

## Good value for less than the cost of a pint; some reflections on 47 years of EU membership.

30<sup>th</sup> January 2020 | Matthew Mimms

*"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."*

John Donne – English Writer and Poet (1572 - 1631)

The UK will start the process of leaving the European Union on 31 January 2020. After three and a half years of arguments, intrigue, countless parliamentary votes and 2 general elections, Prime Minister Johnson finally secured a parliamentary mandate in the recent general election that allows him and his government to “get Brexit done” and bring the UK’s formal membership of the EU to an end.

The UK joined the then European Community on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1973. Ted Heath was Prime Minister, Richard Nixon was in the White House, “Long Haired Lover from Liverpool” by Little Jimmy Osmond was number 1 in the charts and a pint of beer cost 14 pence.

In that time, the EU has brought us butter mountains and wine lakes, the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, EU Presidents from Roy Jenkins to Jacques Delors and Jean Claude Juncker. It’s led to the downfall of several UK Conservative PM’s including David Cameron, Theresa May and arguably Margaret Thatcher, and it’s banned straight bananas (well actually, that’s a Euromyth, a proposal banning straight bananas and other misshapen fruits was brought before the European Parliament in 2008 and defeated).

And a lot more. It’s provided access to the world’s largest trading bloc (500 million consumers, over 20% of global GDP); the Single Market and the Customs Union provide for paperless and hassle-free trade. It provides for a significant part of the UK’s trade; in 2018 the EU accounted for 45% of UK exports and 53% imports (all at the UK’s doorstep, not 1000s of miles away). It provides for almost half of all of the UK’s inward foreign direct investment. It has provided access to 40 free trade deals with 70 countries including the likes of Canada and Japan. It has meant that UK citizens are EU citizens and can live and work anywhere in 28 countries. It has provided a home for 1.2 million Brits (including my father) and for the UK, it provides a home for 3 million EU citizens, many of whom have helped plug the UK skills gaps as doctors, builders and in hospitality and added to the richness and diversity of the UK’s culture. It has helped fund British film, theatre and sport. Cities such as Glasgow and Liverpool have benefitted from being European capitals of culture. It has helped improve air quality, sewage emissions, the quality of beaches and bathing water. It has helped improve worker’s rights including health and safety, overtime pay, parental leave, equal pay. It has helped improve food standards and food labelling. It has invested heavily in areas hit by industrial decline and help fund a raft of infrastructure projects. It has contributed investment in countless regional initiatives, from Cornwall’s Eden Project to youth employment initiatives in Scotland, from Birmingham’s NEC to Liverpool’s John Lennon Airport, from the ‘Angel of North’ to creating jobs, boosting innovation and supporting businesses in London. It’s helped bring prosperity and democracy to Eastern and Central Europe. The EU is a guarantor of the Irish Good Friday Agreement. It has allowed the UK to arguably punch above its’ weight’, and to influence the politics and policies of the largest and arguably most successful trading bloc in history. And perhaps most important of all, it has helped maintain the peace in Europe for the last 70 years. EU membership has given the UK peace, prosperity, influence and supported the Union.

And all this for a net contribution in 2018 of £8.9 billion (that’s £171 million per week, not £350 million I might add, or put another way, about £2.50 per person per week which is incidentally less than the average pint of beer today).

But on 31<sup>st</sup> January at 11pm GMT, the UK will officially leave the EU, because the UK voted for it (which is of course a very good reason). Our exit from Europe will no doubt be greeted with joy and happiness by some (though no Big Ben bong), with ambivalence, and with sadness and anger by others. As the Union Jack is lowered in Brussels, the mantle of responsibility falls on the current Conservative Government lead by Brexiteer-in-Chief, Boris Johnson to carve out a new path and place in the world for the UK. They've a lot to live up to. Let's hope they succeed.

*"I am also sure that, one day or another, there will be a young man or woman who will try again, who will lead Britain into the European family once again...a young generation that will see Brexit for what it really is – a catfight in the Conservative party that got out of hand, a loss of time, a waste of energy, stupidity."*

Guy Verhofstadt, Belgian MEP and former Prime Minister (April 2017)

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