

Analysing britains role in the european union politics essay



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It was only on January 1, 1973 that Britain became an official member of the European Union. Ultimately, what was seen through this was twenty-two years of little participation from Britain in the affairs of Europe. Twenty-two years before its entrance, Britain was given the opportunity in 1950 to participate in the negotiations that paved the path for the emergence of the European Coal and Steel Community; nevertheless, when an invitation was extended to the Labour Government of the time, Prime Minister Clement Attlee declined to participate in these discussions. Later, when the ECSC and its six member-states passed consensus to expand the ECSC, Britain was invited to the negotiations but Prime Minister Anthony Eden ultimately withdrew his Conservative party from the discussions. By 1974, a year after its official membership, Britain had become regarded as an awkward partner to the European Union, a standing that continues to be seen between Britain and the EU as a result of the policies that Britain's respective leaders have taken towards the European Union.

Conservative Government - Strained Relations of 1973 & 1974

Edward Heath, who took the reins of Britain in 1970, was at the helm of building a stronger relationship with the European Union. His pro-European attitude led to the ultimate admittance of Britain into the EU. Nevertheless, admission came at a time when Britain and the rest of Europe began to see a strain to their economies. The success that the EEC had seen prior to Britain's admission was not shared; instead, Britain entered during a period of recession which led its membership to not have positive connotations with Britons. While Edward Heath and Georges Pompidou had started to build a close relationship after Britain's entrance, Britain's attempt at increasing the

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quality and size EEC's institutions and proposing the concentration of its activities in Brussels angered the Commission because, through it, Britain continued to imply that the Commission was ineffective.

When it came to the Economic and Monetary Union, Britain once again earned a reputation of being an awkward partner in the EU. Britain disappointed its EU partners when it declared that it would not enter the sterling into the joint float unless certain agreements were reached by the EEC to underwrite the sterling's value. While the rest of the member-states had agreed to place the bank in Luxemburg, Heath insulted the EU by pressing for centralization of the European reserve bank to be located in Brussels, which fared negatively for him as a result of member-states believing that Britain was meddling in issues that they have no involvement in.

As Britain continued to slowly integrate into the EU, the British government continued to strain its relationship with the other EEC members. Instead of acting in a diplomatic manner, British officials openly voiced their opinions of the incompetence seen within the EEC, which often angered the original six. Heath's push for what he believed were necessary changes to the external energy policy of the EU was often seen as conflicting with the positions of the other member states; France had continued to insist that an internal policy would need to be first established before the EU could even consider the feasibility of an external policy. The British, on the other hand, did not believe that internal energy policy was as crucial as the EU's external policy on the matter. Unfortunately, the start of the Arab-Israeli war brought about oil shortages that brought many EU nations down to their knees; the Dutch <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-britains-role-in-the-european-union-politics-essay/>

and the Germans, who at first supported Britain's argument in preventing an internal policy, began suffering heavily from the shortages in oil and shortly after began supporting the creation of an internal European oil/energy policy. In a show of their awkward partnership, Britain decided that not back down from their original position of rejecting an internal energy policy for the EU, which led the continuing of European oil shortages. Britain focused on its own domestic interests, feared that the establishment of internal energy policy would give the EU an opportunity of obtaining access to Britain's oil reserves in the North Sea. As a result, Heath would not concede to EU pressure and refused to consolidate and distribute energy resources equally amongst EU member-states.

What started as a constructive and optimistic entry into the EU ended with conflict and stress between Britain and the EU member-states. While Heath was genuinely interested in strengthening the European Union, his actions were seen as Britain being uncooperative as a result of its desire to benefit from the EU for the sake of its own national interests. Regrettably, the Labour party that took office in 1974 would continue Britain's role as an awkward partner.

Labour Government of 1974-1979

The Labour party that succeeded Heath's government in 1974 began to take a backseat in international politics as it attempted to repair the country. Domestically, Britain had become plagued with economic and political problems caused by both the oil crisis and by Heath's inability to control British trade unions (Guido, 1984). As a result of the oil crisis, inflation hit

British society hard and was predicted to remain on the rise, while the balance of payments saw a deficit in the billions by the end of 1974. While Prime Minister Harold Wilson had to work with hung Parliament, he also found himself, at the same time, being forced to deal with the problems of his divided country.

Britain's membership in the EU continued to be an issue to many Britons, which allowed Wilson to unite Britain in a campaign against the European Union (Bilski, 1977). Wilson, in seeing the negative opinion Britons had of the EU, decided to become a protector of Britain's national interests by pressing for British membership in the EU to be renegotiated with acceptable terms. What began as peaceful negotiations that aimed to adapt and reshape the terms of Britain's membership in the EU soon turned harsh by April 1974; at the renegotiations held in April, Britain demanded to have the right to withdraw itself from the EU if any future negotiation led to terms that Britain would not agree to (Ernst, 1974). While the Commission was disappointed with Britain's tone, it felt obligated to sit down with Britain to renegotiate its terms of membership.

After Wilson strongly campaigned for his government against the EU on CAP; cash rebates; and Britain's membership terms, domestic polls showed that a higher percent of Britons supported EU membership. While the referendum produced high support for membership from the public, Wilson continued to see hostility towards the EU from within his own party. As such, Britain found itself again as an awkward partner to the EU based on the negotiations of pollution control and Britain's claims from the ERDF. When the EU proposed changes to emission limits, Britain quickly rejected the proposal and claimed <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-britains-role-in-the-european-union-politics-essay/>

that the standards were unsuitable for Britain. While the EU suspected that Britain was influenced by its chemical industry, West Germany argued that the lax standards that British chemical plants had gained by not accepting the emission limits would give British companies a price advantage over European competitors.

In continuing the souring of its relationship with the EU, Britain was accused of making claims from the ERDF for projects that were supposed to be funded by British funds. The ERDF was established with the mindset that only projects that were not funded through national money could be claimed. Instead, Britain had decided to put in only claims that would allow it to recover the money it had itself put into the ERDF fund. To the EU, this attempt at recovering its own funds showcased Britain's inability to have a community-based mentality.

Finally, when it came time to look into energy policy again, Britain once again took the steps to make it an awkward partner with the EU. Britain continued to object the proposal of placing controls on the production and distribution of oil energy even when the EU attempted to accommodate each and every demand by the British government. Nevertheless, Britain continued to argue that it needed more time to look into the effects of such proposal, which angered all the member-states who wanted to obtain an accord on an outline of the policy. In discussing the upcoming conference of 1975, Britain showed again showed its disinterest in cooperating with the EU when it announced that it would not agree to be represented by a single EC seat at the Paris conference. Annoyed, Germany sent out a letter to the member-states that expressed anger at the lack of community within the EU

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as a result of Britain's position on the seat allocation. Germany argued that with its weak economy, Britain was in no position to negotiate on these issues without any consequences (Davidson, 1975). Member-states continued to argue that the negative attitude of the British government hindered their ability to develop a common policy.

While the Wilson administration tarnished Britain's reputation within the EU, the emergence of James Callaghan as the next Prime Minister did little to make the EU hopeful of a better relationship with Britain. While Callaghan took a peaceful approach towards the EU early on, domestic hostility towards Britain's membership in the EU continued to remain high; which led Callaghan to remain cautious in his relationship with the EU. The letter from Callaghan to Labour Secretary Ron Hayward, while positive at first, continued Britain on its negative relations with the EU. Callaghan claimed that the EU was not working in the interests of Britain and that the only reason for not withdrawing from the EU was that it would tarnish Britain's relations with the United States. Callaghan's statement in regards to the US angered member-states who complained that Britain was providing more attention to the United States than to its partners in the EU. A prominent theme in Callaghan's government, US-British relations did little to lift Britain's reputation within the EU, and its relations would continue to spiral downward with the rise of the Thatcher government.

Rise of Thatcher: 1979 to 1990

Elected in 1979, the Thatcher government that rose to power following Callaghan's Labour government became quickly aligned to the U. S.

government, much to the anger of Britain's EU partners who were against influence stemming from the United States. Nevertheless, by 1981, the European Union was suffering an economic downturn and was facing bankruptcy. In order to counter this problem, the EU proposed increasing the VAT ceiling by an additional one percent, which Britain strongly refused to accept. Relations between Britain and the EU continued to sour during this financial crisis because Britain continued to hold up any compromises and refused to agree on any proposals set forth by the EU. As the EU member-states grew irritated with Britain's reservations on agreeing to new agricultural prices, member-states decided to call for a majority vote on the price levels. In retaliation, Britain protested this action, stating that it breached Britain's right to utilize a veto on the topic. Nevertheless, already weary with Britain's inability to compromise, member-states rejected Britain's complaint because they believed that agricultural price levels were not of national interest for Britain. As a result of Britain's lack of cooperation, France proposed removing Britain as a member of the EU and making it a nation with 'special status' in the EU (Hansard, 1982).

When the EU finally ran out of money in 1984, it proposed adding an additional budget of two billion to aid them for the rest of the year. As usual, Britain became an awkward partner by announcing that it would reject a supplementary budget, asserting that the EU should learn how to operate with the budget it had been already been given. Hearing this, member-states grew weary with the already unpopular British government and labelled Thatcher as being 'counter-productive' to the success of the Union (The

Economist, 1984). Member-states were disappointed with Britain's primary concern over the budget rather than on the wellbeing of the EU partnership.

Already blacklisted as a hardliner, Thatcher's strong cooperation and identification with the U. S. did little to help her image with the EU. The Reagan Administration, on a hunt for terrorists in Syria and Libya, was set on placing restrictions on these two countries and urged Britain to join its cause. Britain's involvement in urging EU sanctions against Syria left many EU member-states troubled by Britain's strong partnership with the United States.

While the early 1980's saw a more peaceful and relaxed time for the interactions between Britain and the EU, Britain did appear again as an awkward partner by the end of the 1980's. When proposals for a single European currency were suggested at the 1988 meeting in Hanover, Thatcher quickly responded that she would not take any steps of integrating the sterling pound into the EMS. Additionally, Thatcher rejected any ideas of creating a European central bank, stating that a central bank would require a central government to succeed, to which she argued that her government was not ready to accept a centralized European government. Nevertheless, frustrated by Britain, the EU decided to proceed without the British and establish a committee to look into the possible ways to strengthen the EMS (Hansard, 1988). Concerned at the route that the EU began taking, Thatcher publically denounced the committee and proclaimed that Britain would never agree to the establishment of a European Central Bank, a statement which continued to strain relations between Britain and the EU (Ibid, 1988).

When discussing a European technological cooperation budget in 1986, Britain once again was labelled as the EU's awkward partner in its refusal to accept the amount of funding proposed by the other member-states. The EU believed that it would be giving Britain more value for its investment in research and development; nevertheless, Britain would not budge from its original budget proposal (Peel, 1987). Once Britain backed down and agreed to fund the program in 1987, member-states had become frustrated with the termination of the program as a result of lack of funding from the British (Sharp, 1987).

When the EU expressed interest in reviving the plans for the European Defence Community in 1987, Thatcher warned against the idea in fear that the establishment of such defence policy would counter the links that the EU and Britain had established with the United States. These strong views from Thatcher made Britain seem to be uncooperative with the goals set forth by the EU. While some member-states were also unwilling to establish an EDC, the tone that Thatcher used - which made her sound more concerned with Britain's relationship with the United States - made Britain an awkward partner for the EU. Her focus on preserving ties with the United States rather than worrying about European interests greatly hindered her ability to work with her EU partners.

At home, Margaret Thatcher began facing attacks from the Labour party, who accused her of attempting to slow the development of the European Union (Independent, 1989). They argued that the EU would continue its development with or without Britain and that it would be dangerous for Britain to be left as a 'second-class member' (Independent, 1989). The <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-britains-role-in-the-european-union-politics-essay/>

public was further enraged by Thatcher's tone against the EU; numbers in the country showed that the public had become more pro-Europe since the referendum in 1975 (Independent, 1989). As a result, Thatcher saw herself being forced to become much more neutral and conciliatory towards the EU. While members of her cabinet continued to attack the EU on monetary policy, Thatcher decided to accept only the first condition of the Delors proposal for the creation of a monetary union. Thus, throughout 1989 and 1990, the proposal for a monetary union became a primary theme for both the EU and Britain.

Due to the fact that Thatcher personally opposed Britain's membership in the ERM, government officials quickly grew angry with her stance and many subsequently resigned from their posts. Officials argued that Thatcher's views were not consistent with the views of the British government and that by remaining out of the ERM, Britain would be unable to take part in the discussions surrounding a monetary union. With a government pressing for entry into the ERM, Thatcher eventually agreed that Britain would become a member of the ERM on October 5, 1990 (Elliott, 2005).

While Thatcher agreed to enter the ERM, her partnership with the EU once again became awkward when she refused to allow the EU to move to the second stage of the Delors report. Much to the anger of Parliament and her cabinet, Thatcher argued that national interests could not allow her to 'hand over the sterling' to the EU (Hansard, 1990). As a result of her stubbornness, the EU saw Britain as an awkward partner and Thatcher lost her Deputy PM, who resigned in frustration. Her Deputy PM argued that the uncooperative tone that Thatcher had taken with the EU would make it more difficult for <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-britains-role-in-the-european-union-politics-essay/>

Britain to hold influence over the future of the monetary union. Additionally, he blamed Thatcher for the inflation that Britain was suffering as a result of her disinterest in joining the ERM (Independent, 1990). The resignation of Geoffrey Howe slowly gave way to the end of Thatcher's reign as Prime Minister and rise to the government of John Major in November 1990, which hoped to build better relations with the European Union.

Conservative Government of 1990 to 1997

While the Major administration that took over tried to mend relations between Britain and the EU, it constantly found itself returning towards the hostile relationship found under the reign of Thatcher. In 1991, President Delors provided Britain an opportunity to accept an 'opt-out' clause in regards to accepting a single currency. While Thatcher still argued against the concept of accepting any compromise on monetary union, Major felt that an 'opt-out' clause in the Maastricht Treaty would help Britain overcome its hesitation on the topic. Nevertheless, because only Britain was given this opt-out opportunity, it was again placed as an awkward partner as a result of its unwillingness to completely cooperate with the union.

By 1992, Britain had assumed the EU Presidency and now found itself strongly on the defence of the Maastricht Treaty. Major believed that standing in complete support of ratification of the Treaty would show the EU that Britain was dedicated to its role within the EU. At the same time, he believed that the treaty would hinder attempts at centralizing the EU.

Nonetheless, Delors' interpretation of the Maastricht Treaty as an opportunity for the EU to become a federalist state upset both Britain and

many of the EU member-states. As a result, Denmark's referendum led to a defeat of the treaty, which shocked many nations, including Britain.

Consequently, Major now found himself advocating the ratification of a treaty that every other member-state had wanted to renegotiate. Thatcher condemned Major's support for the Maastricht Treaty and called for a British referendum on the treaty. With trouble at home, Major faced anger and criticism from member-states who claimed that Britain continued to remain focused on her self-interests and ignored the problems facing the EU as a whole. Fear that France would vote against the Treaty gave way to a loss of confidence in the ERM, which led to the pound sterling being forced out of the ERM as a result of Britain being able to maintain the sterling above its set lower limit (Hansard, 1992). This latest development in the problems during the British presidency only served to fuel Britain's role as the EU's awkward partner.

As a result of resentment towards the EU within Britain, Major struggled to maintain positive relations with the EU; the nominations for the President of the Commission in June 1994 showcased Britain's struggle and awkwardness as a partner. At the meeting, Major vetoed the appointment of Jean-Luc Dehaene, announcing that he would never agree to his nomination (Barber, 1994). EU member-states grew angry by Britain's stance, claiming that Britain was driven by its domestic interests rather than its interests with the EU. Britain became the awkward partner when the Council was forced to agree on the nomination of Prime Minister Jacques Santer of Luxembourg instead of their original nomination. Major's actions against Germany's

nomination of Dehaene quickly deteriorated Britain's relationship with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

What started as a desire for complete EU cooperation ended with Britain having a tarnished reputation amongst its EU partners. Major's actions against the EU, through his threats, vetoes, stances and public speeches, led to his government being isolated from the politics of the EU. While a large portion of the problems with the EU emerged as a result of influence stemming from domestic policy at home, Major's angry tone towards the EU over the election of a new commission President, and over the mad cow crisis of 1996 only served to further distance Britain from the EU.

Britain's Present Day Status

Though this report only discusses the governments of Heath, Wilson, Callaghan, Thatcher, and Major, it is important to note that despite the fact that relations have somewhat improved between Britain and the EU, there still remains tension between the two partners to make Britain continue its path as an awkward partner. While the Blair and Brown administrations have improved Britain's relationship with the EU, there still exists an awkward relationship between the two partners. Though political parties have change, Britain continues to maintain its position as the EU's awkward partner as a result of the domestic fear in accepting the EU's role and influence in British politics; the strong sense of maintaining national pride and through the rejection of European federalism; and finally, as a result of the continued focus on maintaining a strong relationship with the United States.

Nevertheless, while domestic uncertainty towards European Union has remained prevalent in Britain, one can say that the EU has indeed had an impact on British politics and Britain's foreign policy. Once known for its dominant decision-making role in international affairs and in its own domestic policies, Britain has shifted its view of global politics to that where it has realized that its relationship with the United States and the EU are equally important for the success of the nation. Thus, while Britain still remains an awkward partner to the EU, the steps and actions that Britain has taken in the two most recent administrations - and with any luck in the upcoming administration - can be claimed as an attempt by the British nation to take slow and calculated steps towards ultimately embracing its membership within the European Union.