

Commentary

A DECADE OF BREXIT: WHERE DOES THE UK STAND TODAY?

Anand Menon

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham's comment at the Labour Party conference that the United Kingdom (UK) should consider options when it comes to its European Union (EU) ties, including rejoining the group, has ignited a debate that will be hard to shut down. Why did he make such a comment, and what are the options the UK must now confront?

There are several reasons why the British government is rethinking – or at least debating – its current relationship with the EU. One is economic. Given that Andy Burnham (and indeed Keir Starmer before him) has been willing to talk in credible terms about the economic impact of Brexit, there are incentives for attempting to repair some of the damage done. The contradictions in the position adopted by the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves were becoming unsustainable. She claimed that Britain's economy could be up to 8% smaller due to leaving the EU yet proposed only limited refinements to the relationship.

Secondly, the international environment has changed profoundly since the UK voted to leave the EU. For one thing, it has become more protectionist, with even formerly liberal trading states increasingly adopting mercantilist measures aimed at securing supply chains and defending national industries. This was even the case under the Joe Biden administration in the United States (US) with the Inflation Reduction Act; the EU's 'made in Europe' legislation is not too dissimilar. Being outside these continental-sized blocs is becoming more economically damaging.

Additionally, the second Trump presidency has served to cast doubt on the reliability of the US security guarantee to Europe. Whatever the future holds for transatlantic relations, it seems likely that Europeans will need to take greater responsibility for their own security – which in turn will require greater collaboration among themselves. This logic has not escaped the UK, which is seeking closer collaboration with Europe over security and defense policy.

Finally, there are political considerations behind the British government's rethinking of EU ties. Following the 2024 General Election, and under the increasingly unpopular Starmer premiership, the governing Labour Party lost increasing numbers of voters to other parties on the progressive left, including the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National Party (SNP). This slide in the polls has been halted and, to a degree, reversed by Andy Burnham, but Labour Party strategists are well aware that even more progressive voters might be attracted should the party come up with a more ambitious offer on Europe in time for the next election.

The reasons driving the Prime Minister's decision to relight the Brexit debate aside, what are the actual prospects for Britain's reintegration into the EU?

It is effectively impossible to even try to predict what might happen next. The course

of global politics over the next few years is highly uncertain; should President Trump alienate European allies still further, their calculations concerning the need for cooperation might change profoundly. Equally, while Andy Burnham currently enjoys levels of popularity unique among recent prime ministers, this situation can change rapidly.

While the incentives for Britain's reintegration into the EU might change, the choices the country faces seem fairly rigid. The EU has made clear that the UK will not be able to pick and choose those aspects of European integration in which it wants to participate. "Cherrypicking," as it has come to be known, will not be allowed. The UK will therefore have to decide which of the existing options for relations with the bloc it wants.

These range from the status quo to a customs union – with the UK adopting the EU's tariff system and reaping the benefits of a consequent reduction in trade paperwork with EU partners – to membership of the single market to applying for full membership of the club.

What is striking about these options is that the 'middle ground' possibilities – notably the customs union and the single market – appear less than attractive after careful scrutiny. The customs union would not do much to reverse the economic damage caused by Brexit. By contrast, single market membership would, but the UK would be reduced to being a "rule taker": obliged to follow EU rules with no formal say over what those rules contain.

The point is that it is all too likely that the debate in the UK will quickly crystallize along the lines of 'join' versus 'stay out': in other words, that the country will return to the debate it had at the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Time will tell whether this is something Andy Burnham really wants. It is difficult to avoid the impression, however, that his conference speech served to reignite discussion on Brexit. It will be very hard to stop a debate that the 'rejoin' side in particular has been desperate to spark for some time. Whether this enthusiasm is reflected in the Labour Party's manifesto ahead of the next election will perhaps be the decisive issue that shapes the relationship between the UK and the EU for the foreseeable future.

About the Author



Anand Menon is Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London. He is a Director at Public First and directs the UK in a Changing Europe project. He has published numerous academic books and articles and contributes regularly to both print and broadcast media. He is a trustee of Full Fact, a member of the Strategic Council of the European Policy Centre, a Council member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, and an associate fellow of Chatham House.

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Author: Anand Menon

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