CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM
LONDON ★ BRUSSELS ★ BERLIN

November 2026

Brejoin?

Ten reflections on Britain rejoining the EU



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Ten years after the Brexit referendum, a conversation has begun on the possibility of Britain rejoining the EU. The chances of that happening in the next ten years are – in my view – slim, but they are higher than they were a few months ago. Prime Minister Andy Burnham has a short-term strategy and a long-term strategy. The former is to continue the work of Keir Starmer's government in negotiating a 'reset' with the EU. Parts of the reset will be agreed at the UK-EU summit in Brussels on November 20th. The reset will stick to the three red lines – no freedom of movement, no customs union and no single market – with which the Labour Party fought the 2024 election. The long-term strategy is to consider how the relationship could evolve after the next general election, due by July 2029. Burnham seems open to jettisoning the red lines in Labour's next manifesto, and wants to consider the pros and cons of all options, including full membership.

Some British commentators have reacted with much cynicism, assuming that the hard political realities of both British and European politics will soon smother Burnham's idealistic musings. It is true that the potential obstacles are legion; they include the hostility of many Britons to immigration, the strong opposition of the Conservative Party to EU membership, the EU's characteristic inflexibility in negotiating, and the prospect of a Marine Le Pen French presidency destabilising the EU. But other forces are pushing Britain and the EU closer together, and I take Burnham seriously when he says he wants to start a debate. Here are ten reflections on the possibility of Britain rejoining.

1. Andy Burnham has been brave to put 'Brejoin' on the agenda

EU membership is a divisive issue and many people – including some of those who voted Remain in 2016 – do not want to revive the painful debates of the Brexit years. A lot of Labour MPs are reluctant to reopen what they regard as a can of worms. More than half of Labour MPs represent seats that voted to leave the EU (though More in Common polling last summer found that only 11 of the 632 mainland British constituencies would vote against EU membership, if the referendum was repeated). In talking about Rejoin, Burnham will incur the wrath of many influential figures in the media, as well as opposition politicians. We know from the last referendum that the anti-EU campaigners will play dirty. Any attempt to abandon Labour's red lines in the next parliament would be highly controversial, particularly concerning freedom of movement.

For example, Ed Balls, an influential figure in the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and a Remainer, has said that Burnham's rethink was "fraught with danger," warning that if Labour was serious about "putting free movement on the ballot at the next general election," he was "really quite worried." Around half the senior figures in the government, including Chancellor John Healey, Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds and Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy, have made clear their lack of enthusiasm for rejoining. Influential centre-left pundits and strategists such as Jason Cowley and Clare Ainsley have said that debating rejoining would be an unwelcome distraction from dealing with the major problems which confront the UK.

Before he became prime minister, Burnham was criticised for being someone who avoided tough choices because he was reluctant to upset people. That criticism now looks unfair. He undoubtedly sees political advantages in adopting a new line on Europe – which will appeal to voters who abandoned Labour under Starmer in favour of the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party – but he seems to genuinely regret

the damage inflicted by Brexit on Britain. Thanks to Burnham, there will be a debate on the pros and cons of closer ties, and of membership.

2. A shift in public opinion underscores Burnham's new line on Europe

The evolution of public opinion since the referendum makes it easier for Burnham to be brave. A YouGov poll in June has 57 per cent saying it was wrong to leave the EU, and 30 per cent saying it was right. An Opinium poll conducted in September has 46 per cent of Tory voters approving of Burnham's plan to explore options for a closer relationship, with 38 per cent opposed.

Morgan McSweeney, Keir Starmer's chief adviser for much of his short-lived premiership, counselled against talking about the harm done by Brexit, for fear of losing votes to the Conservatives or Reform UK in Leave-voting constituencies. McSweeney seemed relatively unconcerned about pro-EU voters abandoning Labour for the Liberal Democrats or the Greens. Burnham appears to have reversed that strategy, hoping that his pro-EU stance will win back voters who have shifted to other left-of-centre parties. He may be assuming that voters who strongly support Brexit will vote Conservative, Reform UK or Restore Britain (a party to the right of Reform UK), whatever Labour says. And he will have noted that demographic change is contributing to the shift in public opinion: the older voters who in 2016 were the most pro-Brexit are diminishing in number.

Burnham is aware that the public's apparent support for Brejoin may be quite soft. If detailed negotiations on rejoining get underway, the EU will prove a tough negotiating partner, which could reduce support for reversing Brexit. The EU's normal method of dealing with third countries is to be firm and inflexible, and it can come across as arrogant. The inflexibility stems from the Council of Ministers setting the Commission a negotiating mandate, which, once agreed, cannot easily be changed (the EU has its own complaints about the arrogance and lack of seriousness on the UK side during the Brexit talks).

French diplomats in Brussels have given clear advice to the other 26 governments over how to handle the UK during talks on the reset: be strict with the British – when they seek to ease the burdens of Brexit – so that they conclude rejoining is a better option. Quite a few of the permanent representatives (the ambassadors of the member-states to the EU) buy this argument. When I argued to them that if the EU was too tough on the British, they could lose the motivation to rejoin, few permanent representatives saw my point.

Against all that, British public opinion is leadable. Over the past ten years, it has become steadily more pro-EU, despite the fact that most political leaders, including those of the Labour Party, have kept quiet about the damage inflicted by Brexit. For example, they have not explained that Brexit has bequeathed a smaller economy and thus lower tax receipts, thereby necessitating tax rises and spending cuts. A serious effort by politicians to explain the benefits of closer ties to Europe should have some impact on public opinion. For example, they could clarify that 'free movement' does not mean an unconditional right to reside indefinitely in another EU country, since member-states can place conditions on longer-term residence. Politicians could explain better the benefits of EU membership for migration management; leaving the EU has cut off British access to its migration and criminal databases, whereas rejoining would restore access. In any case, if Britain entered into talks on rejoining, the atmospherics would be more positive than they were during the Brexit negotiations.

There would inevitably be crises in the talks, with the issue of British payments into the EU budget likely to prove especially difficult. The UK is unlikely to get back the rebate that it used to have on its budgetary contributions. Nor would it regain the right it had to opt into only those justice and home affairs (JHA) measures that it wanted to join – it would be expected to be a full participant in JHA, including EU rules on migration and asylum (so Britain would regain the right to deport illegal immigrants to the country through which they entered the EU). But when a crisis did flare up in the EU-UK negotiations, it would be up to leaders on both sides to ensure that it did not escalate.

I do not expect much pressure on the UK to join the Schengen area – when it was a member, the EU was fairly relaxed about Britain and Ireland, as islands, being outside this zone of passport-free travel. Moreover, the Common Travel Area, shared with Ireland, is also written into the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which helps preserve an open land border on the island of Ireland. The EU has no reason to seek to revisit this special arrangement – unless Ireland decided it wanted to join Schengen, and for Ireland too there are migration policy advantages to being outside it.

Nor do I expect the euro to be a dealbreaker. Some EU voices will demand that Britain commit to join it, but Denmark has a formal opt out, while there is no pressure on Sweden, Poland, Czechia or Hungary to join. Ultimately, most members will consider the prize of Britain rejoining as more important than denying it a de facto opt out on the euro. In any case, the EU is likely to adopt more multi-speed arrangements in the coming years, with not every country taking part in every policy.

3. The main driver of the UK debate on rejoining is economics

The biggest reason why public opinion has shifted is the awareness that Brexit has not worked economically. It is also the reason why Burnham wants to reopen the debate on membership. Serious economic research – from the Office of Budgetary Responsibility, the CER, and researchers from Stanford University and the Bank of England – puts the hit to UK GDP at between 4 and 8 per cent. That means a shortfall of government tax revenue of up to £90 billion a year. The CER's own recent research has focused on the impact of Brexit on trade. My colleagues John Springford and Anton Spisak found that UK goods exports to the EU were 16 per cent down on what they would have been, and goods imports 14 per cent down. Services exports to the EU were 7 per cent lower, and services imports from the EU 19 per cent lower, than had Britain stayed in the EU. Brexit hit global exports by 5 per cent and imports by 8 per cent. Lower levels of trade mean lower export revenues, higher prices for consumers, less competition and less pressure to raise productivity.

Andy Burnham needs more money, for example to pay for social care and a bigger defence budget. But the UK already has high levels of debt and taxation. Hence the search for economic growth via closer ties to Europe. He has been told that the current agenda of the 'reset' – merging emissions trading systems, adopting EU rules on food, plants and animals, agreeing to a youth mobility scheme and rejoining the single market for electricity trading – could raise GDP by up to 0.4 per cent. Even rejoining the customs union would only (according to CER calculations) increase growth by about 0.5 per cent. For a significant boost, Britain needs to consider rejoining much or all of the single market, or full membership, as Burnham is well aware.

Rejoiners should not claim that all is rosy in the EU's economy, or that all is rotten in that of Britain. All European economies have their strengths and weaknesses. The point is that economic integration

creates more trade and therefore income, that everyone can learn from an exchange of best practice, and that global economic rules tend to be shaped by the US, China and the EU. Because the EU is and will always be the UK's largest market, EU rules are inescapable without large costs. An isolated Britain will have to live in a world where others make the rules. If the UK wants to help shape global rules on, for example, AI, it will need to be part of the EU.

4. Geopolitics will also drive closer UK-EU ties

In Britain, economics is the main reason for questioning Brexit, while geopolitics is a subordinate factor (though many Remainers fret about the geopolitical costs of having left the EU). In the EU, it is the other way round. Most governments are content with the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) – which governs EU-UK trade – but are acutely aware that an EU without the British has diminished standing in the world.

Since Brexit, the United States has turned out to be a much less reliable partner than in the past; nobody can be sure how committed Donald Trump and his successors will be to European security. Vladimir Putin has proved much more threatening than he initially seemed, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China's power has grown enormously, and though less of a direct military threat to the EU, its diplomatic clout and its reach into the 'global south' are extensive.

In this age of strongman politics, spheres of influence and 'might is right', the UK and the EU have much in common. Both support a rules-based global order, with strong multilateral institutions – including the UN, the World Trade Organisation, the International Criminal Court and mechanisms to combat climate change. And, in practical terms, Britain can make a substantial contribution, with first-class intelligence services, armed forces that though small and underfunded still pack a considerable punch, competent diplomats, real expertise on development (notwithstanding the slashing of the overseas aid budget) and useful military technologies. Even outside the EU, Britain does plenty for European security, via NATO, the Joint Expeditionary Force, aid for Ukraine and so on. But the EU would have substantially more geopolitical weight with the UK inside it.

5. The more the British debate the options, the more support will grow for rejoining

The UK has five options for its relationship with the EU. One is to shun anything more ambitious than the current reset talks. A second is to rejoin the customs union. That would probably not require freedom of movement, but would mean Britain giving up its independent trade policy. It would have to merge the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that it had negotiated with other countries since Brexit with the EU's own FTAs – or give up its new FTAs. Britain would have to accept EU trade policy – including highly political decisions on trade defence measures against China – without having a vote on those decisions. The customs union would make life easier for manufacturers, by removing some bureaucracy (such as local content requirements). But services, which make up the bulk of the British economy, would not benefit – which explains why the boost to growth would only be modest.

A third option is to go for a closer but bespoke arrangement, perhaps similar to the Swiss-EU relationship. The Swiss are in the single market for goods, which removes a lot of bureaucratic controls, but have to accept freedom of movement and payments to the EU. But the EU has never offered this model to the British, arguing that its patchwork of bilateral agreements with Switzerland makes it hard to keep Swiss

rules aligned with EU law. The package that the EU and the Swiss recently agreed upon, and which will go to a referendum, seeks to address these shortcomings via provisions for dynamic alignment (automatic following of EU rules), consistent interpretation of common rules and independent dispute settlement. Even so, many Commission officials still see these arrangements as specific to Switzerland and argue that they offer no template for the UK.

That has not stopped British pro-Europeans from hankering after something similar. As prime minister, Theresa May proposed a deal involving a de facto customs union plus membership of the single market for goods. If that had passed Parliament, which it did not, the EU probably would have rejected the scheme.

In the spring of 2026 Starmer's government floated the idea of rejoining the single market, sector by sector; the UK would agree to dynamic alignment and accept a role for the European Court of Justice. But though the EU had conceded the principle of single market membership for agrifood products, as well as electricity trading, it said no to extending this to other sectors. It strongly believes that to allow 'cherry-picking' would set a bad precedent for the EU's own internal politics and lead to calls for special arrangements from eurosceptic European governments, ultimately weakening the integrity of the single market.

Option four is Norway, in the European Economic Area. Norway benefits from being in the single market for goods and services, and though consulted on the rules has no vote on them. Economically, this is the best option other than membership. But I cannot see it working for Britain, with its large economy, globally significant financial services industry, rapidly-growing tech sector and proud political traditions. The British might be able to live with following EU rules on cars and chemicals, but surely not for the City of London. Montenegro (once it becomes a member) and Slovenia would be able to vote on financial services rules, but not the UK. The Norway option would mean rule-taking, payments into the EU budget and freedom of movement – so if you want the benefits of the single market, why not go for the fifth option of rejoining and have a say on the rules?

6. The biggest obstacle to Britain rejoining could be the Conservative Party

Suppose that in 2030 a Burnham government applied to rejoin. The EU would not want to snub the UK with a rude "no", but in practice could not say yes – because the Conservatives and Reform, the two biggest opposition parties, would be committed to taking Britain out again. It would be a nightmare for the EU if the UK left and rejoined every five years. The EU would insist – very sensibly – on a national consensus for rejoining before accepting a UK application. Reform's whole identity is built on hostility to the EU so it cannot be expected to shift its line. But what about the Conservatives? The membership and the leadership are strongly eurosceptic and show no signs of warming to the EU. But the voters are rather different. A recent poll from Ipsos found that a third of Tory voters want to rejoin the EU.

So far, party leader Kemi Badenoch has been firmly eurosceptic. She has spurned Prosper UK, a new group created by moderate Conservatives such as Ruth Davidson and Andy Street. She is committed to withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights – and insists that nobody can be a Tory candidate unless they accept that policy, even though it could lead to the suspension or even cancellation of all or part of the TCA.

Yet at the Conservatives' October 2026 annual conference Badenoch launched a strong attack on Reform UK. This suggests that she may no longer be emphasising the pursuit of voters who have drifted to

Reform, and that instead she wants to win back middle-class voters in the south of England who tend to be more sympathetic to the EU and may have switched to the Liberal Democrats. So, Badenoch may hesitate before attacking every element of Labour's reset. In the long run, perhaps under a different leader, it is not inconceivable that the party will rethink its attitude to Europe.

In any case it seems plausible that the Conservatives will re-establish themselves as Britain's leading right-wing political party. Reform UK's standing in the polls has tumbled in recent months, owing to a series of scandals. Meanwhile, electoral reform could help to create something of a national consensus on EU membership. Burnham is a supporter of proportional representation (PR), and if the UK did adopt some form of PR, one could imagine a fairly permanent 60 per cent of MPs – from Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the Scottish and Welsh nationalists – in favour of EU membership.

7. The EU has changed since the UK left

Over the past ten years, the EU has become – surprise, surprise – less British. This is most evident in economic policy, where France and its Colbertism have become more influential. The purer versions of competition policy and free trade are in retreat, while there has been more emphasis on security of supply, state aid and industrial policy. The threat from Chinese manufactured goods, in particular, has pushed the EU into adopting a wide range of trade defence instruments and laws that are not China-specific but are in practice aimed at China. Many of these (perhaps inadvertently) harm third countries such as the UK – for example measures to restrict steel imports, and the Industrial Accelerator Act with its 'Made in Europe' rules (which threaten the British car industry).

It would be wrong to see these shifts in EU policy merely as the consequence of British absence and French dominance. For the world has changed over the past ten years: because of Covid, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and China's export surge, everyone, including the British, is more willing to impair economic efficiency by placing greater emphasis on diversification of supply chains, derisking and protection. Indeed, the EU's evolving economic philosophy may prove less of an obstacle to British membership than one might suppose. The UK faces very similar challenges to the EU, for example in responding to Chinese exports. Already, the UK is adopting EU-style measures to limit steel imports, and it is contemplating tariffs on Chinese EV imports (which the EU applied in 2025).

The EU has changed in other ways, too. It has issued bonds in its own name, to finance its post-Covid recovery fund. And it has become more active in defence, particularly in providing incentives to encourage defence industrial collaboration. As a member, the UK might have tried to veto action in both these areas. But given the security situation in Europe, and America's uncertain commitment to NATO, the UK may now be more relaxed about the EU becoming proactive in defence. The EU's collective borrowing could prove more difficult for the UK – but the Germans will do their best to resist further iterations of this concept, and some combination of compromise and opt out might satisfy the British.

8. Most member-states would welcome the UK rejoining, but France could be difficult

When Burnham started talking about rejoining, France's Emmanuel Macron and Spain's Pedro Sánchez immediately said the UK would be welcome. Senior German officials said much the same. Some officials in the EU institutions and governments were less enthusiastic, fearing yet more work being added to their already over-charged agendas.

But in broad terms 26 member-states regretted Brexit. The most upset were those with strong cultural and economic ties to the UK – the Irish, Dutch, Nordics, Germans and Poles. The French were uniquely ambivalent. Some of them saw that Brexit was a geopolitical loss for the EU, but others saw opportunities – such as drawing financial services business to France, enhancing French domination of the European defence industry or extending Colbertist economic thinking across the EU.

Most EU political leaders, of all political persuasions, see obvious geopolitical gains from Britain rejoining. Furthermore, the British already follow most EU rules, so the accession talks could be relatively quick, perhaps taking just a few years. The British would be net contributors to the EU budget. Against that, some federalists and influential figures in France might consider the British insufficiently integrationist, and too liberal economically. But on balance, most EU leaders would not want the Commission to set terms for the British that deterred them from rejoining.

The French are always influential in EU policy-making – as I explained in a CER insight – and would have a big say on any British attempt to rejoin. During the original Brexit talks, they took the hardest line on the British, and they have played a similar role more recently during negotiations on the reset. The French administration seems divided. Parts of it, like Macron, see the geopolitical advantages of Brejoin as outweighing the disadvantages. Other parts think differently. An influential permanent representative in Brussels put it this way: "France can get Britain to contribute to European security via 'E3' meetings [of Britain, France and Germany], and you don't need the EU for that. France's priority is to dominate the EU politically. Why would France want to dilute its influence by allowing the UK back in?"

Some French officials have indicated that they would be less hard in talks on Britain rejoining than in those on the reset; in the latter, the British have sought to gain many of the advantages of membership without paying the price in terms of budget payments and free movement – and that has annoyed the French, the Commission and quite a few other governments. That irritation should not arise in negotiations on membership *pur et dur*. Having said that, the French can be relied upon to sit at the harder end of the spectrum in talks on rejoining. But France itself may be heading for another revolution.

9. The rise of Europe's far right could stymie British efforts to rejoin

Far-right political parties are nothing new in the EU – the Union's leaders have had to cope with their impact in countries like Austria and Hungary for many years. The far-right parties are far from united, and sit in three separate groups in the European Parliament. But their support is growing, and they all tend to be hostile to immigration, green rules and the EU, while some are sympathetic to Russia. The far right is a junior partner in several coalition governments within the EU – including in Czechia, Slovakia and Italy (because of her moderate stance on the EU and on Russia, I do not regard Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni as far right). It may soon join a Spanish coalition government and could possibly return to power in Poland. It has shown that it can win state elections in Germany, though it has little prospect of winning power at the federal level in that country.

The EU has shown that it can manage with a few far-right leaders from small countries around the table at the European Council. But the country that really matters is France, where polling suggests that Marine Le Pen of the Rassemblement National has a good chance of winning the presidency next May. She has indicated that she would be much more disruptive of the EU than, say, Meloni in Italy, or the Law and

Justice party in Poland: she would withhold payments to the EU budget, block EU aid for Ukraine and assert the primacy of French over EU law.

Most British people, especially those that support Brejoin, do not like the far right, so its success on the continent would tarnish the EU's image in the UK. Furthermore, a Le Pen victory and the crises that would ensue would absorb the time and energy of EU leaders. They might think that dealing with British budget payments and opt-outs was not their top priority.

Yet if the British did press ahead with their efforts to rejoin, a Le Pen presidency might not be damaging to Britain's prospects of readmission. When they were in the EU, the British were among the least integrationist members, and Le Pen might see some value in bringing in a country that is hostile to federalism (though she may have qualms about the UK's vestigial Atlanticism) and which could balance German power. Other European governments might be keen for the UK to counter-balance France's influence within the union.

10. Don't say this too loudly, but the EU would benefit from Brejoin

Britain rejoining would be good for the EU, and not just in terms of security. This is not to say the EU is an economic basket case – it is not. The Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Spain, Ireland, the Baltics and even Greece have grown faster than the UK in the last ten years. But the EU countries do need structural economic reform, and more market integration, as the reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta have demonstrated. For example, there is still no effective capital markets union, energy prices are far too high and a lot of regulations stifle innovation.

Britain itself faces many of the same problems that Draghi and Letta identified, but back inside the club it would be a voice for reform, as it was when a member. For example, the British led the way on modernising EU utility markets (separating providers from networks), crafted the 'Lisbon agenda' of economic reform and came up with a large part of the plan for a capital markets union. The world may have become less economically liberal, but the EU still needs reform to be more competitive and resilient. Bringing a large economy like the UK back into the single market would be a big economic win for the EU itself – both in terms of increasing market size and of boosting industrial resilience.

There are, of course, many weaknesses in the British economy, such as a malfunctioning housing market, an inability to build infrastructure and poor public services. But there are also real strengths. The British venture capital industry is the biggest in Europe, and it has helped to spawn successful start-ups in biotech, fintech and AI (a third of European AI start-ups are in the UK), while the AI Security Institute has a global reputation for being among the best in its field. Britain also has the City and world-class universities. Too many people in the EU see economics as a zero-sum game, and fear that British prowess in certain sectors would hurt EU industries. In fact, if the UK and the EU increased their economic integration there would be more competition; and a more competitive Europe would be better able to face up to China and the US.

But the British should be careful to get their tone right. Take the recent paper published by the Tony Blair Institute. It declares that Britain should "set an objective to rejoin the EU within a decade – subject to internal EU reform." In his forward to the pamphlet, Blair writes that for the UK to rejoin, the EU "must be on a credible path to reform, a Europe of nation-states, a Europe capable of being a genuine global power."

Much of what Blair and his institute write makes sense, but in places the tone veers towards condescension. If the UK's bid to rejoin is couched in a narrative that those slovenly Europeans would be very lucky to have the UK joining their club, it will get nowhere. Perhaps the British should leave it to their friends within the EU – of which it has many – to make the case that Brejoin would be good for Europe.

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