



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK campaigners upbeat on prospect of rejoining an evolving European Union



The few thousand diehard pro-Europeans who marched through central London at the weekend calling for Britain to rejoin the European Union, could be forgiven for having a new-found spring in their step.

Days earlier, opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer lifted a self-imposed vow of silence on the B-word - Brexit - to propose a "closer trading relationship" with the 27-nation bloc.

Days before that, the UK rejoined the EU's Horizon research programme as an associate member. That was a consequence of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's more pragmatic approach to unpicking the contradictions of the Brexit deal negotiated by his predecessor-but-one Boris Johnson.

These and other signals that the major parties seek a more stable and cooperative relationship with their former EU partners are a far cry from meeting the aspirations of the "rejoin" lobby.

Coupled with a significant shift in public opinion since the 2016 referendum, however, they are seen as a positive trend by rejoiners.

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Recent polling indicated 56 per cent of voters now thought that it had been a mistake to leave the EU, although after 7 years of Brexit trauma only one-in-four voters would opt for another referendum anytime soon to reverse that decision.

None of the main political parties, aside from the Scottish National Party, supports rejoining the EU. Even the newly Europe-friendly Labour Party has ruled out going back into the single market or customs union.

Starmer says he is focused on getting a better deal for Britain when the present agreement

comes up for review in 2025. Reacting to this limited ambition, senior Conservatives did not miss the chance to accuse the Labour leader of wanting effectively to rejoin the EU.

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Former Conservative grandee and anti-Brexiteer Michael Heseltine, addressing a largely sympathetic audience at an event in London last week, predicted the UK would eventually rejoin, although not before the next decade.

Some eyebrows were raised when he asserted that it would be the Conservatives that would accomplish this. He described the party as a coalition that was brilliant at realigning itself depending on which way the political winds were blowing.

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History has not stood still as Brexit turned to Bregret amongst a large proportion of the UK public.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent pressure for EU enlargement are factors that have forced the 27 to confront how they move forward, with or without Britain.

As early as 2018 France's President Emmanuel Macron, who Labour's Starmer met in Paris this month, revived the concept of a Europe of concentric circles in which post-Brexit Britain

might occupy an outer ring.

The concept was first advanced unsuccessfully by the late François Mitterrand at the end of the Cold War. It resurfaced this month in a report by academics commissioned by France and Germany to consider possible EU reforms.

The report envisions four levels of membership in a future enlarged EU.

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There would be an inner circle of states that are already deeply integrated through their membership of the Eurozone and the Schengen area. A second circle would include remaining members of the EU, while a third would embrace non-members such as Norway that accept the rules of the EU single market.

The fourth and outermost circle would include countries such as the UK who would be committed to political cooperation with their European partners without the requirement to be bound by EU law.

Other proposed reforms included the option for members to opt out of measures towards deeper EU integration and to revise existing agreements, elements that could bring doubters in Britain around to the rejoin camp.

The report, which is not officially endorsed by either of the two governments that commissioned it, may end up sharing the fate of Mitterrand's initiative.

It might prove difficult to persuade would-be members - they now include Ukraine and Moldova - to accept second division status in the EU league.

Nine countries in the Balkans and beyond are in the queue to join the EU. If Britain ever reached the point of seriously contemplating rejoining, it could be negotiating with a bloc of

substantially more members and a constitution markedly changed from that of the union it left.

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That could be an advantage to those arguing to rejoin. A more diverse EU, less characterised by a one-rule-for-all philosophy, might appeal to more of those who voted "leave" last time.

But where is the political will? If the Conservatives lose badly in the next election, they could embrace Heseltine's comforting vision of pro-European realignment. They could as easily descend into a factional war from which a hard-ripe rump might emerge victorious.

If the Labour Party wins, it would have so many pressing domestic problems to address that reigniting the Brexit debate would be well down its list of priorities.

A likelier outcome, in the short term at least, is that an increasingly disaffected Britain will continue to lick its largely self-inflicted Brexit wounds, while leaving it to politicians on the continent to determine the direction of travel in an evolving Europe.