

Why should we care about the European Union?

Imagine a world without the European Union (EU). There would be no overpaid bureaucrats in the European Commission in Brussels issuing diktats on the likes of straight bananas and hours of work. There would be no more meddling in national politics. There would be no need to prioritise some policies over others in EU negotiations. There would be no need to be outvoted by other member states and having to accept policies you don't like. There would be no need to elect unknown representatives to a European Parliament. There would be no need to accept judgments by the European Court of Justice that overturn those made in national courts. This all seems rather nice and heavenly. An ideal world for Eurosceptics. But also imagine a world where some of the wealthiest countries fail to coordinate their views on key issues of the day, such as trade, security policy, terrorism, agriculture, and humanitarian aid, to name but a few. Imagine a world where the likes of China, Brazil, Russia, India, and the United States (US) set the agenda. Imagine a world where individual European countries are increasingly weak and powerless. Imagine a world where the divisions in Europe that produced two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century are still raging today. This does not seem so nice and heavenly. In fact, it is hard to think of a world without the EU.

From Beijing to Berlin and Lima to London, the policies and decisions that are taken by the EU are of relevance to governments, businesses and individuals. If you live in any of the 27 EU member states the reality is that approximately half of all the new laws that are implemented in your country with an economic focus will have originated from decisions taken by the EU. Non EU countries do not escape. Children's toy manufacturers in China have to adhere to strict EU controls on the materials used for production. Computer software

manufacturers in the United States of America (US) need to be aware of EU rules on fair competition.

Many people question why there is a need for such rules. Newspapers headlines often scream 'get us out of Europe'. But we have to remind ourselves that there are often very good reasons why such rules and policies do exist. As the EU is the world's greatest importer and exporter of goods, it is sensible for there to be common standards governing the quality of these goods. Otherwise producers inside and outside of the EU could be tempted to produce goods of a lower standard of quality and price. Rules are aimed at protecting consumers as well as attempting to ensure that producers face a level playing field. Sometimes the EU does not make the right decisions. EU policies can be too wide-sweeping in their remit, failing to fully take into consideration the views of all parties. Concerns about the impact of using chemicals in manufacturing industries can result in blanket bans that do not always take into account that the conditions and necessity of use might vary between industries.

At the heart of the EU there is a tension between its need to provide broad standards and the desire of individuals, organisations, companies and member states to seek variance from these standards. This often results in a considerable degree of friction between the local level of the member state and the broader EU level. Reports from the European Commission highlight variation in the implementation of EU policies. Some member states adopt new EU rules with a greater zest than others. Britain's lack of enthusiasm for many initiatives that deepen European integration belies the tendency for its officials and ministers to be extremely efficient in implementing these policies. Other countries can have a more high profile public commitment to European integration, but can drag their feet when it comes to implementation.

A FAVOURITE JOKE: HOW THE EU WORKS

Despite stories of daft European policies, there are relatively few jokes concerning the EU. An old and characteristic joke that is a favourite of mine goes as follows:

In Germany, they make the rules, in Britain, they obey the rules, in France, they bend the rules, in Spain, they break the rules and in Italy they have no rules at all.

This joke, which could be adapted to refer to other member states, points to the fact that member states are viewed in different ways. Thus, in a not so subtle way, the joke points to perceptions of national stereotypes, albeit ones which are not always true.

Whatever variances exist, it is evident that EU member states face common challenges, from fighting global terrorism to conducting trade negotiations with the likes of China and America. And the voice of each of the EU 27 member states is stronger and more influential at a global level when it is presented as an EU viewpoint rather than a national viewpoint.

The rub of this is that each member state has to compromise to achieve consensus at the European level. Member states have to relinquish a degree of their national sovereignty by being part of the EU. On joining they agree to decisions in certain policy areas being taken at a EU level rather than at a national level. A loss of national control is regularly criticised by those who oppose the EU. Eurosceptics argue that the EU interferes too much on the national way of life the member states. Many Eurosceptics even go as far as to make the case for withdrawal. On balance most commentators suggest that that for the 27 EU member states the benefits of membership outweigh any potential costs. But as with any organisation, there are aspects of the EU that require significant reform.

The financial crisis that has so severely affected the euro zone since 2008 has led many people to reappraise the extent to which EU membership and in particular the single currency is of benefit to their own nation. If we rewind to the launch of the euro as an electronic currency

on 1 January 1999 (it became legal tender on 1 January 2002), at that time it was evident that some EU member states considered that the euro offered a panacea for what had otherwise been volatile or weak national currencies. This was certainly the view taken by the likes of Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. But if we fast forward to 2011, it could be argued that rather than providing a beacon of stability, the euro has locked these countries into an economic policy that is not controlled at a national level.

This has placed the governments of these countries between the proverbial rock and a hard place. On the one hand they have hankered after a return to their pre-euro currency, giving them the ability to control economic policy at a national level, such as the setting of interest rates. On the other hand, they have recognised that any departure would be a formal sign of weakness that would in turn lead to greater instability at a national level as investors flee to safe havens in other countries. Governments in the likes of Athens and Dublin have been faced with a double-edged sword scenario. They seem unable to ditch the euro because the cost of breaking up would be enormous and yet staying in the euro means that they have to swallow significant doses of EU medicine to stabilise their economy. Therein lies the dilemma of membership of the euro-zone.

What would happen if a country decided to leave the EU? Technically, Greenland is the only country that has left the EU when it gained independence from Denmark in 1982. When this happened it was hardly earth-shattering news. Greenland was an overseas territory of Denmark and as such was not a member state. But it would be an altogether different matter if one of the 27 EU member states were to leave the EU. Back in 1975 the British Labour government led by Prime Minister Harold Wilson held a national referendum on Britain's being a member of what was then known as the European Community. This was a calculated move by Wilson, who wanted to silence divisions on Europe among his government as well as among the electorate. When the electorate spoke, 67% voted in favour of membership. But the issue

of Britain's membership was not resolved and to this day there continues to be a strong undercurrent of opposition to the EU.

It would be fanciful to think that the likes of Britain, France, Germany or any other EU member state would be able to act in a carefree manner if it left the EU. All of these countries would still be affected by EU policies and would have to trade with the remaining EU member states. But they would trade at a competitive disadvantage. Their goods and services would be subject to import taxes. Thus, while withdrawal might create a sense of greater national identity and lead to a view that sovereignty has been restored to the nation state, the reality is that withdrawal would mean that such countries would still be influenced and shaped by EU rules without actually being able to exert any influence on them.

SOVEREIGNTY

Barely a day passes without some discussion regarding sovereignty within the context of European integration. This especially applies to whether there has occurred a transfer of powers away from the member states to the EU institutions and as a result a reduction in the sovereignty of the member states. In the context of a nation state, sovereignty refers to the ability of the institutions of the state to take decisions and implement laws. Because EU institutions have the ability to take decisions that are binding on member states, it is evident that there has occurred a transfer of sovereignty away from the national level in those areas where the EU has responsibility. Within the context of European integration, the most common argument made by a Eurosceptic is that there has been a loss of national sovereignty. Although there is much truth in this view, it is nevertheless the case that member states joined the EU by voluntary means. They have also played a leading role in shaping the powers of the EU institutions and determining the policies that are to be dealt with at the EU level.

In evaluating the reason why 27 European governments have decided to give up whole chunks of their sovereignty to become EU member states, one of the most regularly cited points is that membership is equated with peace and security. This is a view that is rooted in the horrors of a Second World War, which claimed over 60 million lives, two-thirds of which were civilians. After the war countries such as France and Germany decided to work together to end the national conflicts that resulted in two world wars. 1945 is generally taken as a common starting point for examining European integration.

One of the most basic points is that the EU provides a mechanism to unite the peoples of Europe. Today it is just as common for British citizens to go on holiday to France and Spain as it is for them to spend time in their own country. People regularly commute for work-related meetings in other European countries. Many of the companies that people work for operate on a pan-European basis. University students are able to study in other European countries.

UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL INTEGRATION

At its most basic regional integration refers to the way in which societies have come together to deal with common issues, of which economic and social issues are often the most apparent. This in turn creates a climate of interdependence, with states often coming together to deal with common issues which can result in the formation of regional identities. The issues that are often dealt with at a regional level can vary tremendously, including a focus on trade, social and security concerns. The particular mix of the issues that are tackled at a regional level impact on the countries concerned in different ways. For example, cooperation on foreign and security policy results in governments having to establish common positions among themselves as well as to ensure that these positions are translated in an international setting. The most common aspect of regional integration relates to economic issues,

particularly the lowering and removal of customs duties between the member states so as to permit trade to move freely among the specific member states. A customs union additionally require the member states to adopt a common position (or what is often referred to as a common external tariff) in relation to trading with non-member states. What this means in practical terms is that whatever the form of regional integration chosen, the effects of the decisions that are taken will both have an internal impact on the member states of the particular organisation as well as an external impact on non-member states.

A core concern of regional integration is the way in which the decision to come together as a bloc has on the domestic policies of the member states concerned. In some cases regional integration results in the establishment of formal institutions with policy-making and legal responsibilities. This particularly applies in the case of the EU where the member states have taken a conscious decision to come together and give so-called supranational organisations responsibility for decisions and policies. As a result, the member states have given up an element of national sovereignty.

Surveying the EU: more than a love-hate relationship?

Despite initiatives that allow European citizens to work freely in other European countries, it is not entirely clear whether over half a century of European integration has actually brought about a common sense of identity and purpose among the citizens of Europe. It is particularly interesting to note the differences in attitudes among the European member states. On a regular basis a sample of citizens in all member states are asked a series of questions by Eurobarometer. This is the EU organisation charged with the task of conducting surveys on a wide variety of subjects relating to European integration. Based on a statistical sample of about 1,000 people in each country, one of the most basic questions that are asked is whether people consider EU membership to be a 'good thing'. The most recent results published by Eurobarometer in

August 2010 show that across all 27 EU member states 49% of the respondents considered membership to be a 'good thing'. This is a 4% reduction since the previous report in autumn 2009, and is close to the lowest levels that have been recorded over the previous decade. This is by no means a convincing figure. It also might lead people to think that the rest of the respondents thought EU membership is a 'bad thing'. This would be the wrong conclusion to make. In fact, only 18% of respondents regarded membership as a 'bad thing' in August 2010. This was a 3% increase on the previous year.

A likely conclusion that can be drawn from these statistics is that there is a trend towards a reduction in the support for EU membership and an increasing scepticism about the benefits of membership. There can be a number of reasons that influence these developments. This includes the way that EU membership is portrayed by the media and the extent to which national governments inform their electorate about the realities of EU membership. But before we condemn the EU for a lack of public support, we also need to be aware that more people tend to trust the EU than their own national government.

Such statistics often reflect deep-seated attitudes that are shaped by how a particular member state views the importance of its EU membership. For Britain, EU membership forms part of a broader network of external relationships that include the Commonwealth and relationships with other partners such as the US. Other countries rarely have such a wide range of priorities. Many people in Britain still refer to 'Europe' as another place even though they are an integral part of it. People go on holiday 'to Europe'.

This focus on national identity is not peculiar to Britain alone. All EU member states have strong national identities. This even applies to the most ardent supporters of European integration, such as France. But national identities have not been eroded by European integration through the creation of some form of 'identikit' Europe. Recent evidence suggests that national identity has increased. The end of the Cold War created many new states in

Europe. The former Yugoslavia fractured into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. In 1993 there took place the so-called Velvet Divorce, which saw the division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics. By 2010 Europe had twenty-one more sovereign states than it did in 1990.

Over there, not over here

Expansion of EU membership has raised significant questions about what we actually mean when we refer to 'Europe'. Since the first Eurovision song contest competition in 1956, some 50 countries have participated in this annual event. A cursory glance highlights that there are many participating countries that we do not necessarily perceive to be 'European'. This includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Israel, Moldova, Morocco, and Russia. EU membership is not based on which countries participate in the Eurovision song contest. As EU membership has grown from 6 to 27 countries, there is increasingly a lack of clarity as to where the boundaries of membership rest. The EU stretches from Cyprus in the South to Sweden in the North, and from Ireland in the West to Romania in the East. There are a number of candidate states that are negotiating membership, notably Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Turkey. Other potential applicants include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo and Iceland.

If all of these countries were to become members, the map of the EU would change dramatically. There does not exist some clear-cut geographical, economic or political set of criteria that note the boundaries of the EU. Each applicant has to pass a number of tests to enable them to become members. This includes their ability to implement EU laws, democratic structures of governance, and the strength of their economy. But there does not exist a policy which states that each member state has to have a certain economic wealth or that their political institutions have to be of an equal standing. This means that there are huge differences between

the member states. To tackle this situation a great deal of money has been spent by the EU supporting countries seeking membership as well as those who have become members. The idea behind such strategies has been to improve the standard of living in the poorer member states as part of a policy of harmonisation.

Somewhat inevitably there has been a great deal of debate about whether enlargement is a 'good thing'. This extends to the implications that an increased number of member states brings about for the influence and power of the institutions that govern the EU as well as their relationship with the member states. This has been referred to as the 'widening' versus 'deepening' debate. Put simply, this relates to whether more member states dilute the strength and influence of such bodies as the European Commission. This has tended to be the view taken by such countries as Britain who has favoured an EU that attaches emphasis to trade and open competition rather than an EU that establishes policies that invade too much into the life of domestic governments.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is a particularly good example of the practicalities of EU membership. In Britain, fishermen from the South West of England to the North East of Scotland are governed by EU regulations that tell them when, where and what they can fish for. But catching fish is not like harvesting crops. The basic method of the fishing industry is to trawl nets through the sea and wait to find out what appears. More often than not perfectly good fish are thrown to the deep as they are not part of a quota that has been set by Brussels-based officials. Such a crazy outcome has resulted in newspaper stories that stir opposition to the EU among the public. Yet without any regulations there would be nothing to protect fish stocks from relentless fishing that would irreparably damage fish stocks.

EUROMYTHS

Why do many people have a sceptical attitude towards the EU? One answer is the prevalence of euromyths. They range from the bizarre to the ridiculous. While some have tentative links to EU rules, many do not. A classic example is the story that emerged in the summer of 2006 that EU officials were requiring the spicy snack known as ‘Bombay Mix’ to be renamed because the Indian city of Bombay had changed its name to Mumbai. Despite the ridiculous nature of this story, it was nonetheless reported as a fact in Britain’s leading popular newspaper *The Sun* on 18 July 2006, with a banner headline of ‘EU to rename Bombay mix’. The origins of the plan had nothing to do with the EU and were instead attributable to a fictitious story put forward by a British regional news agency. The significance of all of this was that many people actually thought that the EU could be capable of such a policy. In other words, they had become accustomed to what they regarded as unnecessary EU bureaucracy.

The majority of euromyths tend to appear in the British press. Probably the most famous of them all was the ‘straight banana’ story that emerged in 1994. At first glance people might be forgiven for thinking that this story was in the same league as the Bombay Mix headline. Yet despite the bizarre nature of such a proposal, there was an element of truth to the story. European Commission Regulation (EC 2257/94) stipulated that bananas had to be ‘free from malformation or abnormal curvature’. This regulation lay in the desire to create common European rules for certain types of fruit and vegetables. In the case of bananas, this meant that Extra Class bananas had to have no defects, Class 1 bananas could have ‘slight defects of shape’, and that Class 2 bananas could have full ‘defects of shape’. You may wonder why there was a need to have such rules? The fruit and vegetable industry lobbied the European Commission so that EU rules could be established that would assist with pan-European trade. This was considered necessary. Otherwise there would be different standards across the EU, resulting in confusion for producers and consumers. Such practical economic arguments did

not stop the media having a field day with what was regarded as another daft policy from crazy EU bureaucrats.

In the 1980s the dominant Euromyth was the so-called 'Eurosausage'. The European Commission had created a plan to rename the British sausage as 'emulsified high-fat offal tube'. But while the story had its roots in European Commission proposals to provide clearer labelling on food products, the story first materialised in the BBC television comedy programme 'Yes Minister' where a government minister called Jim Hacker managed to stop the proposed name change for the British sausage. As time has passed, many people have forgotten that this was a fictitious story. Consequently the 'Eurosausage' is often cited as an example of unnecessary intervention from the EU. It is a myth that has become confused with reality.

Visions of Europe

To fully understand what the EU is all about we need to consider the factors that have influenced the outcomes that make the EU what it is today. If we take the example of the initial drive towards European integration in the post-1945 era, many people stress the influence of France and Germany. This focuses attention on individual countries, the role of government, and individuals that have been of particular importance. But we also need to consider the role of business groups, trade unions and political movements. Today, this list also includes what are commonly known as social movements. These are groups that reflect particular interests in society, such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth.

According to the latest evidence, the EU is now the world's largest donor of humanitarian aid. But what exactly does this mean? Is all aid administered by the European Commission? The answer here is that this refers to both the aid provided by the European Commission as well as the aid provided by member states on an individual basis. So in this

sense, the term 'EU' refers to the work of the individual governments and the work that the member states have agreed to be conducted at a collective European level. When we refer to the influence of the EU we are noting both the decisions taken by national governments working in tandem at a European level as well as those decisions in specific policy areas where the EU institutions have been given responsibility and power.

While a great deal of attention is attached to the fact that there has been a growth in the power and influence of policy dealt with at a European level by the EU institutions, we need to be aware of the fact that the EU budget is relatively small when compared to the combined national budgets of all member states. In 2011 it is actually only around 1.23% of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of all the member states of the EU. Staffing numbers are another area of comparison between the EU and the member states. An instructive example is that there are approximately 34,000 people employed by the European Commission. By contrast, Birmingham City Council, which is Britain's largest metropolitan City Council, employs approximately 50,000 people. The British National Health Service alone employs over one million people.

Any study of European integration needs to pay attention to a number of factors that range from national governments through to business movements and the EU institutions themselves. The decision to expand the number of policies that are dealt with at a European level has for the most part been the result of the pragmatic decisions of member states themselves. But we also need to be aware of the fact that it would be wrong to purely view the EU through a lens that emphasises the relationship between member state governments and the predominantly Brussels-based institutions. The relationship is far more complex. Emphasis needs to be given to the way that local and regional government engage in policy at a European level. Some academics consider the EU to be a bit like a tiered cake where the different layers reflect the distinct areas of activity. This is namely the European, national and local level. We

can conclude that the EU reflects a multi-level body where there are different centres of power.

Not all power rests in Brussels.

THE MULTI-LEVEL NATURE OF THE EU

