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When American students arrived in England, they automatically believed that they have arrived in the foreign and sophisticated land of Europe. This notion was dispersed with very quickly. The citizens of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have a very strong sense of patriotism which manifests in us and them, the Isles and the Continent attitude. Therefore, it is no big surprise that Britain was not a founding member of the European Community, which would later become the European Union. After finally joining in 1973, Britain has often been seen as a reluctant European due to the way it entered the union and the subsequent fidgeting done by the prominent leaders of the country afterwards.

Primarily, Britain declined the invitation of entry into the European Community for a variety of reasons. One major opposing argument was the supranational component that was advocated in the Schuman Declaration. The British Constitution’s key point is that Parliament is supreme. Many of the British politicians were against joining the EEC due to the fact that there would be a “supranational body with the power to make regulations that would be applied directly within the United Kingdom and form part of the law of the land”[[1]](#footnote-1). Some such laws could be opposed by the UK, though if the majority of the members vote for it, it would become law anyway. Therefore, in the eyes of some, Parliament would lose its supreme power.

Further reasons included that in 1951 Britain still viewed herself as a world power and was enjoying a brief phase of prosperity. Another was that Britain had strong ties to the Commonwealth and a “special relationship” with the United States. However, the main reason that Britain did not jump on the European wagon was the outcome and ramifications of the World Wars. The opinion was that since Britain was the only country that was in at the beginning, in at the end, and undefeated throughout both World Wars, there was no need to partnership with the less successful countries. Philip Norton explains: “lacking the experience of German occupation and the need to recreate a policy, Britain was not subject to the psychological appeal of a united Europe, so strong on the Continental mainland”[[2]](#footnote-2).

This attitude began to change by 1960 as Britain’s economic problems became evident. Compared to the six member countries of the European Community (France, Italy, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Belgium, and Holland), Britain’s growth rates were quite a bit lower. In addition, Britain’s hope in the Commonwealth was slightly unfounded since it was not a strong source of trade or materials. Likewise, the “special” disappeared out of the relationship with the United States. After the Suez Crisis in late 1956 and “the sudden cancellation by the US administration in 1960 of the Blue Stream, a missile that Britain had ordered and intended to employ as a major element of its nuclear defense policy”[[3]](#footnote-3), Britain’s leaders realized that on the world stage, UK was no longer in the main role. The EEC was seen to be a way to reestablish what was lost politically and gain the benefits of a tariff-free market economically. This unenthusiastic change of heart underscores that when Britain finally joined the EC, it became a reluctant European compared to the others.

Consequently, after finally joined the EEC, the British government was still unsatisfied. When Labour came to power in the general election of 1974, Prime Minister Harold Wilson tried and succeeded in renegotiating the agreement terms. He held the first nationwide referendum on whether or not to stay in the EC. The referendum passed with 67.2% voting to stay in the Community. In 1979, the European Monetary System was introduced to the members of the EC with the hope that it would stabilize exchange rates which would further stimulate trade between the members. The United Kingdom was the only member of the Community who choose to opt out with the provision to opt in sometime in the future.

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, she argued against the further European integration and pressed for a reduction in Britain’s contribution to the EC. In 1984, an agreement was reached and UK was refunded for the payments made during the previous years with a new system set up for the following. Her successor, John Major, negotiated and ultimately agreed to sign the Maastricht Treaty in 1991. Britain once again chooses not to commit, though with a chance to join at a later date if so desired. Most recently, Prime Minister David Cameron renegotiated the terms for the British membership in the EU. There were a variety of factors that were renegotiated, the main being sovereignty, limits on free movement, and child benefit. There is a national referendum scheduled for Thursday, June 23rd where the citizens of the UK will vote on whether or not they want to stay in the European Union.

From the very beginning, Britain has been a reluctant European. From the concerns before the joining to the constant renegotiation of the agreements, it seems that Britain is not satisfied being a part of Europe. Only time will tell whether it will continue to be reluctant, satisfied, or decline to be a member at all.

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1. Norton, Philip. *The British Policy*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2011. Print. pp. 246 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid pp. 247 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Norton, Philip. *The British Policy*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2011. Print. pp. 248 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)