

# TRACING BRITAIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH EUROPE

## An Uncertain Member of the Community?

**Daniel Pullin**  
Publishing Assistant  
Gale, part of Cengage Learning

Speaking at a press conference at the European Council in Brussels in October, British Prime Minister David Cameron made a speech which perhaps epitomises Britain's uneasy relationship with the European Union (EU) at present. Mr Cameron expressed his 'downright anger' towards the European Council for demanding that Britain pay an additional £1.7 billion into the European budget by 1 December [www](#) [www](#). Coupled with reports that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was unhappy over its proposals to limit the immigration of foreign workers into the United Kingdom, serious questions have arisen regarding Britain's continuing membership of the EU [www](#). Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising in light of these incidents that British Chancellor George Osborne claimed that Britain's relationship with the EU was 'not working properly' [www](#). Yet tracing this relationship over time reveals some remarkable continuities since Britain's accession into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. As well as underlining some of the reasons for the ongoing difficulties, a survey of the *Chatham House Online Archive* shows that instability and insecurity have been recurring themes of Britain's membership of the EU.

**What is striking when searching *Chatham House Online Archive* is how soon after Britain's accession into the EEC that debate surrounding the value of its membership emerged.**



What is striking when searching *Chatham House Online Archive* is how soon after Britain's accession into the EEC that debate surrounding the value of its membership emerged. It appears that the approaching decennial of the accession in the early 1980s was seen as a key opportunity for reflection, as two contributions to the journal *International Affairs* highlight. In his 1982 article, John Palmer wrote of the 'undeniable disenchantment' which had characterised Britain's European relations in its first ten years of membership [IPG](#). These had been marked by 'endless friction and strife between the UK and its partners', leading many within Britain to advocate its withdrawal, even at this relatively early stage of membership [IPG](#). Similarly, in Roy Jenkins' article 'Britain and Europe: Ten Years of Community Membership', attention is drawn to the predominance of the 'in/out' argument, which is deemed an unnecessary distraction from Britain's pursuit of positive European policies [IPG](#). Uncertainty and dissatisfaction with Britain's first decade of EEC membership are the two overriding themes of this material.

In fact, these feelings seemed to be present from the start of Britain's negotiations to join the EEC. Within Britain, there were strong arguments for staying out of the EEC altogether, with Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) a major sticking point [IPG](#). Even during Britain's (unsuccessful) initial attempts at accession in 1963, there were political divisions over the EU question. There was evidently a high degree of uncertainty beneath British Lord Privy Seal Edward Heath's confident desire

for Britain to become ‘full, wholehearted and active members of the European community’ . Against the underlying discontent, it is all the more surprising that a concerted effort to join the EU was sustained by Britain.

The political divide which has long existed in Britain over Europe is instructive in other ways. It may indicate why some have accused Britain of a lack of commitment towards European affairs; domestic interests (such as maintaining the support of the electorate) have often taken precedence. This was underlined by Britain’s refusal to participate in discussions over the 1981 ‘Genscher/Colombo Plan’ devised by Italy and Germany, which sought to bring greater cooperation between EEC members by weakening the veto power . Jenkins sees this as epitomising Britain’s ‘negative attitude’ towards Europe, which has led it to work against countries rather than with them . A similar inference can be made from S. Z. Young’s comments in *The World Today*, where he felt that British politicians were more concerned with ‘minimising the damage of community membership’ than pursuing proactive European policies of their own .

Implicit here is the notion that national interests have eclipsed international, European interests. As Lord Plumb explained in his 1990 address to Chatham House, there was a difficult balance to strike between maintaining British national identity – something deemed especially

important domestically – and positively contributing to an international society . The effects of Britain’s continuing struggle to achieve this balance are worth addressing, especially in relation to its impact upon Britain’s authority within the EU. It may explain why Britain’s 1982 demand for a rebate on budget contributions caused ‘enormous unanimous irritation’ in Europe . Focussing too intently upon preserving national self-interest, and thus neglecting proactive European policy contributions, meant that Britain’s EU colleagues had little sympathy for its plight. Setting Britain’s current difficulties regarding the European Commission’s ‘completely unacceptable’ demand for more money in this context suggests why their claims have been interpreted by some commentators as being symptomatic of ‘a child in a quarrel’  .

What, though, are the prospects for a recovery in relations between Britain and the EU? For, despite the Chatham House material evidencing several instabilities which have existed during its membership, differences have previously been set aside and compromises struck to ensure Britain’s continuing participation. Yet, despite talks having been opened between Britain and the EU regarding their future relations, it is unclear whether today’s disquiet will be resolved harmoniously . Bearing in mind Merkel’s apparent ultimatum, there may be several obstacles to overcome before the air is cleared. [GALE](#)

## Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

Palmer, John. “Britain and the EEC: The Withdrawal Option.” *International Affairs* 58.4 (1982) 

Jenkins, Roy. “Britain and Europe: Ten years of Community membership.” *International Affairs* 59.2 (1983) 

129. Speeches of the Ministers at the final session of the negotiations for British entry into the Common Market, Brussels, 29 January 1963. *Documents on International Affairs 1962*. D. C. Watt, ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1971 

Young, S. Z.. “Britain in the European Community: The view from Right and Left.” *The World Today* 29.7 (January - December 1973) 

Lord Plumb MEP, and Michael Franklin. “The European Community and Britain’s Rightful Place.” RIIA/8/5091. Chatham House, London. 11 Dec. 1990 

 Click to view supporting image on our website

 Click icon to open referenced PDF

 Click icon to visit referenced external website