



Wilfried
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for European Studies

Reconnecting the British to Europe:

Strategic Imperatives
and Inconvenient Truths

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Summary

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The goals of overcoming Putin, staunching populism and reinforcing Europe's relevance for successor generations demand Europe's most innovative and strategic statecraft since the late 1940s. This should include inviting the British people into plans for Europe's future: with war in Europe having been inflicted by Putin, this is not transactional cherry-picking, but must instead be seen by Europe's political leadership as a strategic imperative. The recent bilateral concord between France and the UK is a positive precedent.

This paper illustrates three priority areas where greater UK–EU cooperation could take place: in environmental policy, in forming a European capital market and in defence. In addition, four further elements of civil society are viewed as being essential to tangibly reconnect the British with the heart of Europe on a practical level. These are reciprocal youth mobility (including British membership of Erasmus+), the re-engagement of civic interest groups, the UK rejoining Creative Europe, and the reinvigoration of town and city twinning initiatives.

In the aftermath of the recent elections, a unique opportunity now exists for the UK and the EU to work together for their common benefit. Strengthening the European identity through public policies will empower more of Europe's citizens to share more of life's experiences, grounded in a mutual commitment to democracy and the rule of law.

Keywords Brexit – TCA – Defence – Citizens' Europe – Europeans' Europe – Constitutional reform – Federalism – Defence – ECHR



Introduction

So far, this century has seen autocracies advancing and democracies falling back. The US, underwriter for Europe's peace since 1945, is increasingly dealing with non-European priorities. The shifting geopolitical tectonic plates have made securing the best future for Europe's successor generations—some of whom, particularly outside the UK, are being tempted by the siren call of populists—an urgent strategic priority. Including the British people in addressing this priority makes sustainable success more likely.

As in the decade after 1945, our times require strategic foresight as bold, clear and generous as that of Europe's founding fathers.¹ Europe also needs a strategic political shift to reinforce the perceived relevance of the European project for Europe's successor generations, including those in the UK. Strengthening European identity through public policies will empower more of Europe's citizens to share more of life's experiences, grounded in their mutual commitment to democracy and the rule of law.

This paper is structured as follows. Part one sets out the 10 strategic imperatives of the British polity. Part two deals with the inconvenient truths surrounding the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). Part three offers three illustrative areas of potential closer cooperation. Part four sets out specific measures to creating a Europeans' Europe.

The 10 strategic imperatives of the British polity

The decision to leave the EU was the outcome of a governing party allied with Europe's populist, pro-Putin hard right and a national constitution that constrains accountability, citizens' rights, engagement, localism and political competition. Regardless of how or whether the UK rejoins Europe's journey, the country

¹ Including Winston Churchill: 'If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance there would be no limit to the happiness, prosperity and glory which its 300 million or 400 million people would enjoy . . . We must build a kind of United States of Europe . . . Let Europe Arise!' (W. Churchill, speech delivered at the University of Zurich, Zurich, 19 September 1946); 'a United Europe, whose moral conceptions will win the respect and gratitude of mankind and whose physical strength will be such that none will dare molest her tranquil sway' (W. Churchill, address given at the European rally, Amsterdam, 9 May 1948).



requires a more conventionally democratic polity. This should include, but not be limited to, the following elements:

1. *Any British political party aspiring to government must support the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).* With ongoing challenges to Europeans' human rights, populist dissembling to discredit the ECHR is political delinquency that pointlessly unsettles the UK's European partners.
2. *The UK needs a secure division of constitutional responsibilities.* Boris Johnson's premiership proved that the classic separation of powers underpinning Western democracies is unsafe in the UK.² While debate over dividing lines can be healthy, democracies should accept broadly stable boundaries between the executive, legislature and judiciary, and between the various levels of government. Johnson's premiership instead assaulted the monarchy, judiciary and media. It also massively shifted power from Parliament to the national executive and undermined devolution. The polity's main redeeming feature was the judiciary's courage in resisting unacceptable pressure, notably in the Miller cases.³
3. *The UK should reinvigorate the institutions resulting from the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which helped end decades of violence in Northern Ireland.* While Scotland is confronted with an unenviable choice between the British and the European unions, the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the British–Irish Council should be enhanced, alongside a functional Northern Ireland executive. The Conference could for example consider the security of the wider British Isles and energy interconnections between Ireland, Britain and continental Europe. The Council should bring together far more citizens across the British Isles to better demonstrate the benefits of the Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK, and to promote mutual empathy.
4. Citizens should be empowered by the substantial and democratically accountable devolution of power from Whitehall across the whole of the UK. Johnson's premiership demonstrated that even devolved constitutional

² As is well documented, for example, by The Constitution Society: UK Constitution Monitoring Group, *Constitutional Performance: An End of Parliament Review*, The Constitution Society (London, 2024).

³ For instance, in the case of Prime Minister Theresa May's attempt to unlawfully activate Article 50 without an Act of Parliament. See UK, Supreme Court, *Judgement R (on the application of Miller and another) (Respondents) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Appellant)* (24 January 2017). See also the case of Prime Minister Boris Johnson unlawfully advising Her Majesty the Queen that he had prorogued Parliament: UK, Supreme Court, *Judgment R (on the application of Miller) (Appellant) v The Prime Minister (Respondent), Cherry and others (Respondents) v Advocate General for Scotland (Appellant) (Scotland)* (24 September 2019).



powers could, in breach of the Sewel Convention, be recaptured by the British executive.⁴ In democracies, local decisions should instead be local and open, as reflected in Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union.

5. *Fairer votes should restore the de facto dominance of Parliament over the largest political party and strengthen legitimate political competition.* Particularly in such a centralised state, a mostly unelected national Parliament with a defective electoral method—which in 2019 also failed to act as a centripetal stabilising force—is inadequate as a democratic foundation.
6. *The UK should maximise its diplomatic presence across Europe and its use of Article 713 of the TCA, while the EU could usefully strengthen representations across the UK.* Article 713 grants the UK observer status in committees and expert groups supporting the European Commission. The UK should significantly enhance its policy staff at the UK Mission to the EU and its embassies across free Europe, and also increase the numbers of its military staff focused on defence and security policy. The devolved administrations and English regions should be resourced both to support the UK Mission in Brussels, with a particular focus on the European Committee of the Regions, and to develop dialogue with equivalent bodies in member states.
7. *Within organisations such as the OECD, the G7 and the European Political Community, the British should offer to provide staff (in the latter the British government could offer to support France with a secretariat).* Such offers could encourage allies to see the UK as engaged, helpful and relevant once again.
8. *The UK's efficient and transparent tracking of and, normally, coordination with emerging EU law should improve confidence.* The civil service having increased in size by 100,000 since 2014 to about 500,000, both the UK in a Changing Europe and the Institute for Government have proposed sensible administrative reform.⁵

⁴ The Sewel Convention states that the UK Parliament should not normally legislate on matters within the devolved competence of the Scottish or Welsh Parliaments or the Northern Ireland Assembly without the relevant devolved institution having passed a legislative consent motion. See P. Bowers, *The Sewel Convention*, House of Commons Library (25 November 2005).

⁵ UK in a Changing Europe, *Brexit and the State* (London, 2024); T. Durrant, *Rebuilding Trust in Public Life*, Institute for Government (February 2024).



9. *The UK should encourage secondments between the UK's civil service and member states' civil services (already envisaged between the UK and France)⁶ and the EU institutions.* This would be a win–win investment, enabling the improvement of personal networks and the sharing of mutual know-how between future generations of public officials, both in the UK and in the EU. It would also complement the recommendations set out below for civil society.
10. *Future leaders of public services should receive enhanced training through the establishment of a new Civil Service Training College.* This institute should provide teaching of the highest standard for national, diplomatic and regional officials, and could perhaps be a world-leading joint venture with France's new Institut national du service public. The populist government of Boris Johnson damaged the civil service but the spirit of Northcote–Trevelyan endures: Michel Barnier noted that, in clear contrast to their political masters, he met with some excellent British civil servants.

Review of the TCA

This section offers three illustrative sectoral examples to complement, not replicate, others' forensic work on the opportunities offered by a review of the TCA. As noted by Naomi Smith, chief executive of Best for Britain:

To achieve a closer relationship with Europe, the UK should adopt a general policy of Beneficial Alignment with EU standards and regulations, to ease non-tariff barriers and boost trade between the UK and EU.

We believe the UK should seek this by showing it is keen to cooperate on matters like reciprocal youth mobility. The UK also needs to work on its internal mechanisms, and set up an independent Board of Trade to ensure that a representative and inclusive group of stakeholders have a say on the progress of the trading relationship between the UK and EU.

⁶ UK Government, 'UK–France Joint Leaders' Declaration' (London, 10 March 2023).



Inconvenient truths

Even allowing for the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit's advocates have had ample time to implement their alleged strategy. Economic growth is a distant memory; investment and productivity are low. Twelve million people in the UK exist in absolute poverty (25% of children), with seven million facing food insecurity: they are tragic victims of the UK's neoliberal experiment.⁷ Thatcher promised Europe's best housing for the UK; the opposite is nearer the reality. The UK's under-resourced public services are mediocre, undermining the vocational motivation of altruistic and outstanding people. Meanwhile, private debt (at 200% of GDP), public debt (100% of GDP) and taxation (40% of GDP) are cumulatively excessive.

The government has even failed to secure a trade deal with an intimate ally with which the UK shares a head of state, that is, Canada. The trade deals it has concluded, with Australia and New Zealand, are nugatory. While antagonising European allies, the then governing party recklessly sought intimacy with Putin and Xi Jinping. That being said, in European terms, the UK—even England alone—is too big to ignore. Geopolitics dictates a mutual interest in success and stability.

Indeed, for an EU also falling further behind the US, managing without the UK is an unaffordable luxury, even setting aside the EU's trade surplus with the UK—in 2023 this was €112 billion in goods and €45 billion in services.⁸

With a population soon likely to exceed 70 million people, the UK retains formidable assets. Within the European time zone, the UK retains unique global interconnectivity and capacity in its varied and world-class service sector. At Europe's western and northern boundaries, superb traditions underpin its armed forces. Its senior judiciary is world-leading, as are its best education and culture. Sustained polling shows that most of its people now realise Brexit was an error.

Even if the UK's main political parties persist in an unsustainable conspiracy of silence over Brexit, Europe's political leaders still face a strategic moment of truth: do global strategic challenges make it prudent to invest in encouraging the re-engagement of the British people—particularly successor generations—with the European family?

⁷ UK Government, Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income: An Analysis of the UK Income Distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023* (21 March 2024).

⁸ European Commission, *Report on the Implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement Between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, COM (2024) 127 final (21 March 2024).



Regarding the EU's 2024–9 mandate and review of the TCA, this paper is intended to complement the following reports in particular:

- the UK Trade & Business Commission's 114 recommendations;⁹
- the European Parliament's report of 3 November 2023 on implementation of the EU–UK TCA;¹⁰
- the House of Lords European Affairs Committee paper, *The Future UK–EU Relationship*;¹¹
- the 175 proposals of Peter Hefele and Klaus Welle of the Martens Centre, contained in *The 7Ds for Sustainability*;¹² and
- the Conservative European Forum's report, *Building on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement*.¹³

The European Parliament's report signals that a closer relationship with the UK is achievable. Paragraph 51, which calls on the Commission to continue to monitor regulatory divergences in the UK, is among its helpful conclusions. Monitoring by both the Commission and the UK¹⁴—with a quarterly regulatory divergence tracker in an accessible format, also provided by The UK in a Changing Europe¹⁵—could, again, transparently show good faith to mutual advantage.

The EU remains the UK's main trading partner. To help to kick start the UK economy from a generation of lethargy, the next UK administration should signal that its norm will be for British regulation to remain aligned with that of the EU. Outside the EU, the UK cannot formally be an EU rule-maker, but the more the UK adds value, cooperates and engages, the greater its influence.

⁹ UK Trade and Business Commission, *Trading Our Way to Prosperity: A Blueprint for Policymakers*.

¹⁰ European Parliament, *Report on the Implementation of the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (2022/2188(INI))* (3 November 2023).

¹¹ UK Parliament, European Affairs Committee, *The Future UK–EU Relationship*, Report of 4th Session 2022–3, HL Paper 184 (29 April 2023).

¹² P. Hefele, K. Welle et al., *The 7Ds for Sustainability*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (October 2023).

¹³ S. Saunders, *Building on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement: How the UK and the EU Can Cooperate Better for Economic Growth and Political Stability*, Conservative European Forum (March 2024).

¹⁴ UK Government, Department for Business and Trade, *Retained EU Law Parliamentary Report June 2023–December 2023* (22 January 2024).

¹⁵ J. Reland, *UK–EU Divergence Tracker Q4 2023*, UK in a Changing Europe (24 January 2024).



Three illustrative areas of potential closer cooperation

Environment

Alignment on enlightened environment policy is—for the many if not the few—a manifestly shared interest of the EU and the UK.

By way of illustrative examples, the UK Emissions Trading System and the EU Emissions Trading System (and, if possible, the US equivalent) should be aligned, with coordinated transatlantic tariffs on exports of aluminium and steel from China. The UK should also seek to re-enter the remit of the European Chemicals Agency. As a potentially massive generator of sustainable energy, the UK should also be fully included in the enormous investment now needed in shared energy grids and all associated industries.

European capital market

In the early 1990s, when the first legislative step was taken towards creating a European capital market, no informed source anticipated that this intention would remain unrealised in the mid-2020s, with Europe's economy still being held back by ongoing excessive reliance on savings rather than an investment model.

McKinsey notes the cost to Europe of both lower investment than that of the US and an incomplete single market.¹⁶ Accelerating the completion of the capital markets union is critical and, strategically, this should be open to the UK. With or without the UK, such a union would enhance the euro as a global reserve currency, bringing long-term advantages to Europeans and, it should be noted, also to Americans.

Europe's green investment could be most competitively secured by a continental-scale capital market giving Europeans more control over our shared destiny. Funding public infrastructure through bond offerings could enhance investment and pensioners' security, while offering better value for public money than models such as Private Finance Initiative. Europe's wholesale capital market should have a European regulator—the European Securities and Market Authority—with national regulators retaining more responsibility for the retail market.

¹⁶ M. Giordano et al., *Accelerating Europe: Competitiveness for a New Era*, McKinsey Global Institute (16 January 2024).



Defence

The TCA failed to address the imperative of the EU and the UK cooperating on foreign policy and defence. Yet, Putin is now both forcing Europe to rearm—albeit still too often more in word than deed—and driving the UK closer to the rest of free Europe as they are compelled to share a burden that the Baltic countries cannot carry alone: all of Europe is at risk.

As noted by David McAllister, Member of the European Parliament, former Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and former Prime Minister of Lower Saxony,

Since January 2021, unfortunately there has been no institutionalised framework within which the UK and EU could coordinate a unified response to foreign policy challenges. The support of Ukraine during the Russian war of aggression underscores the potential of a successful future EU–UK security partnership.

In a welcome move the United Kingdom has applied to take part in the PESCO military mobility project, thereby solidifying the positive trend in our bilateral engagement.

In the next years, we should focus on the efficient use of our security and defence resources. This could include merging and developing a future combat air system.

Similarly, Julian King, former European Commissioner, has stated: ‘We should be ambitious—unconstrained by the terms or timelines of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.’¹⁷

Constrained public budgets combined with technological revolution should compel Europe—including the British—to build the required new intellectual and productive capacity. Substantial purchasing from and cooperation with the US would remain essential.

Enhancing Europe’s defence capacity will require funding from taxation but a European capital market could help. The European Defence Agency, which should be open to association with the UK (as the UK remains involved in pan-European defence projects), could belatedly deliver efficient European

¹⁷ J. King, ‘The Case for an Ambitious UK/EU Security Cooperation Pact’, *European and International Analysts Group* (1 February 2024).



procurement, with an overdue unified European defence market reinforcing standardisation and interoperability across NATO's pooled sovereignty.

Within Europe the UK retains unique capabilities, such as participation in Five Eyes, as does France with its world-leading technology. The 2023 Joint Leaders' Declaration offered encouraging and pertinent focus: '[The] ambition for the next decade is to deliver the further integration of UK and French armed forces, enabling the seamless transfer on operations, drawing on common Intelligence . . .' 'France and the United Kingdom commit to progress activity to ensure interoperability of weapons and platforms across Europe and NATO. . . . They will further develop their Joint Nuclear Commission . . .'¹⁸

France and the UK uniquely share the European capacity to monitor the Atlantic and the High North, which will become an increasingly strategic component of Europe's defence as climate change makes the seas north of Russia and Canada navigable. Their shared responsibility to enhance and lead Europe's defence capability cannot be overstated and, with NATO, is Europe's strongest underpinning for the potential of wider European initiatives such as the Weimar Triangle. As well as the UK's return to Copernicus, its participation in Galileo, EGNOS and EUSST should be open to discussion.

Creating a Europeans' Europe

The TCA enables politicians to meet each other. This is essential but insufficient. Top-down leadership formed the European project. However, popular support has also always been needed: in the beginning particular effort went into reconciling the peoples of France and the Federal Republic of Germany, with notable efforts made by Chancellor Adenauer and President de Gaulle.

Statecraft must now reinforce civil society, with much of the European project having been necessarily arcane. The European Commission's report on the implementation of the refers to civil society, and the idea of the Civil Society Forum envisaged by the TCA is acknowledged by the British government.¹⁹ The European Parliament has also shown prescience in its report on the implementation of the TCA:

¹⁸ UK Government, 'UK-France Joint Leaders' Declaration'.

¹⁹ UK Government, 'UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement Civil Society Forum' (15 January 2024).



[It] stresses the importance of strong EU and UK civil society involvement, including regional and local authorities employers' organisations and trade unions, as well as nongovernmental organisations, in the implementation of the TCA, in accordance with Articles 13 and 14 thereof; calls for representatives of the fisheries sector, regional authorities, coastal communities and other stakeholders to be actively involved in the monitoring and implementation of the TCA; urges the Commission, to that effect, to promote the establishment of a domestic internal fisheries advisory group, without prejudice to the existing advisory councils; notes with regret the absence of organisations specifically representing young people among the UK civil society organisations selected to participate in the TCA Civil Society Forum.²⁰

While reflecting a mid-twentieth century focus on organised economic partners, the additional references to non-governmental organisations, regional authorities and young people in this report correctly identify today's need to enhance civic engagement. In the US, Americans are hardwired to know what it is to be American. Part of this identity is active and effective participation in the civic life of local communities: Americans' local and state identities underpin their innate, shared larger identity.

Mike Clancy, General Secretary of the Prospect trade union has further noted the valuable relationships developed across Europe through the union framework:

Prospect consistently supported engagement in Europe before Brexit and has pushed for a productive and close relationship since then. We've always valued links with our sister trade unions and partners across Europe, recognising both the values and challenges we share. Wider citizens' engagement between Britain and Europe could only be helpful in more broadly demonstrating what we share in common with European friends and getting to a future better for workers than the recent past.

Europe's successor generations should be empowered to create a credible narrative for a Europeans' Europe. Every European—including the British—should share a better understanding of what it is to be a free European: what we share and what we have together managed to build from our creatively dynamic—if too often also destructive—shared history.

²⁰ European Parliament, *Report on the Implementation of the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement*.



Many British people indicated that they want a closer relationship with the EU in the run-up to the recent general election.²¹ For example, five times as many people who are intending to vote Labour want a closer relationship rather than a more distant one. This is an opening door. After the sustained xenophobic populism in government and the partisan media, it is almost a miracle.

A future UK administration might improve the tone of relations by guaranteeing British citizenship on demand to EU nationals registered under the EU Settlement Scheme. Reciprocal gestures by member states to UK nationals would also be welcome.

In terms of bringing Europeans closer together, the words—if not yet the deeds—contained in the Joint Leaders' Declaration again offer an encouraging precedent which could be applied elsewhere. It noted:

This Summit will further strengthen those foundations: hundreds of twinnings between towns and cities in France, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; the hundreds of thousands of their citizens who live in one another's countries; the millions more who visit on holiday and the thousands of Franco-British families. This Summit will further strengthen those foundations. . . . To bring their societies closer, France and the United Kingdom will put the emphasis on developing people-to-people initiatives, encourage mobility, culture, and exchanges, within the framework of the EU–UK relationship.²²

The strengthening of the Franco-British relationship was further amplified with the proposal for a France–UK Literary Award, a 'Spotlight on Culture', a circle of French–British museums, a bilateral commission on educational cooperation, and a commitment to facilitate school trips and strengthen business links.

From acorns of civic engagement the sturdy oaks of a Europeans' Europe can grow. Four specific examples are offered here:

1. *It should be first nature for interest groups across Europe to engage organically with each other.* To pick a random example, in a Europeans' Europe, beekeepers in Latvia or Hungary will naturally engage with those in the UK. Europe's beekeepers share concerns about neonicotinoids. The more their knowledge is shared, the better for all Europeans and our shared environment. This is an example of Burke's Little Platoons organically building a Europeans' Europe.

²¹ *Best for Britain*, 'New Mega-Poll Reveals Voter's Desire for Stronger EU–UK Ties and Dismay at Rishi Sunak' (31 December 2023).

²² UK Government, 'UK–France Joint Leaders' Declaration'.



2. *Europe's young need to meet each other and forge lifelong friendships.* The House of Lords has sought an ambitious reciprocal youth mobility partnership, similar to the existing youth mobility arrangements that the UK and individual EU member states have with other jurisdictions.²³ Associated with this is the need to rescue British schools' advanced teaching of continental Europe's main languages from virtual extinction, and to improve the teaching of our shared European history and concepts of liberal democracy. *UK participation in Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps should be restored.* In the meantime, the London mayor's commitment to seek a quasi-Erasmus for London is welcome, as is the reciprocity and inclusion of schools in Wales's Taith scheme, both components missing from England's Turing Scheme. The first EU–UK Youth Gathering held at University College London was welcome: the precedent should be promptly and widely replicated across the UK.
3. *The UK should rejoin Creative Europe.* It was self-harm for the UK, with world-leading cultural sectors, to withdraw from Creative Europe. The programme could also usefully bring more artists and audiences together across Europe. Why not, to offer just one example, offer a pan-European festival of Europe's greatest oratorios, bringing together choirs and orchestras, with each performing a different oratorio?
4. *Twinning initiatives should be reinvigorated to involve far more citizens:* Bavaria with Scotland, Manchester with the Ruhr and so on. The University of Kent's campus in Brussels is a sensible initiative; and the Straits Committee, in which the University of Kent participates, should be re-energised.

²³ UK Parliament, European Affairs Committee, *The Future UK–EU Relationship*.



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