

Our European heritage

Many of us who voted for Brexit stressed that we wished to be friends with the continent, to trade with our neighbours using most favoured nation terms under the WTO, and to do many things with them by mutual agreement in sport, culture, defence, foreign affairs and the rest. What we voted to end was EU control over us, EU law making, a relationship driven by immutable Treaties and by a foreign court.

None of us doubt that our past has been very interwoven with our European neighbours, and none of us doubt our future will also contain many European engagements and links. What does annoy many Brexiteers is a false economic and historical narrative from Remain politicians that our links with Europe have always been positive and EU style laws and controls are essential for our peace, prosperity and freedom. Any normal reading of history will show how one sided that view is. Today the EU seeks to resolve tensions by legal argument, but not so long ago Europe fought over these matters.

The latest trade figures show that contrary to Remain forecasts our trade in goods and services combined has risen with the EU since we left. It has risen more with non EU, as it was doing in our later years as EU members. Non EU now accounts for 58% of our trade, though both EU and non EU are welcome.

The UK has a global destiny and has had a global role for several centuries. That came to me from my reading of much European and world history. That also taught me that too many times our intense involvement with the continental European countries forced us into wars that were often as damaging to them as well as to us. We got involved in the struggles for domination by the great continental powers, and were often helping smaller countries to resist them. I am going to write some pieces to explore more of this theme over the weeks ahead. Today let us start by remembering that the UK often suffered pre 1945 from invasion, from raids and occupations by European powers, from annexation of our lands and from systems of slavery and feudal exploitation that came from the continent.

The Roman invasion led to seizure of lands and wealth, to a slave based society with inferior jobs and opportunities for most of the British who were unable or unwilling to join the Roman governing elite. The Viking raiders plundered, burned, and assaulted in their many raids and wars. The Norman French comprehensively chronicled their robbery of the lands and wealth of the kingdom for their own settlers, and placed a feudal yoke upon many British inhabitants of these islands. The Spanish attempted conquest in 1588, the French tried under Napoleon and the Germans under Hitler amongst the more serious attempts at violent overthrow of our governments. Had any of those succeeded we would have lost our freedoms and right to self government.

The UK's involvement in European wars has been too frequent and damaging, leading to too much loss of life and diversion of effort from more productive peace time uses. Today it is welcome that the EU seeks to resolve the tensions between EU states by legal and political process. There are also

dangers from the rise of European nationalism that the EU itself will get into disputes with its neighbours. Currently the war in Ukraine reminds us how damaging European wars can be.

The UK should be careful not to seek to express strong views about how the continent is governed, and should be reluctant to be drawn into continental conflicts and arguments. The UK cannot and should not seek to impose a view about all the border disputes, religious struggles, policy rows and neighbourly disagreements that still beset the many nations that have land borders with each other on a continent packed with many states. They need to resolve those themselves through peaceful means .

The Germans who have a big influence on EU policy direction used to argue with me to relent my opposition to the UK joining the Euro. They used to think the clincher argument was that the UK would have no influence over it if we were not in it. They refused to grasp I had no more wish for a say in the future of the Euro than in the yen or the rupee. The UK should take a global view based on a good mixture of our national interest and the best way forward for freedom, democracy and free enterprise worldwide.