

Brexit Undone: A Future History of Britain

Article by Molly Scott Cato

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Riding on a wave of populism and euroscepticism, the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU in 2016. After a toxic exit campaign and a painful divorce process, the damage to the UK's relationship with the bloc seemed irreparable. Fortunately, this was not the case, a dispatch from 2050 confirms.

Looking back on the turbulent events of the early years of this century, it is hard to believe that one of the leading architects of the green and democratic Europe of 2050 could have once been the problem child of the EU. After a decade of economic depression and disillusion with narratives of independence, the UK has more than atoned during its nearly twenty years of positive EU membership since rejoining in 2033.

In hindsight, Brexit can be seen as a consequence of the teething troubles of becoming a truly global and interconnected world. It is hard to remember now that offshoring and digital technologies posed an existential threat to democracy in the 2020s. The success of the European Green Deal and sustainable finance legislation was vital in creating quality green jobs and countering the disillusion with what historians now call the "stale decades", when many voters dismissed politicians as little more than corporate shells.

Of course, the EU's Positively Digital legislation – inspiring similar regulation across the world – was crucial in countering online disinformation and digital attacks on democracy. The EU's bold investments in green infrastructure in African countries during those decades reversed centuries of exploitation and helped reduce the emigration of talented Africans, which many European politicians had used to stir up resentment. In my advanced old age, you will indulge me if I reflect on how we achieved this success and how differently things might have turned out following the UK's ill-informed vote to leave the EU in 2016.

Deregulation or cooperation?

In the end, it all happened faster than any of us could have imagined. After a few years of a Labour government doing its very best to make Brexit work in the 2020s, it was quite clear that this was simply unfeasible and that the damage we had done to ourselves by leaving the EU could not be repaired in some piecemeal process. The only option was to reverse it.

The kind of Brexit we most feared, the one that involved deregulation and what is referred to by historians as Singapore-on-Thames, never became a reality. Most attempts to set up cut-and-paste versions of European laws were rejected by businesses, who did not want to have to make products to two different standards. After promising not to repeal various pieces of environmental legislation, the discredited Brexit government of 2019 to 2024 (commonly regarded as the worst government in the modern history of the UK) abandoned controls on pollution, and it seemed that we were destined to return to being the "dirty man of Europe".

After Boris Johnson became prime minister in 2019 with the deceitful slogan “getting Brexit done”, the 2024 election offered a new leaf. While Brexit was barely mentioned by Labour or the Conservatives, the damage it had done to our economy and our political fabric lurked in the background and in the minds of many voters.

Outside of government after their electoral defeat, the Tories became even more extreme, arguing for “Brexit Unchained”: the UK as the deregulated, polluted, free-market nightmare that its most ardent supporters dreamed of back in 2016. In 2024, Labour inherited a country in a direful and broken state. Our rivers were little more than open sewers, our public buildings literally falling apart, and our hospitals barely functioning because of staff shortages and ever-increasing waiting lists.

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Conservative Party was eventually fulfilled.*

In this context, the idea that undermining EU environmental protections or further reducing the right to strike could possibly solve our problems looked both cruel and fantastical. It took a few years, but the prophecy that Brexit would spell the end of the Conservative Party was eventually fulfilled.

Labour accepts the inevitable

Labour had come into government in 2024 with strict fiscal rules, pledging to fund investment from growth. With no strong ideological attachment to what the Conservatives of the time framed as “Brexit freedoms”, whether on workers’ rights or environmental protections, the Labour government limped on with its acquiescence to the Brexit mantras, while the economy stalled and the desperately urgent needed investments in public services were put on hold.

The handful of Green MPs elected in 2024 kept strong pressure on Labour to take environmental protection and the energy transition seriously. Labour did their best to achieve a sort of “Green re-alignment”, keeping as close as possible to EU laws as they evolved. Closer cooperation was especially successful in two areas: energy and defence. UK Energy Minister Edward Miliband had always been considered a European leader on climate policy, and he worked closely with other EU energy ministers and with the support of the UK’s emboldened Green MPs to strengthen the COP process and build more positive global action on the climate emergency.

At the same time, the transition to renewables made energy cooperation essential. Balancing renewable energy across the grid needed more than the capacity of a single country, and the Europe-wide network of energy interconnectors became central as we moved beyond fossil fuels. It was also at the heart of a stronger and more trusting EU-UK working relationship and curiously symbolic of the way they were, in reality, still very closely connected.

The Green HydrEU initiative, launched in 2025, enabled the UK to use its excess electricity to produce green hydrogen that then replaced imported natural gas across the continent. This was the first real sign that the UK was offering something positive to Europe since the disastrous referendum of 2016.

The defence realignment of those years was also crucial in rethinking the UK’s place in the world. In 2016, cyberwars and lethal robots were top of mind. Russia’s war on Ukraine focused minds on the reality of what the EU had always been about: keeping peace in Europe. The heroic battle of the Ukrainian people brought together UK and EU defence ministers, not only to support the struggle for

freedom but also to work for a true European peace, not a divided continent with an Iron Curtain a few thousand miles to the east.

The UK's experience of the peace process in Northern Ireland and Germany's experience of supporting pro-democracy forces in Eastern Europe were quietly brought to bear on Russia, which blundered its way towards democracy from the failed state and oligarchic chaos of the Putin years. It seemed little short of a miracle that just a decade after Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans joined the EU, and a newly democratic Russia was able to as well, finally fulfilling Gorbachev's vision of a "common European home" and making a reality of the security guarantees to its territory that Ukraine had fought for.

Learning the lessons of Brexit

In spite of these successful collaborations, in the UK Brexit continued to make people's lives more complicated and business harder, while our economy drifted into stagnation. Two years into the Labour government, it was clear that the UK would continue to slip backwards economically without EU membership. A two-thirds majority of British people supported EU membership, but we still needed to convince our European partners that we would not be as disruptive in the future as we had been in the past.

By this time, the UK was clearly suffering domestically and on the global stage, being both economically and strategically weakened by the misguided decision to leave the EU. Performative trade deals with Asian economies had done nothing to mend the damage that trade restrictions with the EU had done to so many British businesses. Outside the EU, the UK lost its role as a bridge to the US and the dissolution of the Commonwealth left Britain looking increasingly isolated. Talk of a new "special relationship" with India contributed little economically and, with Russia in chaos and China increasingly authoritarian, the UK found it difficult to find friends and allies at global summits.

Labour adopted a policy of negotiating to become full EU members in their manifesto for the 2029 election and won resoundingly. The changes to the electoral system they introduced during these years effectively locked the Euroloony Conservatives (as they were by then known) out of power forever but also meant a surge of Green MPs into the 2029 Parliament, together with an increased number of Liberals. The fact that these parties had been so strongly pro-European throughout the period added credibility to the UK's negotiating position with the EU.

A chastened but triumphant return

The negotiations were protracted, with several national capitals understandably needing guarantees of our good faith and potential stumbling blocks over Schengen and the single currency. With Ireland also outside Schengen, we were under no pressure to join initially, but within a decade it became clear that freedom of movement was so widespread across the continent that it simply made no sense to have a barrier at the Irish or English channels. The issue of the euro was more problematic, with many British economists and financiers strongly committed to keeping the pound. This was not a block to our becoming an EU member, but over the decade that followed, our financial markets became so intertwined that joining the euro, which was now subject to democratic control rather than under the power of bankers, was no longer a problem for most British people. The Red-Green government of 2029-34 took us in with little dissent.

The modernisation of our 17th-century democracy – especially the adoption of a proportional voting

system – meant that the worst Eurosceptic forces had forever been excised from our body politic. As those who were once called Eurosceptics grew old and died, they carried on voting for their angry parties, but in ever smaller numbers, so that while they were initially represented in the parliament elected in 2029, by the end of the 2030s they no longer featured.

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For most British citizens, joining the EU was a natural extension of ongoing cooperation and a chance to enjoy the boost to our economy that our original membership had meant for us. There were the small practical reasons – the pet passports and roaming charges – and the wider symbolic sense that we were, and had always been, Europeans, and that this was our club as much as anybody else's. The years on our own had taught most Brits a few lessons: that we no longer ruled the waves, that we were not exceptional, and that we should learn to play our strong but ordinary hand more skilfully and without resentment.

For politicians who returned to the EU institutions – and I am proud to count myself amongst that number – we returned with a sense of humility and historic responsibility. We understood that the values we might have taken for granted, like the rule of law and democracy, were not inviolable. The EU had guaranteed these for the devastated post-war economies, and the new Mediterranean democracies, and then for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In an increasingly authoritarian world and with our own democratic foundations feeling much less stable than we had imagined, we were grateful to be part of the world's leading democratic bloc.

So we returned to the place we had always held: a leading legislative partner in the EU institutions. We were pleased to find that most of the laws we had contributed to during our 40 years of membership – and the EU's peculiar version of English – had survived our absence. Our return was marked by a renewed commitment to European values and European institutions. After the experience of the previous two decades, who would dare to argue that we would be better off on our own?



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