catholic, and only in England did the king then make himself the head of it.⁶

7. City of London

New York and London are the undisputed world leaders in financial services. The City is headquarters to 500 banks and is a major global hub for insurance and currency trading. It accounts for about 10% of UK GDP and contributes £53 billion annually to UK government tax receipts. The surplus of almost £40 billion it makes on international transactions has been propping up Britain’s balance of payments for decades.⁷

France and Germany have long envied the City’s position, and now they are challenging it with proposals for a ‘Tobin tax,’ and a new rule that clearing houses transacting in euros must operate from inside the Eurozone. This puts the UK government between a rock and a hard place. It cannot agree to policies that will weaken the City, but it cannot risk leaving the City isolated outside a Eurozone wall either. There is no obvious solution to this conundrum.

8. Commonwealth

A legacy of the Empire, the Commonwealth has a population of 2.1 billion across 54 countries. Straddling rich and poor, Christian and Muslim, black and white, and all five continents, no other EU country can tap into such a rich global network. The Francophonie is much smaller and weaker, and Mozambique (a former Portuguese colony) and Rwanda (formerly French) both recently joined the Commonwealth.

Except it’s not really a ‘common-wealth’ any longer, for when Britain joined the EEC, it had to impose tariffs and quotas on Commonwealth goods. Forty years later, this doesn’t look like such a smart move. Britain is now hobbled to a sclerotic continent in decline, while its erstwhile free trade partners in southern Asia and around the Pacific Rim are thriving.

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9. Credit

The French and Germans blame the global financial crisis on spendthrift Anglo-Saxons, and they have a point.

Brits (like Americans and Australians) used to save, but then they went on a card-fuelled spending binge. The UK savings ratio (savings as a percentage of household income) in 2010 was just 5% (it was below 4% in the United States and below 3% in Australia). The average savings rate across the Eurozone is double that.⁸

Continental Europe has been more wary of credit. Germans tend not to see homeownership as a means of wealth accumulation and did not suffer the crippling housing bubble that busted Britain. Nor are they as enamoured of credit cards. British households have rattled up debts worth some 170% of their income. The Eurozone average is just over 100%.⁹

10. Cricket

The only Test-playing cricketing nation in Europe is England. Talk to a Frenchman about ‘Third Man’ and ‘googlies’ and he’ll think you’re describing an orgy.

11. Decimal points

The entire continent outside of Britain is under the misapprehension that decimal numbers are written with a comma rather than a full stop. Europeans also litter their alphabet with accents, cedillas, umlauts, tildes and other assorted squiggles and dots that you will never find on an English keyboard.

12. Defence

Britain and France each spends around 2.5% of GDP on their military. With the notable exception of Greece (which maintains high military spending as a result of continuing enmity with Turkey), no other country in Europe spends anything like this amount. Britain and France are also Europe's only two nuclear powers, and they both hold permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

Much of Europe's defence has long been paid for by the Americans, but European leaders are in denial about this. They hanker for a European defence force, free of American influence, but few are willing to pay for it.

The problem is not only financial. Europe today is essentially pacifist. It is doubtful whether the will is there to fight even a defensive war, and Bosnia showed there is neither the backbone nor the competence to commit ground troops effectively on foreign soil. Recently, after four of their soldiers were killed, the French announced they are withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan.

Britain, though, is happy working in tandem with the United States. Dean Acheson's 1962 jibe that Britain had lost an empire but isn't found a role wasn't true. Ever since World War II, Britain has been playing world Deputy Sheriff supporting the US Marshal. It's just that they're still waiting for the badge.

13. Driving on the left

It dates back to the days of jousting, when right-handed knights passed each other on the left with their lances in their right hands. Swordsmen, too, passed in the street on the left so they could draw their weapon if the need arose.

So why does the whole of Europe drive on the right? Because Napoleon was left-handed. He insisted his armies march on the right, and he imposed this rule on every territory he conquered.

14. Electric plugs

Britain uses three-pronged, square-pin plugs that allow each appliance to be earthed and fused independently. The rest of Europe uses two-pronged, round pin plugs. I can think of

no better symbol of the relationship between Britain and the rest of the continent than the UK/Europe plug adapter.

15. Electoral systems

Britain elects its Parliament by a first-past-the-post voting system. It exaggerates support for bigger parties and wipes out smaller ones, but it tends to produce governments with effective majorities (though not in 2010), and the public prefers it.

Every other country in Europe uses some form of 'proportional representation' or 'alternative vote' system, as does the EU Parliament. This is why Europe is governed by perpetual coalitions.

16. Formality

Every European language other than English distinguishes formal and informal modes of address. The choice between *tu* and *vous*, *Du* and *Sie*, demarcates close, personal relationships from more distant, less emotional ones.

English used to have a familiar second-person pronoun too ('thou'), but it disappeared more than 300 years ago, leaving it as the only European language without one. Linguists cannot agree why it disappeared, but early urbanisation and extensive geographical mobility may have had something to do with it. If you interact a lot with strangers, the familiar pronoun becomes redundant.

17. Housing

Homeownership rates in England (as in other Anglo countries) are high compared with much of continental Europe (69% in United Kingdom, France 54%, Germany 43%).¹⁰ Britain's cultural heritage of individualism has left its mark in everyone wanting a home of their own. There is an aversion to apartments (units) in Britain, although many council tenants have little choice but to live in one. European cosmopolitans love inner-city apartment living because, like Le Corbusier, they think of a home as a 'machine for living in.' Brits are more suburban. They think of a home more as a nest for decorating. Preferably with fake Tudor timbers and garden gnomes.

18. Identity cards

Of 27 EU countries, only Denmark, Norway, Ireland and Britain do not have national ID cards. The Blair government tried to introduce them in Britain, arguing that it would help stamp out social security fraud, but the Coalition government scrapped the idea. This has safeguarded the principle in English law that individuals have a right to walk the streets without having to prove their *bone fides* to anyone. In most of continental Europe, you only have rights like this if you can prove the state says you do.

19. Insurance

One of the key distinctions Michel Albert draws in his comparison of the 'two capitalisms' relates to the character of private insurance. On the continent, risks tend to be pooled so that everyone pays the same premium. In Britain and other Anglo countries, risks tend to be assessed on an individual basis so different people in different situations pay different premiums. Albert sees in this the difference between more cooperative and more individualistic cultures.

However, Britain is now being forced to adopt the continental model. The European Court ruled last year that it is illegal for insurance companies to offer lower premiums to women, even though they are statistically safer drivers than men. British women now face a big increase in their motor insurance. The ruling also makes it illegal to offer more generous annuities to men, even though they die younger, so women will now pay the same monthly premiums as men but will end up getting a lot more money back. Perhaps someone at the Hague has told God to equalise life expectancy rates.

20. Law

In the mid-twelfth century, Henry II imposed a unified (common) law throughout England by sending judges from London around the country to try cases. Their judgments, based on local tradition and custom, were then recorded centrally, and courts elsewhere were required to comply with them. Today, English courts are still required to follow precedent, and court decisions have the same force as statutes.

In the rest of Europe, the legacy of Roman laws and Napoleon's legal code provides the basis for a very different system of civil law. Laws derive more from central authority, case law plays a secondary role and courts generally have less discretion. All laws derive from the central authority, and the courts have little or no discretion in how to apply them. Cases are decided by magistrates who interrogate witnesses to try to reach the truth (the 'inquisitorial model'). In England, by contrast, there is a right to trial by jury, and defence and prosecution make their case before a neutral judge (the 'adversarial system').

21. Metric measurement

As any well-educated Englishman will tell you, the length of a cricket pitch is one chain, the penalty spot on a football field is 12 yards from the goal line, and horses measuring 16 hands run races over five furlongs.

On the other side of the channel, there are no miles, yards and inches, no pints and quarts, no pounds and ounces. Just metres, litres and grams. This is a profoundly unnatural system of measurement. A *foot* is what it says it is (well, not quite, but we'll let that pass), but what is a metre? The French invented it, and Napoleon exported it to the rest of Europe claiming it was 1/10,000,000th of the distance from the equator to the North Pole. But it isn't. Since 1983, the metre has had to be re-defined as the distance light travels in 1/299,792,458ths of a second. It would be much simpler to base things on the length of a man's foot.

In 1995, an EU Metrication Directive stopped Brits buying petrol in gallons and timber in inches. They may still order pints of beer at the pub, but if they drink shandies, the lemonade must be priced in millilitres. It is illegal to sell produce in pounds and ounces (street traders have been prosecuted for doing so), but distances continue to be measured in miles and gas consumption in therms. Yet again, Britain is stranded, half in, half out.

22. Monarchy

The United Kingdom is not the only monarchy in Europe. The Scandinavians have their kings

and queens, as do the Dutch, and the Spanish re-instated their royal family after Franco died. But monarchy is nowhere so resplendent as in Britain. Queen Elizabeth II would never be seen dead on a bicycle.

23. Names

It's a tricky business, naming newborn children. Luckily, many European countries, including France and Germany, produce a state-approved list of permitted forenames for newborn babies. Parents may not select a name not on the list. In Britain, parents often converge on a common pool of names (there were four Peters in my class when I was at school), but at least there is no law requiring them to do so.

One day, all Euro-babies will be given numbers rather than names. A bureaucrat will assist at the birth, stamping every new delivery with a computer barcode on the forehead.

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24. National Health Service

Founded in 1948, Brits believe the NHS is 'the envy of the world.' Strange, then, that nobody else has copied it.

The biggest employer in Europe, the NHS owns and runs hospitals and contracts GPs to deliver health care to people it deems are in need of it. Because these 'free' services generate infinite demand, supply is rationed by queuing. The NHS provides reasonable emergency treatment, but 'non-essential' treatment is lousy.

In most EU countries, health services are run privately. Governments require people to buy health insurance and help poorer people pay for it. The result is slightly more expensive, but much more effective, than the NHS because politicians and bureaucrats do not micromanage the system.

British politicians know the NHS needs fundamental reform, and the present government is making a half-hearted attempt at it. But the

NHS is a sacred totem in Britain. No matter how feeble and inadequate it becomes, voters do not trust politicians who meddle with it.

25. National service (conscription)

Several EU countries still have it (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Norway), although civilian service is usually offered as an alternative to service in the military. Many had it until recently, but scrapped it after the Cold War ended (Belgium 1994, Netherlands 1997, France and Spain 2001, Germany 2011). Once again, Britain stands out from this list, having abolished conscription back in 1960.

The argument for compulsory peacetime national service is that it inculcates in young people a strong sense of civic duty, self-discipline, and national belonging. This is an argument that tends to appeal to collectivists. The argument against is that the state has no business enslaving its young people. This is an argument that tends to appeal to libertarians. Traditionally, continental Europe has been on one side of this argument, Britain on the other.

26. Political parties

The rest of Europe has Christian Democrats, but Britain has Conservatives. The rest of Europe has Social Democrats, but Britain has the Labour Party. Britain *does* have Liberal Democrats. Needless to say, nobody else does.

27. Pubs and beer

There are bars on the continent, but there is nowhere the equivalent of the English pub. There is beer on the continent, too, much of it of excellent quality. But nowhere outside Britain will you find a non-carbonated pint of real ale served by hand pump at room temperature. Australians see this as an excellent reason for heading for Dover.

28. Special relationship

Europeans have never come to terms with having their historic civilisation saved in 1945 by a bunch of gum-chewing cowboys. They see Americans as uncultured, and they want a power bloc that can resist the tidal wave of baseball hats and diet Coke from across the Atlantic.

In Britain, it's different. Like a faithful Labrador, Britain thinks it has a 'special relationship' with America, although the Americans seem unaware of it. They left Britain in the lurch at Suez in 1956, and they withheld public support in the 1982 Falklands War. But when the United States needed bases from which to bomb Libya in 1986, Britain was the only country that offered them. And when George Bush ploughed into Iraq in 2002, Britain went in with him.

Brits share a common heritage, common values, and (almost) a common language with America. They have readily adopted each new American fad and innovation, from hula hoops and hypermarkets to psycho-analysis and crack-cocaine. The only bit of American culture that has never caught on in Britain is drive-in movies. You'd never see the big screen through the swish of the windscreen wipers.

29. Welfare state

The Danish sociologist, Gøsta Esping-Andersen, distinguishes three 'welfare regimes' in advanced countries: social-democratic, corporatist and liberal.¹¹ Scandinavia's generous benefits system exemplifies the first; Germany's social insurance model the second; and Britain, with its 'safety net' system, the third. Britain has a huge, budget-busting, bureaucratic, enterprise-sapping, producer-dominated welfare state that generates all sorts of perverse disincentives. But in most of continental Europe, things are even worse.

30. World War II

My father was an RAF pilot in World War II. In his hall hangs a framed picture of one of the planes he flew, together with his pilot's wings. Like others of his generation, he is proud of what Britain and its allies did during the war.

I used to have a German friend whose father fought for the *Wehrmacht* on the Eastern Front. When her father returned home, he never spoke of his experiences. Like most other Germans of his generation, he was ashamed of what he and his country had done.

Much of Europe is ashamed, which explains the intense desire to bury the past and re-make the continent. The French collaborated with the

Nazis; the Italians were allied with them; Dutch, Scandinavian, Baltic and Balkan volunteers fought in Hitler's armies; the Southern Irish and Spanish remained dishonourably neutral throughout. And hanging over the whole continent is the shame of those who turned a blind eye to the deportation of the Jews.

Every year, on 11 November, Britain honours its war dead and millions of people wear red poppies out of respect. My German friend could not understand this. 'Why can't you Brits just forget about the war?' she once asked me, in exasperation. In her incomprehension, we see the depth of the chasm that still separates Britain from those it is now happy to regard as its allies.

Endnotes

- 1 Although the Scottish National Party has won the right to hold a referendum on independence in 2014.
- 2 Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: State Formation, Cultural Revolution and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1985).
- 3 Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Blackwell, 1978).
- 4 Michel Albert shows in his book, *Capitalism Against Capitalism*, that Britain, like America and Australia, represents a more robust, buccaneering form of capitalism than the corporatist planning found in continental Europe. Michel Albert, *Capitalism Against Capitalism* (Wiley, 1993).
- 5 'There's no such thing as "pure chocolate," EU court rules,' *The Guardian* (25 November 2010).
- 6 Under the 1588 Act of Supremacy, the Church of England was established as both 'Catholic', emphasising its unbroken link to the early Apostolic church with its belief in the Trinity and the sacraments, and as 'Reformed,' underlining its links to elements of the European Protestant Reformation and its adoption of the Book of Common Prayer.
- 7 Duncan MacKenzie, *Economic Contribution of UK Financial Services 2010*, TheCityUK Research Centre (January 2011).
- 8 Global Finance Magazine, *Household Savings Rates*.
- 9 George O'Neill, 'Is the UK's household debt to income ratio the highest in the world?' *FullFact.org* (20 September 2011).
- 10 Nation Master, 'People Statistics: Home ownership (most recent) by country.'
- 11 Gøsta Esping-Amersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Polity Press, 1990).