

I can pinpoint the exact moment when it became clear to me that the EU was incapable of changing and that ultimately Britain's days inside it were numbered.

It was on Thursday, July 10th, 2003 at the signing ceremony closing the European Constitutional Convention. I had spent 15 months almost full time in Brussels on behalf of Britain to negotiate the document that eventually turned into the Lisbon treaty.

Everyone was standing around sipping champagne to the strains of Beethoven's Ninth. But I was in no mood for self-congratulation. I grumpily scribbled my name, declined the drink and headed straight for the airport.

Seeing Europe's power politics operating up close had not been pretty. It was in the worst traditions of the EU--a mule-like refusal to listen to democratic concerns or accept any suggestions of deviation from the orthodoxy of political integration.

Giscard d'Estaing did a masterly job of managing the whole event on behalf of the people who in his opinion mattered.

For the rest of us, apparent progress turned out to be an illusion. Until the last 48 hours, we thought we had agreement on a whole range of issues – and it all unravelled.

During the Convention, whenever I typed Giscard's name the spell-checker prompted me to put Discard. Now that is what I call artificial intelligence.

Time to break free

I shouldn't have been surprised. The EU is an institution that keeps to a single trajectory, incapable of critical self-examination.

Questions like democratic accountability and economic competitiveness, which are so central for us in Britain, are downgraded in case they divert from the European Project. It is integration at whatever cost or consequence.

This referendum is the opportunity to set ourselves free from an organisation that only serves its own interests.

That is why I am proud to chair the Vote Leave campaign.

In saying this, I have to acknowledge that it is the culmination of a sometimes difficult journey. All my instincts for most of my life have led me towards wanting close cooperation between European countries.

I am the child of a refugee from eastern Europe. I grew up with the recollections of the horror not just of war itself, but the painful efforts to rebuild a country.

I also grew up in a Federal state. So I count myself as one of the few British politicians for whom federalism is not an "F" word.

But after more than 40 years living in the UK and 20 years in British politics I have also learnt to appreciate the basic building blocks of modern democracies. The rule of law determined by a government elected by and accountable to a free people—a demos.

The EU does not and never will be built like that. Leaving will allow us to return real democratic control to important areas of national life; from international trade, the right to work and live in Britain to business regulation.

We would also regain control over the £350m subscription we pay Brussels every week. We could spend it on schools, the NHS, the environment, cutting the deficit-- the choice will become ours again.

The last referendum

When I moved here from Germany in 1974, a year after the UK joined the Common Market, membership seemed to make sense.

The country was in the throes of the “three day week”. The miners were on strike and national politicians seemed to have lost control.

Germany was at the height of the Wirtschaftswunder – or economic miracle - and it was hoped that some continental vigour and glitz might rub off on a tired country. Economics drove British interest in the EEC. That was as true for the government as it was true for the voters. Let’s not forget that the words Common Market appeared on the ballot paper in the 1975 membership referendum.

Roy Jenkins, then Labour’s loudest pro-European voice, campaigned for a Yes because he believed the EEC had changed--dropping its goal of economic and monetary union and shedding its federalist ambitions.

But Europe did not reform after 1975, or after the 2003 convention. And it is not going to now.

As someone once said.... insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for a different result. There are still people who think Europe will change. But the EU has broken its pledges over and over again.

The Maastricht Treaty promised no bailout of the euro. But as soon as the 2008 crisis hit, the promise was discarded – and Britain was told it had to chip in. We were promised the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights would have no more legal effect than the Sun or the Beano.

But that pretence was soon dropped after the European Court of Justice ruled that the charter has legal effect in Britain and our Supreme Court confirmed the decision. This charter has already been used to interfere in our attempts to monitor suspected terrorists and deport criminals like the daughter of Abu Hamza, the hate preacher.

Of course Europe has its own definition of reform, and that is More Europe. There was a big push for deeper integration in the 1990s. That was after German reunification when the decision was made to create Economic and Monetary Union with a single currency; followed by the pulling down of borders with the Schengen agreement. Britain secured opt-outs from both initiatives.

With hindsight, it feels as if that was the start of a 20-year process of Britain peeling away from the European project, which is culminating now.

Dangers of staying in

Voting to remain on 23rd June is not just about staying in the EU as it is today, but staying in the EU as it will look in 2025 or 2035.

The difference now compared with 2003 is that the EU knows exactly what its next stage of development should look like.

We can read it in the so-called Five Presidents' report published last summer.

It details a three-stage plan to be completed by 2025 for a political union including ideas such as a euro-area treasury and a single representative on international bodies like the IMF.

The Five Presidents' Report-- its title alone is a reminder that we are not dealing with a very streamlined institution -- describes an EU where the eurozone's interests gradually take over Brussels institutions.

Let us be charitable and suppose the EU sticks to the commitment it gave David Cameron in the renegotiation that the eurozone will not discriminate against non-members.

We may be able to fend off some negative change, but our ability to bring positive reform will wither. At the same time we will remain subject to all the restrictions on our sovereignty and economy that Brussels imposes.

Eurozone crisis

The Eurozone is facing long-term crisis even if it manages to put its present agonies behind it. The daunting demographic reality shows the Eurozone is a ticking time bomb.

The population of the currency's member euro countries is predicted to fall over the next 35 years as the number of over-65s grows rapidly.

Research we are releasing today shows that by 2050 the zone's pension bill will go up by 2.1% of GDP because of this ageing population. This will fall onto the shoulders of a shrinking number of workers. Once you add in the rising cost of debt interest, this implies taxes in the euro countries going up by 17.6%.

As Mervyn King, the former Bank of England governor, concluded in his book *Alchemy*, there are two likely alternatives.

For the single currency to survive, we need a country called Europe, or the euro breaks up.

For us in the UK that means either consigning the nation state to history or being part of the currency's messy break-up.

Britain clearly does not want any part in either of those options, and is better off staying clear.

There are other clear pointers towards a country called Europe—like the borderless Schengen zone, if it survives. A successful Schengen requires an EU police force to control the external borders. And if you look at some of the developments between Germany and the Netherlands, there is a European army in the making.

Crying wolf

Those on the Remain campaign warn of disaster if we leave.

We have heard these warnings of doom before -- from those who supported our joining the euro and the Exchange Rate Mechanism.

In the run-up to joining the ERM, the head of the Stock Exchange said London's status as Europe's financial centre would be threatened if we stayed out. The governor of the Bank of England and the CBI were enthusiasts.

We went in, we crashed out -- and enjoyed our longest period of growth for at least 200 years.

It was not long, though, before they were at it again – and Michael Heseltine said that staying out of the euro was “threatening great swathes of British industry”.

Thankfully, the Labour government did not listen. And free of the shackles of a fixed exchange rate, we have recovered from the financial crisis more quickly and strongly than the continental economies.

Benefits of Out

To those who say leaving is a leap in the dark I say it is jumping from darkness into light. I agree with what the Prime Minister said a few months ago: “My argument is not going to be in any way that Britain can't succeed outside the EU. Of course we could. We're a great country.”

The shape of the global economy and the way it works have changed profoundly since Britain joined the EU.

As other economic powers have risen, so Europe's share of the world economy has sunk. And whether it is in cars, labour law, banking or food, many of the rules governing Europe's internal market are now agreed globally, with the EU acting as a costly middleman to pass them down. The idea of regional economic blocs will soon seem as outdated as so many other kinds of middle management.

Trade, the motor of globalisation, has speeded up thanks to the steady fall in tariffs since the creation of the World Trade Organisation in 1995.

If we leave, we can take back our WTO seat, which Brussels currently occupies on our behalf, and reach our own trade deals, creating new prosperity and jobs.

We may decide to speed up talks with emerging economic superpowers like India and China and perhaps to reboot our relations with old friends like Canada and New Zealand.

Asking if the EU itself would be reluctant to reach a new deal with us is a legitimate question. And no doubt the Commission and those who draw their salaries and pensions from the EU would not be too happy.

But are we really to believe that member states would throw away the free trade they currently enjoy with this country, the world's fifth-biggest economy? Would they really betray the interests of their own people like that? Would the Germans really no longer buy Minis from the UK and stop selling BMWs and Audi's to us?

We are told that the EU would never agree to free trade without us agreeing to free movement of people.

In the case of Britain, I believe control of our immigration policy should be something we debate and decide on here.

We should not simply accept EU preconditions.

This does not mean we are an inward-looking country. Just that we are one that looks out not only to Europe, but to the wider world too.

Is it fair that my Birmingham constituents who are the grandchildren of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent find it so hard to get their relations here for family weddings when someone from Romania or Latvia can come and go at will?

Immigration is placing the NHS under huge strain and undermining patient safety, and our ability to control the NHS could be further undermined by the way the pressure that could be made worse by the TTIP agreement the EU is negotiating with the US.

We could consider a points system that favours those with the skills that can help Britain. How we manage migration is just one among numerous issues we will need to discuss when the process of leaving starts. As Angela Merkel says, "wir schaffen das"-- we'll get there. And there could be other benefits from leaving. Perhaps, as Stuart Rose from the In campaign so kindly pointed out, wages may even go up.

Conclusion

It has not always been comfortable for me to see the direction Europe has taken—the arc from the recovery and optimism of my parents' generation to my disillusionment today.

Now, I look forward to the kind of country I would like my grandchildren to grow up in.

Whatever happens, I hope they can live in an open, free and prosperous Britain at ease with its neighbours and with the choices it has made.

For years, British governments have tried to be pragmatic about Europe. They have taken the view that the day of decision could be kicked down the road, that we could be at the heart of Europe without being part of the state-building project.

But once the euro was created it became impossible to remain in both camps.

Now the time has come to decide what is in the best long-term interests of the country.

If the EU were an energy supplier or a bank, you would long ago have stopped believing its hype, you would have seen it was hopeless value for money and never listened to its customers.

You would just move your account.

It is time for Britain to recognise that Brussels has had enough chances. And that the only safe option is to Vote Leave.