

Brexit and British exceptionalism: the impossible challenge for Remainers



Since 2016, a number of high profile [‘Revocateurs’](#), among them Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell and Andrew Adonis, have appealed for a [fresh referendum](#) on the EU in Britain. Leaving aside the complex practicalities and politics of the [‘neverendum’](#) idea, **Oliver Daddow (University of Nottingham)** argues there is no evidence either that Revocateurs were the victims in Act One of the ‘Britain and Europe’ story, or that they possess the credibility to play the heroes of Act Two. Revocateurs need to have more regard for history as it happened, not as they choose to rewrite it now.

Narratives of British exceptionalism were not the sole preserve of the Leave campaign. They had been the stock-in-trade of pro-EU British politicians for decades. There was no compelling pro-European message in 2016 because supposed pro-Europeans had for decades been content to communicate [mixed messages](#) on a low-salience issue. The referendum, however, exercised the British public and smoked out the weakness of this approach. Asking the people to [accept the logic of Eurosceptic discourse](#) but vote to Remain was a strange contract: some might say counter-intuitive bordering on the illogical. The [Leave side’s](#) anti-establishment, anti-elite messages targeting the ‘ordinary voter’ with messages around sovereignty, [immigration](#) and ‘control’ cut [through much better](#) with voters.

The tradition of British exceptionalism is centuries old and has [adapted seamlessly](#) to changing policy contexts and challenges. Succinctly, it originated in the idea that Britain required a free hand in Europe to pursue liberal free trade practices, in the 19th and early 20th century through [imperial expansion](#). This meant imprinting on British foreign policy a ‘limited liability’ approach towards Europe, as opposed to a wholehearted [‘continental commitment’](#). The supposed uniqueness of Britain’s past, present and future destiny ran through a panoply of British [identity constructions setting it apart](#) from Europe: all were rooted in the spatial geopolitics of its [‘island story’](#). ‘Europe’ in this tradition is a choice for Britain, not a necessity.



Churchill in 1943. Picture: [Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0 licence](#)

The most complete iteration of British exceptionalism was articulated after the second world war by [Winston Churchill](#), who in 1948, saw Britain operating at the centre of [three circles](#) of power and influence: Empire, the ‘English-speaking peoples’ ([Anglosphere](#)) and, very much last, Europe. Clement Attlee, then Labour’s post-war prime minister, did not take much convincing. His post-war government and Churchill’s 1951-55 administration met Europe’s integrative ventures very frostily, harnessing a defence of British sovereignty to the idea that the schemes would not work, especially not without Britain’s involvement. By the time Britain had reluctantly decided to throw in its lot with Europe in the 1960s, [Charles de Gaulle](#) twice vetoed Britain’s (England’s as he called it) membership of the original European Community (EC), because: ‘She has in all her doings very marked and very original habits and traditions’.

De Gaulle’s indictment in 1963 indicates that British exceptionalism was not just an ascribed identity, but one achieved through instinctive foreign policy practices after 1945. It might have been supposed that Britain’s accession to the EC would have created a ‘turning point’ or opportunity space in which a more comfortably ‘European’ identity would be devised and sold to the public. However, membership proved to be a temporary exception to the limited liability rule, during which the European element of Britishness was never truly embraced. Furthermore, even some of the most vaunted pro-Europeans from the time, including [Edward Heath](#), treated membership as a tactical shift in Britain’s global strategy, as much as a chance to create a fully Europeanised identity.

Britain’s membership years from 1973 thus saw the historical ‘outsider’ try but fail to become less ‘awkward’ in the conduct of its European policy, but without anything in the way of a sustained public campaign to educate or inform the public of the role the EC/EU played in British national life. Space precludes [comprehensive coverage](#) of how Britain secured its ‘[privileged terms of membership inside the EU](#)’, but the steps included Margaret Thatcher’s budget rebate, Major’s Maastricht opt-outs, Blair’s bashing of the European ‘superstate’, and David Cameron’s self-styled ‘veto’ of the 2011 Fiscal Compact Treaty.

Ivan Rogers, Cameron’s EU ambassador, has remarked that in 2016, with Britain ‘[in the EU but outside the Eurozone](#)’, it had achieved an uneasy yet ‘special’ status – one rooted in the exceptionalist ideal and expressed discursively by political ‘double-speak’ on Europe. Some of the most progressive British governments, in which many of today’s Revocateurs cut their teeth, could occupy pro-European or Eurosceptic subject positions depending on [which speech, or which bit of a single speech](#), one quoted. Take these words from [Gordon Brown](#), from a 1997 address on the ‘British Genius’: ‘I believe that we should have the confidence to engage with Europe and make it better and – dare I say it – more British’. By 2016, the British people, not to mention Britain’s EU partners, were entitled to ask: is this the best pro-Europeans can do?

In sum, it is something of a leap of faith to imagine that today’s Remainers – yesterday’s Eurosceptic pro-Europeans (an intentional label) – have the public trust, credibility or indeed the capacity to construct a compelling narrative that would swing a public vote *against* Brexit, whether the plebiscite took place on the government’s final negotiated deal or membership per se. In many significant ways, the Revocateurs were the architects of their own downfall. The referendum ship therefore sailed long ago, however much Revocateurs might wish to retell the history in their favour.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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