

# A European Britain or a British Europe?

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European Union flag. Credit: Vsaid and Creative Commons

Britain does not need to become more European, but Europe should become more British, a leading academic told a debate in the Cambridge series at the Hay Festival last week.

Speaking in a debate on [Europe](#), Professor Brendan Simms of the Department of Political and International Studies [Polis], said the union between [England](#) and [Scotland](#) and the subsequent creation of the [United States](#) which endorsed the Anglo-Scottish union should be a model for Europe. “The Eurozone needs to take a leaf out of the Anglo-Scottish union’s book,” he said, “and federalise its debt and ensure it has sound finances, common political representatives, an elected president, a senate and a common language and army.”

Professor Simms, who is writing a book on European geopolitics, counselled that Britain should not join a British-style Europe in the first

instance since “the European project was designed to fix something that wasn’t broken in Britain”.

If the union was a success, however, Britain could consider joining at a later date, he said. He said Britain would be part of a three-layered structure with the single Eurozone at the centre, the wider European community, including Britain, in the next layer and the North Atlantic federation in the outer layer.

Simms said he didn’t think Britain should fear not being at the centre. “A Eurozone political union would be flattery by imitation,” he said.

Robert Tombs, professor of history and an expert in Anglo-French relations, said France would not accept an English-speaking Anglo-Saxon model of Europe.

He believed Britain needed a much clearer vision of what it wanted from Europe. France was very sure of how Europe could work in its interest and had had considerable success as a result. For instance, it had never been wholly sure of the idea of having the UK as a full European partner and has used the European Union framework to keep Germany under control.

In any event, he said, Europe was essentially a French/German marriage with Britain being the bit on the side.

“Britain needs to face up to this and think how we coexist with a more integrated core if fiscal union occurs,” he said. “It’s not just about whether we are in or out of Europe. We don’t seem to have much influence either way. We need a clear vision of what we want from Europe.”

Professor Christopher Hill of Polis called for a more intelligent debate

on Europe and criticised press coverage for its slanted and simplified coverage of all issues relating to Europe and for exaggerating the importance of Britain's struggles with Europe.

Whatever Britain did or didn't do in Europe, he said, would have much less impact on the outside world than most people imagined. The British debate was far too self-regarding. Even if we remained outside an integrating euro-bloc dominated by Germany it was unlikely we would be faced with a new hostile power. For historical reasons Germany was very reluctant to assert itself and did not wish to be again a major military power.

On the other hand, he stated, it was impossible for Britain to be totally adrift from Europe, no matter what Eurosceptic politicians and commentators said. "We cannot help but be entangled in Europe, culturally, economically and politically, whatever institutional arrangements are made," he said.

He poured scorn on those who argued against European foreign policy cooperation. "European countries have been converging on foreign policy attitudes since Vietnam," he said, citing also the more recent example of the Balkans where he said the EU had been a stabilising force since the mid 1990s. Despite all the bluster about keeping Britain's foreign policy independent, he said, Britain had played a leading role in promoting common approaches to [foreign policy](#). This was a pragmatic approach since "a middle range power like the UK cannot rely on ad hoc bilateral deals."

Professor Simms agreed that "independence is illusory and that is what we are seeing now," adding that he believed a vote for Scottish independence amid the current economic crisis would be "suicidal".

Professor Hill said the media had so swayed the debate against Europe

that a referendum now might lead to [Britain](#) leaving Europe. Professor Simms said there was little point in different countries having different referenda at different times. Instead the whole of Europe should vote on the way forward with the same question asked in different countries at the same time.

“It is extraordinary that a new state could be created with no democratic backing,” he said. However, Professor Tombs felt this option was unlikely to take place and said he doubted that Europe would adopt an Anglo-American model. “It’s more likely to follow the model of the Habsburg empire,” he said.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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