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Britain doesn’t need anything from the EU. There is no reason to accede to its demands



Remainers such as Sir Keir have a deep-seated need to atone for the sin of Brexit, by giving away everything Brussels asks for

My favourite moment in the 2016 referendum campaign came in a cavernous lecture hall at Exeter University. I had spent an hour doing my best to convince the students to vote Leave. As we chatted afterwards, an undergraduate asked how my side would react if, despite everything, Britain decided to stay in.

Our local Vote Leave organiser, a stately Tory matron, answered for me. “If, after all this, we vote to remain,” she declared in a Lady Bracknell tone, “the EU will treat us” – here she paused, savouring the word – “as their *biatch*.” She was right, of course. A Remain vote would have delivered Britain to the Brussels federalists, defeated and subdued. Yet here we are, nine years on, perilously close to putting ourselves in that position anyway.

If Sir Keir Starmer gets his way, Britain will be not so much the EU’s biatch as its gimp. He will hand us over, wrapped in shiny black leather, with a ball gag in our mouth, prepared to do as we are told. Give us your fish! Pay for our students! Deploy your soldiers where we need them! Follow our rules in perpetuity!

Two-tier Keir is offering a two-tier EU. One tier, which contains the 27 full members, will carry on as now, becoming ever more stifling, conformist and uncompetitive. The second, which consists only of Britain, will be the same, only without voting rights.

You might think my gimp image is over the top, but the truth is that Starmer’s submissiveness vis-à-vis Brussels is psychological, not economic. He experienced the referendum result as a profound emotional shock, and tried for years to overturn it. Like many irreconcilable Remainers, he convinced himself that Brexit had wrecked our economy.

How, you might ask, could anyone think that after years of Britain outperforming the eurozone? The answer is that there were plenty of clever Remainers telling one another what they wanted to hear.

Listen, for example, to Callum Williams, the senior economics writer at *The Economist*.

“When the UK voted for Brexit, when I look deep into my psyche, there was a phenomenon where I was like, I want the UK economy to go down the toilet as a punishment for voting for Brexit. And I think a lot of people did. We were looking for evidence that the UK economy was about to collapse. And in practice, that didn’t happen at all.”

Europhiles therefore took to quoting alarmist forecasts, many of them made during the campaign, as if they were established facts. They started measuring the UK economy, not against

the EU, but against some made-up figures supposedly representing what would have happened had we stayed.

Labour came to power convinced that if it only undid the barriers raised (so it assured itself) because of Tory xenophobia, then GDP would increase automatically.

Once in office, it found that things were not so simple. Yes, there were obstacles to trade – notably in financial services – but these were the result of EU protectionism, not British standoffishness.

Meanwhile, Brexit had brought opportunities. From gene editing to artificial intelligence, Labour ministers were soon boasting about their new regulatory freedoms.

Most obviously, Britain was doing trade deals more nimbly and ambitiously than the lumbering Euro-mastodon. Our formal membership of the Pacific market, the CPTPP, came into effect shortly after Labour took power, and deals with India and the US followed earlier this month. The India accord is significant.

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Never before has that teeming nation agreed such an ambitious commercial relationship with another country. The US deal is a stop-gap, a temporary arrangement pending a proper treaty to be ratified later this year.

Both have left the EU standing. Neither would have been possible without Brexit. Yet the PM has taken credit for them, and I don’t begrudge him his moment. Our trade with the EU had been falling in proportionate terms for years before the referendum, and it has continued to decline since. We need to recover our global vocation, to look to the opulent markets of the Commonwealth and other fast-growing nations.

Yet Starmer now proposes an arrangement with the EU that would not only imperil future trade accords (including the pending agreement with the US), but might be incompatible with our membership of the CPTPP.

The EU has always wanted to take back control of our trade policy. It especially resents the idea of our buying foods that it has banned on protectionist grounds – Australian, Canadian and American beef, for example. It is important to stress that such imports would not squeeze British farmers, who produce less than the country consumes; but



they would displace French, Irish and other EU imports.

To keep Britain as their captive market, their treasure island, Eurocrats want to set our standards in perpetuity. We need to understand the depth of their ambition. There may be reasons for aligning with EU standards on a case-by-case basis when economies of scale demand it. But that is not what is being proposed. What Brussels wants is to dictate our standards permanently and unilaterally.

The phrase for this in Euro-speak is “dynamic alignment”, though few things are less dynamic than the EU. Alignment would mean giving up

Trade off: the Prime Minister with Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission

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forever our freedom to innovate on, say, gene editing. It would represent a total capitulation.

The alternative to dynamic alignment is mutual recognition, whereby we effectively agree to trust each other’s regulators. The EU has such a deal with New Zealand, whose standards, while high, differ more widely from its own than ours do. No, this has nothing to do with consumer safety or the Irish border or chlorinated chicken or any such nonsense. It is an act of naked imperialism, aimed at keeping Britain as a perpetual vassal state.

It is extraordinary that EU diplomats are asking for such a thing, let alone

that our British negotiators are countenancing it. But if you feel a deep psychological need to atone for Brexit, you may have trouble focusing on the national interest.

The EU wants Britain involved with its defence. Britain’s policy, even as a member, was to oppose any defence integration outside Nato. Yet, incredibly, things have somehow been twisted around so that the initiative is presented as a concession, not a demand. Britain, we are given to understand, is being allowed in, not asked to help.

And not just allowed in, but made to pay. For the privilege of being allowed to defend Europe from foes who do not directly threaten our island, we are told that we must open our fishing waters to EU vessels.

If there is one thing that Eurocrats care about even more than our trade and our fishing grounds, it is being able to educate their children at UK universities, subsidised by the British taxpayer. Hence, we read, the idea of a youth mobility scheme – which was an

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EU rather than a British demand in the first place – is contingent on letting European students pay British rather than foreign rates.

Again and again, the EU is demanding payment in exchange for accepting payment. It plainly has the measure of the people on our side of the table.

A wiser approach would be to sit tight and ask for nothing. We are doing perfectly well where we are. We have the most comprehensive trade deal that the EU has ever signed with any country that is not in the process of joining. We really don’t need any of the initiatives that are on the table.

But, just as with the Chagos negotiations, the other side senses that Labour takes pride in rising above what it sees as a nationalist and small-minded interpretation of the British interest.

Then again, Labour strategists seem to have had the nous to shelve the Chagos deal, belatedly waking up to the fact that handing money to foreigners while hiking taxes at home is not a winning combination.

If they were to take a similar attitude to the EU reset, they might reverse their slide in the polls. But, deep down, we know that they won’t. In their souls, they had already surrendered before the talks began.

MICHAEL ASHCROFT

Trump still has the power to bring peace to Europe



The US can compel Putin to sit down with Zelensky and accept that Ukraine is a free and sovereign nation

Tensions ran high last week as pressure mounted on Vladimir Putin to attend direct talks with Volodymyr Zelensky in Istanbul. On May 10, four European leaders travelled to Kyiv in a clear show of solidarity, urging the Kremlin to follow through on its own initiative for face-to-face talks with Ukraine’s president. Donald Trump raised the stakes further – suggesting he might go to Turkey himself, should the meeting materialise.

The European Union reinforced its position with a 17th round of sanctions targeting Russia’s shadow fleet – oil tankers operating under foreign flags to ship sanctioned crude, sustaining Moscow’s war chest.

For the first time since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Putin appeared cornered. Journalists flocked to Istanbul, hopeful they might witness a historic day. But the disappointment followed swiftly.

In classic fashion, Putin sent a low-level delegation instead of showing up. This was no coincidence. It was a calculated move to downgrade Zelensky while elevating the Russian president as Trump’s equal in direct talks. The Americans took the bait. Both administrations are now reportedly arranging a Trump-Putin meeting “to stop the killings on the front line”.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian and Russian negotiators did meet in Istanbul. Ukraine reiterated its demand for a 30-day ceasefire – something it had already accepted weeks ago under US pressure. Russia in turn unleashed fire on Ukraine, turning April into the deadliest month in terms of civilian casualties since September last year. Ukraine also insisted on the return of Ukrainian children and a full exchange of prisoners of war.

Russia predictably stuck to maximalist positions: demanding control of four Ukrainian territories, including areas it doesn’t even hold, and the full disarmament of Ukraine. The only agreement was on the exchange of prisoners.

Crucially, Ukraine continues to

insist on a direct meeting between Zelensky and Putin. And rightly so. These talks are not merely about military or political outcomes – they are about Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Russia’s war has never been about the protection of Russian speakers or the supposed encroachment of Nato. The real threat to Putin has always been Ukraine’s independence: a free, democratic Slavic nation on Russia’s doorstep choosing its own path. To the Kremlin, that is a virus capable of spreading across its borders.

That is precisely why Putin refuses to acknowledge Ukraine’s agency, preferring instead to negotiate with Trump directly. He believes he can extract more concessions from Washington than from Kyiv.

If this bilateral Trump-Putin meeting goes ahead, it will shape not just the outcome of current talks, but Ukraine’s future. President Trump must demand that Putin meets Zelensky face to face. Ending this war at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield, is a noble goal. But any agreement must begin with a basic truth: Ukraine is a sovereign, independent European state with full Western backing. It will never return to Moscow’s sphere of influence.

If that message isn’t delivered – and accepted by the Kremlin – any ceasefire will be temporary, and the war will inevitably continue. Only a settlement that secures Ukraine’s sovereignty can bring lasting peace.

Trump holds real leverage. Congress is currently considering the Sanctioning Russia Act, introduced by Senator Lindsey Graham with broad bipartisan support. The bill mandates severe penalties if Russia refuses to negotiate in good faith, including secondary sanctions and tariffs of up to 500 per cent on countries that continue buying Russian oil and gas. This would strike at the heart of Russia’s economic partnerships.

Donald Trump has all the cards: over Russia, and over the nations that could pressure it into a real peace. He must play them wisely. The future of Ukraine – and global security – depends on it.



The slide into online exams and ‘continuous assessment’ will have to be reversed and rigour restored to academe

Our higher education system has been in crisis for ages – excessive student debt, universities in financial Queer Street, excessive dependence on foreign students, rampant wokeism, degrees in silly subjects, trivial research projects – it’s a familiar story.

Somehow, it all trundles along, aided by vested interests and politicians who kick as many problems as possible into the long grass. But now technology is bringing a new threat to academic business-as-usual – in the form of AI.

Modern universities are not about imbuing the values of disinterested learning and scholarship. They are educational sausage machines, processing young people for the labour market. A degree is an essential ticket to most regular well-paid jobs. Higher education institutions must be able to certify that the sausages they process meet a certain minimum standard, but also to differentiate the best from the also-rans. They need an assessment system.

For most of the 20th century, assessment depended largely on unseen timed examinations. Invigilated by beady-eyed disciplinarians, these were a rite of passage which we all used to endure.

But things have changed. Progressive educationalists told us that traditional exams relied too heavily on memory, and tested only a limited range of skills. There should be much more emphasis on “continuous assessment”. Despite the highfalutin notions of those claiming to teach teachers how to teach, for many academics this merely meant setting “What were the causes of the First World War?” as a piece of coursework, rather than as an exam question. This to be done in the student’s own time and with access to myriad resources, including dodgy “essay mills”.

Over time the movement to coursework accelerated as new reasons were found to demonise exams. They were too stressful, with

more and more students being found to have mental health problems which meant they had to be excused, or given extra time, or given an amanuensis. Then it was found that students from some ethnic backgrounds fared badly in exams. Rules were changed to allow multiple resits, or to disregard some modules in counting final results.

Then of course Covid made in-person exams impossible, and institutions switched to 100 per cent online assessment. Many institutions have never returned to the exam hall as student unions kicked up too much of a fuss.

The result of downplaying traditional exams has been that degree awards convey less and less information to employers. Virtually everyone passes, and third-class

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honours and even lower seconds are largely a thing of the past. Thirty years ago only 7 per cent of candidates got a first; today it’s around a third – in a much larger student population. These improved results, implausibly justified by academic apologists as the result of “better teaching”, may keep fee-paying students happy in the short run. But they are leading employers to distrust degree results and increasingly look for other information about candidates, including setting their own tests.

The advent of ChatGPT two years ago has made coursework essays and online exams completely pointless. In seconds AI can generate a pretty good answer to any question you care to ask or any written task you set. A little tarting-up by students, such as adding a few words here and there or even introducing deliberate typos or errors, will fool tutors or even AI-detecting software.

Of course progressive academics are in denial. We must accept AI and encourage students to use it, to build on it and focus on other more interesting tasks than researching and building coherent arguments. One suggestion is to get students to use AI to produce an essay outline and then to critique it. While that may well be an interesting one-off activity, it hardly seems the basis for the dozens of assessments we would expect students to undertake in a three- or four-year programme.

But the only way to maintain any standards at all would seem to be a return to last century’s unseen examinations – or even better, perhaps, oral exams which were the norm before the mid-19th century and which still play a more significant part in the assessment systems in some other countries.

But this will have knock-on effects which our system will find it difficult to accommodate. There will need to be more emphasis on producing tangible skills rather than rewarding waffle-merchants of the Boris Johnson ilk. More students will fail or drop out, which will make recruitment more difficult and further threaten university finances. Many degree programmes will no longer be viable. Research will need to be more practical and more original. New types of shorter courses will make greater sense than many doctoral programmes in the humanities and the social sciences. There will be a premium on apprentice-style programmes with employers, focusing on real employer needs.

We will probably end up with a much-reduced university sector, with fewer young people wasting time on courses they don’t necessarily enjoy and which don’t greatly improve their earnings potential. Taxpayers’ money can be redeployed elsewhere. AI will have done us all a favour.

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