

CONTRIBUTOR TITLE



LUANA MELLO is a graduating third-year political science major concentrating in global politics and minoring in sociology. At Cal Poly, Luana is involved in the Model United Nations program, and has traveled to both San Francisco and Brazil with the team, and is a part of the campus chapter of California Women's List. After she graduates, Luana plans to go to law school with one day becoming an international lawyer for the UN.

THE ROAD TO BREXIT

Luana Mello

The United Kingdom's affiliation with the European Union has never been classified as a strong relationship due its history of tense relations. Many factors contribute to this distinct membership, including the U.K.'s isolated geographical location, its tight-knit alliance with the United States, and its inability to give up power. Throughout its forty years of membership, the U.K. has made sure to keep a divide between itself and the EU, particularly in relation to social and political policy. The U.K.'s resistance to fully immersing itself into the EU has made Brexit inevitable, ultimately freezing all attempts to further integrate the Union.

The United Kingdom's rocky welcome into the European Union - what was then known as the European Economic Community (EEC) - began shaping their unique relationship with the EU. In 1961 and 1967, former French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed both of the U.K.'s attempts to join the EEC. De Gaulle feared that the U.K.'s alliance with the United States would be carried over into its membership, serving to protect American interests over European interests. Additionally, there was concern over the U.K.'s skepticism of European integration, as it was never as eager as France or Germany to relinquish their sovereignty. Britain has always advocated for an intergovernmental Europe rather

than full integration, while retaining a strong sense of nationalism. However, the United Kingdom's entry into the EEC in 1973 was not a measure towards political integration, but rather an economic decision.¹ With its own economy struggling to recover from World War II, the U.K. was aware of the monetary successes in the EEC and sought to join this mutually beneficial relationship.²

In 1975, the United Kingdom held a referendum that confirmed that the country was going to uphold its membership with over 67 percent of votes in favor of the European Community (EC).³ Although Home Secretary Roy Jenkins believed that this referendum committed Britain "to playing an active, constructive and enthusiastic role" in the EC, this "enthusiastic role" did not last as long as expected.⁴ Historically, the U.K. has not been afraid to challenge its contentious position in the EC. For example, in 1984 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher threatened to withhold Britain's payments to the EC until they received a large rebate.⁵ The rebate was meant to offset the difference in agricultural subsidies Britain received, which was much less than other countries. Ultimately, Britain received the rebate and won the argument.

After discussion over the rebate, the belief that the U.K. was not benefitting as much as other countries in the European Community was spreading throughout British media, increasing Euroscepticism.⁶ This further clarified the fiscal intentions of the United Kingdom joining the European Community, rather than the political intentions. Additionally, Thatcher's "The Bruges Speech" in September 1988 made it very clear that Britain was still extremely skeptical of the intentions and purpose of the European Community. Thatcher stated that, "the Community is not an end in itself" and should not be concerned with

1 Naura Campos and Fabrizio Coricelli, "Why did Britain join the EU: A new insight from economic history," *VOX Policy Portal*, February 3, 2015, <http://voxeu.org/article/britain-s-eu-membership-new-insight-economic-history>.

2 Sam Wilson, "Britain and the EU: A long and rocky relationship," *BBC News*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/U.K.-politics-26515129>.

3 James Walsh, "Britain's 1975 Europe referendum: what was it like last time?" *The Guardian*, February 20 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/feb/25/britains-1975-europe-referendum-what-was-it-like-last-time>.

4 Alice Foster, "Why we voted for Brexit in 2016 but voted to STAY in 1975: How Britain changed its mind." *Sunday Express*, September 27 2016, <http://www.express.co.U.K./news/politics/715002/Brexit-why-vote-leave-EU-2016-stay-Europe-1975-what-changed-immigration-economy-Britain>.

5 Stephen George, "Great Britain and the European Community," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 531, 1994, pp. 44–55.

6 *Ibid.*

“endless regulation” towards “some abstract intellectual concept.”⁷ Instead, she argued that the EC should continue focusing on protecting the prosperity and security of its members.⁸

Despite Thatcher’s warnings, her successor, Prime Minister John Major, signed the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which formally established the European Union and “involved huge transfers of power” to the Union, creating its current three pillars system.⁹ Although ratifying the Maastricht Treaty was a great step towards integrating Britain and the EU, it did not mean that the country was ready to surrender its sovereignty. Shortly after signing the treaty, a major economic setback known as Black Wednesday further differentiated the U.K. from other EU members. On Wednesday, September 16th, 1992, the British pound sterling was placed under great strain and ultimately failed in keeping the pound within the limit established by the EU’s Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). As a result, Britain had to withdraw from the ERM which has been seen as “one of the lowest points in Britain’s relationship with Europe” and a day of utter humiliation.^{10 11} Black Wednesday demonstrated a severe loss for the U.K., which heightened the tension between the U.K. and the EU.

After signing the Maastricht Treaty and suffering through Black Wednesday, former Prime Minister Major made sure that the country received special exemptions for a variety of economic, social, and political clauses. Throughout its membership, Britain has used opt-outs that have ultimately kept the country at a safe distance from the EU. In 1985, the U.K. opted out of the Schengen Agreement, which removed internal border controls, and instead kept their border controls along with Ireland.¹² The United Kingdom has also exempted itself from the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, with the option to join at their own discretion.¹³ Perhaps the most significant opt-out that distances the U.K. from other EU members is its immunity from the Economic and

7 Margaret Thatcher. “The Bruges Speech.” Speech to the College of Europe, Bruges Belfrey, Bruges. September 20, 1988.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Op. Cit.*, fn. 2

10 *Ibid.*

11 Philip Johnston, “Black Wednesday: The day that Britain went over the edge,” *The Telegraph*, September 10, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/currency/9533474/Black-Wednesday-The-day-that-Britain-went-over-the-edge.html>.

12 “Schengen (Agreement and Convention).” *EUROPA*, http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen_en.

13 “Opting out.” *EUROPA*, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/opting_out.html.

Monetary Union (EMU). With this exclusion, the U.K. refused to introduce the euro as its national currency, despite nineteen other members doing so.¹⁴ The United Kingdom kept its pound sterling and moved itself even further from integration of the European Union.

Regardless of the tense relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union following the U.K.'s entry in the community, some leaders pushed for the idea of European integration despite national resistance. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the European Parliament in 2005 was far more supportive than Thatcher's Bruges speech, where he advocated for Britain to have a stronger role in shaping and leading Europe instead of looking for more ways to opt out. Blair spoke of the positive values that the EU holds of solidarity between people and nations and stated it was an important factor in growing globalization.¹⁵ In addition to Blair, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was also a strong advocate for the United Kingdom's involvement with the EU and applauded its achievements.¹⁶

However, shortly after these limited steps forward, the euro crisis affected millions of people throughout Europe and led British skepticism to grow in popularity. Instead of working with the Union to solve the economic crisis, Prime Minister David Cameron vetoed an EU-wide treaty that attempted to mitigate the economic emergency. Cameron's veto was seen as a huge move in support of Euroscepticism.¹⁷ Additionally, the refugee crisis, which resulted in millions of people entering the United Kingdom, caused further resentment towards the EU. Soon after, the Brexit referendum was offered and adopted in 2016, damaging Britain's relationship with the EU more than ever before.¹⁸

Despite international shock after the Brexit referendum passed, when examining the history of the U.K. and the EU, it comes at much less of a surprise. Britain has a long history as an extremely powerful imperialist nation, and giving up its power to the European Union was not an easy task. According to a study conducted by Britain's largest independent social research agency,

14 "United Kingdom: EMU opt-out clause." *EUROPA*, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TEXT/?uri=URISERV%3A125060>.

15 "Prime ministers' speeches on Europe." *BBC News*. January 17, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/U.K.-politics-21030153>.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Robert Peston, "David Cameron blocks EU-wide deal to tackle euro crisis," *BBC News*, December 9, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/U.K.-16104275>.

18 *Op. Cit.*, fn. 2

NatCen, over 12,000 U.K. citizens were asked the following question: “What was the most important reason for you voting to leave the EU?” An alarming 49 percent of the respondents believed that “decisions about the U.K. should be taken in the U.K.” as their most important issue, followed by immigration control at 33 percent.¹⁹ The U.K.’s relationship with the EU reflects longstanding social and cultural beliefs of British nationalism. British citizens have made it clear that their countries’ decisions should be made at home, with no interference from a supranational union. Furthermore, in keeping its close relations with the United States, Britain is aware of its role as a powerful nation and is confident it does not need to be part of the EU to maintain that position. As a founder of the United Nations and permanent Security Council member, and an active member of NATO, the United Kingdom will continue to hold strong ties in global affairs.

The European Union, on the other hand, has already begun to adapt to the implications of Brexit. In July 2016, the Council of the European Union established a revised order of which member states will hold presidency in the upcoming years.²⁰ After the U.K.’s decision to give up its Council presidency in 2017, the revision included the EU’s newest member, Croatia, in the list and removed the U.K. entirely. This new order will remain until 2030, leaving the U.K. with no chance for presidency if Brexit were for some reason repealed.²¹ This reveals that the Council is ready to confront Brexit, and other institutions will follow with similar actions.

There have been many news reports, predictions, and concerns regarding what precedent Brexit will have over other EU members. “Who will leave the EU next?” is a common headline spread across news organizations. Some Eurosceptics even see Brexit as the first step in the “dismantling of the EU.”²² The rise of populist movements and support of far-right politicians, like France’s leader of the National Front Marine Le Pen, have also stirred the media following

19 “What was the most important reason for you voting to leave the EU?” *The Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC)*. June 2016.

20 “Council rotating presidencies: decision on revised order.” *The European Council and Council of the European Union*. July 26, 2016. Press Release, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/26-council-rotating-presidencies-revised-order/>

21 *Ibid.*

22 Rebecca Flood, “Which countries could be next to leave the EU?” *Express*, October 2, 2016, <http://www.express.co.U.K./news/world/716421/EU-referendum-Brexit-leave-vote-country-Merkel-superstate-Italy>.

Brexit. Although there have been threats of France exiting the EU, otherwise known as “Frexit,” or the Netherlands exiting, known as “Nexit,” no further legitimate step has been taken by any nation to follow Britain in leaving the EU. In fact, the opposite has occurred in Scotland, where 62 percent of constituents voted to remain in the EU.²³ Since Brexit, there has been much speculation over whether, and how, Scotland will join the European Union independently from the United Kingdom. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has announced a two-year plan for an independence referendum from Britain, and seeks to apply for EU membership once it passes.²⁴ Furthermore, the six Founding Members of the EU, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, released a statement after Brexit, reaffirming their beliefs and commitment to the EU.²⁵ The Founders were quick to outline the future of the union, stating that they are “ready to work with the [EU] institutions” in order to create “a stronger and more cohesive European Union of 27 based on common values and the rule of law.”²⁶ The Founding Members assert that the EU will improve its relations to all member states from “different levels of ambition” for European integration, and are confident that the European future will be successful.²⁷

Despite a history of constant power struggles and severe domestic skepticism of the EU, British citizens did not expect the Brexit referendum to pass. With only five hours left until the elections results were revealed, 88 percent of British betting markets still believed that the U.K. would remain in the EU.²⁸ However, state sovereignty and nationalism continue to be important values of the U.K., and Brexit is one of the greatest markers of these efforts. Among other factors, Brexit was an attempt to control and halt immigration, showing that

23 “U.K. Votes to leave the EU.” *BBC News*. 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results.

24 Severin Carrell, “Scottish independence: Nicola Sturgeon fires starting gun on referendum,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/mar/13/nicola-sturgeon-fires-starting-gun-on-second-scottish-independence-referendum>.

25 “Common Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, 25/06/2016.” *Federal Foreign Office*. June 25, 2016. Press Release, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2016/160625_Gemeinsam_Erklaerung_Gruenderstaatentreffen_ENG_VERSION.html.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 Nate Cohn, “Why the Surprise Over ‘Brexit’? Don’t Blame the Polls,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/25/upshot/why-the-surprise-over-brexit-dont-blame-the-polls.html?_r=0.

the country seeks to move away from integration and retain its autonomy. It is possible, nonetheless, that the U.K.'s departure may take some Euroscepticism away from the Union, since some of the strongest skeptics came from Britain. The U.K.'s influence over the EU is not as dominating as many may expect, which is one of the many reasons for Brexit in the first place. Although it will require extensive negotiating and planning, the EU and its many institutions have already and will continue to recover and move forward. The events leading to Brexit demonstrate a clash between two powerful entities, where one side was never fully willing to cooperate with the other, and shows just how extreme of an outcome this power struggle creates.