

Remain

By Sir Keith Thomas, University of Oxford

One doesn't have to be a historian to see that a decision to leave the EU might well trigger another Scottish referendum and a vote for independence. It would certainly cause grave difficulties for Northern Ireland, by setting up a new barrier between it and the Irish Republic, and endangering the peace process. Brexit, which is overwhelmingly an English rather than a British movement, carries with it the prospect of the Balkanisation and ultimate dissolution of the United Kingdom. That would be a catastrophe and is, for me, a Welshman, in itself a sufficient reason for voting to remain.

But what distinctive contribution can historians offer to the current debate? What can we add that hasn't already been said? I think we can offer a broader perspective by raising larger issues than those on which the politicians and the media have hitherto concentrated.

First, though, I must make a narrow, self-interested point about what Brexit would mean for the historical profession. We should no longer be eligible for funding by the European Research Council, from whom the UK currently gets more grants in the Humanities and Social Sciences than any other country. We would lose many of the gifted students and academics who come from Europe to British universities. We would have to say goodbye to the easy freedom of movement, access to health care, and long-term residence, on which scholarly work in European libraries and archives depends. This would also affect those undergraduates who currently spend a year on the continent as part of their course; and it would accelerate the decline in the study of modern languages which already threatens to make us a nation of monoglots. All this would be particularly ironic, since British historians, many of them present tonight, have made and are making a disproportionate contribution to the history of Europe. In his book Cosmopolitan Islanders, Sir Richard Evans reminds us of just how many of the standard works on the history of Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and other countries have been written by British scholars. Their work in the future would be seriously impeded by new barriers to their easy coming and going.

The second and larger point for historians to make is that Britain has always belonged in Europe, geographically, politically, economically and culturally.

For much of our history we have been part of a larger European entity, ruled by Romans, Danes, Normans, Frenchmen, a Dutchman, and the German Electors, later Kings, of Hanover. English monarchs governed a large part of France until the mid-fifteenth century and until the sixteenth recognised the spiritual supremacy of the Roman Pope. The English Reformation would have been impossible without the German Luther and the Frenchman Calvin. Our artistic, literary, and scientific culture would have been inconceivable without classical Greece and Rome, medieval Christendom, the Italian Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment. From Romanesque churches to Palladian country houses, from chemistry to classical scholarship, from Marx to Hayek, we owe many of our distinctive cultural and political achievements to continental example. In the eighteenth century, the philosopher David Hume declared that all our progress had arisen from imitating foreigners: 'we daily adopt,' he wrote, 'in every art, the inventions and improvements of our neighbours: had they not first instructed us we should have remained barbarians'. In war and diplomacy, as Brendan Simms recently showed, Europe was always more important to us than the rest of the world, even at the height of the British Empire. Today, when we have no empire, a close relationship with the rest of Europe matters even more.

Since Brexit plays heavily on worries about immigration, the third contribution historians can make is to point out that we are a nation entirely composed of immigrants: in prehistoric times Celts and Picts, in the early middle ages, Angles, Saxons and Jutes, Vikings and Normans; in early modern times, Flemings, Walloons and Huguenots; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Germans, Irish, Jews, West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, East African Asians, and many others. Whether they came as conquerors, as refugees or as economic migrants, they were almost invariably resented, even hated, when they arrived. English history abounds in riots and demonstrations against aliens. Yet in due course the newcomers were all assimilated and made vital contributions to national life. The medieval cloth industry was indebted to Flemish artisans, English silver craftsmanship to the Huguenots, science and scholarship to Jewish refugees. Where would the study of history be without Namier, Gombrich, Pevsner, Elton, Berlin, and Hobsbawm? Even Lord Acton was born in Naples, and in the words of the old DNB, 'never more than half an Englishman'. As for popular culture, we need only look at the triumphant Leicester City Football team. Its eleven members comprise one each from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany and Italy, along with players from Algeria,

Argentina, Ghana, Japan and Thailand. Only one was born in Britain, and he plays for Jamaica.

Of course, the potential scale of immigration today is greater than it was in the past but history tells us that we should regard it as not just a challenge but also an opportunity.

Fourthly, there is the question of national sovereignty, threatened, says Brexit, by Brussels. Of course, it is, and rightly so. For more than a century, our sovereignty has been limited by a huge body of international law. The European Court of Human Rights, which is not part of the EU, is deliberately intended to override national governments by ensuring that they observe these rights (mostly drafted by British lawyers anyway). European legislation, interpreted by the European Court of Justice, prescribes the necessary trading standards and conditions of employment for any nation participating in the single market; they include equal opportunities and improved working conditions. In practice, of course, EU directives seldom conflict with British ones and mostly echo what we have already enacted here.

The appeal to unlimited national sovereignty is fundamentally anachronistic. When the professional study of history got under way in the nineteenth century it took as its central unit the nation state. Today, as every undergraduate will tell you, the nation state is no longer an adequate unit of analysis. In a world of cheap travel, instant communications, and fluid identities, it has been overridden by great military-political power blocs, international banks, and global corporations. When Rupert Murdoch is probably more powerful than the British Prime Minister, and when companies like Amazon or Google can avoid paying their fair share of tax in countries where they trade, absolute national sovereignty is an illusion. But the example of the USA shows that federal oversight is compatible with a great deal of local sovereignty.

Finally, the historian can only marvel at what an astonishing phenomenon the European Union has been. There is no precedent, for this voluntary bonding of nations who have been each other's enemies for centuries, yet have come together in a joint commitment to the principles of liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This remarkable achievement remains an inspiration to other regions of the world; and its goals, of peace, cooperation, respect and reconciliation remain as noble as they ever were. Of course, the EU has structural defects. So do the constitutions of every country, our own included,

for our first-past-the-post electoral system also has a democratic deficit. But the EU's imperfections are no reason for pulling out. Rather we should stay inside, influence its decisions and work to make its structure better

To withdraw at this moment would weaken Europe in the face of external threats, whether from Middle Eastern terrorists, who cannot be defeated without the sharing of intelligence, and from Russia under Putin, who is smarting under EU sanctions after his invasion of the Ukraine. Brexit would unbalance the EU by leaving Germany as the dominant power and depriving the Western nations of British support in combating the illiberal tendencies currently displayed by the governments of many central European countries. The former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has said baldly that the EU's very existence depends on Britain staying in. For us to pull out now would be an appalling abnegation of responsibility. In the words of Sir Michael Howard, an exceptionally acute observer of current affairs, Brexit would 'hasten a process of political, economic and military disintegration that will ultimately destroy the world order that has been painfully created over the past half century'. That process of disintegration, he argues, can be checked only by strengthening, not weakening, the institutions we have created to deal with it.

Unfortunately, both sides in the national debate have mostly ignored these larger issues, preferring to concentrate on the economic consequences for us of coming out, on the (possibly correct) assumption that that's all most people really care about. Unscrupulous politicians, and ruthless newspaper proprietors, have appealed to the crudest forms of Little Englandism and fanned the flames of xenophobic hatred of the foreigner. It will be difficult for the Remain campaign to broaden ordinary voters' horizons, by alerting them to the larger issues. But it is imperative that they should try to do so. The eminent scientist Martin Rees has estimated that, for various reasons, the human race has only a 50/50 chance of surviving the 21st century. In view of the threats that face the whole species, it seems obvious that we should cling together, not tear ourselves apart. As Edmund Burke wrote of King William III's creation in the 1690s of the grand alliance against the aggrandisement of Louis XIV: 'the greatest resource of Europe was in England: not in a sort of England detached from the rest of the world . . . but in that sort of England who, sympathetic with the adversity or happiness of mankind, felt that nothing in human affairs was foreign to her.'