EAST ASIAN OBSERVER

A Long Road to Brexit: How Britain came to leave the EU

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In a referendum held in 2016, Britain voted to leave the EU. Britain’s membership of the EU has been a difficult one. Unlike the other leading Member States of the EU, Britain did not seem to have a firm conviction that “ever-closer union” of the peoples of Europe is essential to the peace and liberty of Europe. In the wake of increased immigration and the recent refugee crisis, the British people chose to leave the EU in order to have their sovereignty and independence re-affirmed. It remains to be seen what will be the economic consequences of this largely political decision.

Keywords

1. The Beginning

On June 23, 2016, the UK held a referendum to determine whether to remain in or to leave the European Union (“EU”). A majority of 51.9 percent voted that the UK should leave the EU.¹ The government, currently under the leadership of Theresa May (Conservative), vows that it will take steps to leave the EU. The UK has been an ‘awkward’ member of the European Community and the European Union for over

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14330/jeail.2016.9.2.11
40 years. Britain’s decision to join the European Community was not easy in the first place.

Soon after the Second World War, France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands launched the European Coal and Steel Community (“ECSC”) in 1951. The UK declined the invitation to join. It was a time when the British positioned themselves at the centre of the Commonwealth countries including, among others, Canada, India, Australia and New Zealand. Continental Europe was viewed merely as a neighbour who had lately been in trouble and who often caused troubles for the British.2 The decision to decline the invitation to join the ECSC was taken when the British self-esteem was at its peak.3

Ten years later in 1961, however, the UK began applying for membership in the European Communities. The applications were rejected twice (in 1961 and 1967). It was not until 1973 that the UK was finally allowed to join the club under the leadership of Edward Heath (Conservative).4

When the six original Member States of the ECSC began the European Economic Community in 1957, the preamble of the Treaty of Rome set out that they were “determined to lay the foundations of an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe.” The preamble concludes with the founding members’ invitation, “calling upon the other peoples of Europe who share their ideal to join in their efforts” [Emphasis added] Britain sought membership of the EC and signed the Treaty of Rome, among others. But, with the hindsight, some might suspect that perhaps Britain did not truly “share their ideal” about the desirability of an “ever-closer union of the peoples of Europe.” In a speech in the House of Lords in 1971, Crowther Hunt, in support of the UK’s application to join the EC, said: “You do not haggle over the subscription when you are invited to climb into a lifeboat. You scramble aboard while there is still a seat for you.”5 It appears that the beginning of the UK’s membership of the European Community was driven not so much by an ideal of the ever-closer union of the peoples of Europe as by a sense of an urgent need to protect

2 Margaret Thatcher was to reiterate such a perception of Europe when she wrote, with the Second World War in mind, that: “Most of the problems the world has faced have come … from mainland Europe, and the solutions from outside it.” See M. THATCHER, STATECRAFT: STRATEGIES FOR A CHANGING WORLD 320 (2002).

3 Some authors suggest that the UK’s refusal “resulted at least partly from delusions of grandeur of a homogeneous political élite.” See W. KAISER, A book review of The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945 (written by N. J. CROWSON), 123:501 ENGLISH HIST. REV. 529 (2008).
