

Britain and the European Union

Welcome to Episode 5 of English for Life in the UK. This is a podcast for intermediate level learners of English. It is produced by a group of volunteer teachers from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire, and it is intended mainly for our students attending this course at the Centre. However, we hope it will be of use to anyone wanting to improve their English and learn more about life in the United Kingdom. We've been studying some aspects of British history and in this episode we are coming right up-to-date and talking about the recent history of Britain and Europe. This week I'm joined by John to do this episode.

[Music]

M: So this week's topic is about Britain in Europe. John you started off by saying a bit telling us a bit about the origins of the ... what is now the European Union.

J: Yeah, we followed on from some of our previous lessons where we looked at World Wars 1 and 2, and the decline of the British Empire. And that brought us up to the post-war world in Europe, which saw the formation of the European Iron and Steel Community, which was the beginnings of the European Community. We used maps in the class to illustrate ... to get the students to colour in the initial 6 countries which were: West Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. And we went on from there, to map the extension - the expansion, rather - of the European Union, through the following decades. So, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark join in 1973 and then onwards through Spain, Portugal and up to the 2000s with the eventual expansion into Eastern Europe: Poland, the Czech Republic, etc.

M: And that was after the break up of the Soviet Union.

J: Yeah, so we then went on to look at the actual functioning and the make-up of the European Union, so we looked at the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council and the European Court of Justice: four of the big bodies basically that run the European Union.

[3.07 minutes]

M: So tell us a bit about each one of those, John.

J: The European Commission is made up of 28 Commissioners, one from every member state of the European Union, and that, kind of, takes decisions on a lot of the big political issues effecting the EU. The European Parliament is made of our elected representatives so we have European elections which return MEPs. So we discussed the difference between an MP - being a Member of Parliament in Westminster- and an MEP - being a Member of the European Parliament, in Brussels. So they are the democratically elected representatives in Brussels. We looked at the Council of the European Union which governs over a lot of the issues, finds compromises between States in the EU and maps out the political direction of the European Union and we looked a little bit at the European Court of Justice, which makes sure that the member states, organisations and people within the member states, stick to the rules which have been passed in Brussels. And yeah

M: What would you say some of the basic principles are, of the way the European Union works?

J: Well, we examined the initial kind of *raison d'etre* of the EU was, initially, was basically to interlink the economies of Western Europe in a way that - France and Germany, if you think about the devastating wars in the 19th and 20th centuries, these countries that if their

economies are interlinked and inter-reliant on each other, then they will be far less likely to go to war with each other. As it evolved throughout the following decades, it was something of a counterweight to communism in Eastern Europe so it was promoting democracy, liberal democracy, ideas of free trade, capitalism. And then we looked on ... at this perhaps was some of the reasons that various people in the UK were for and against membership of the EU.

M: Yeah, and the free trade and the free movement of people has been an important principle, hasn't it, of the EU?

J: Yeah, we discussed the idea also, an idea of ever-deepening union which the people who have been pushing the EU project, if you like, things like the Euro, so aligning countries more and more, bringing them more and more into line with each other, with the idea, if you like, of a federal Europe, so more power would rest with the Parliament and the Council in Brussels and, perhaps, less power to the individual member states.

[5:55]

M: And that has been part of the debate, hasn't it?

J: Yeah, very much part of the debate with the free movement of capital and labour and the idea of a deeper union - these are the ideas that have been central to the debate of the UK's membership of the EU. Obviously, quite a lot of people are against these ideas and they've contributed to the campaign of the eventual "BREXIT" which we were able to discuss.

M: OK - so, in order to talk about where we are now and the BREXIT debate, we need to talk a bit about the idea of referenda. So the idea of a referendum is the idea is where the citizens of a country all get the chance to vote on - usually - a single subject, usually a single question. Often a 'yes or no' question. The United Kingdom have held two referenda now on Europe. The first was in 1975 - is that right? Tell us a bit about that one.

J: We explained it was under the government of Harold Wilson, who some of them have seen outside Huddersfield train station, who was the labour Prime minister at the time,

M: The statue of Harold Wilson

J: Yes, I should point that out. Yes. He called a referendum in 1975. In 1975, the UK called a referendum over continued membership of the EU which resulted in a vote in favour of EU membership, of over 67% of people voted to stay in the EU.

[7:40]

M: So that was quite a clear result.

J: Yes, we then went on ... Mark brought a very interesting aspect into it. Mark asked the students if they had experience of referenda in their countries of origin. We found out that, in Iran, in 1979, there was a referendum on whether they should adopt an Islamic Republic as the nature of their government, which obviously, it was a successful vote. So that were interesting, to get some feedback from some of the students about their experiences. We then went on - Mark went on to explore the ideas of pros and cons of referenda.

M: Yeah, lets just say a little bit about that cos I thought that that was interesting - the ideas that the students, themselves, came up with, around that. So on the one hand, it's a good form of direct democracy: it gives its citizens a chance to get involved in a particular issue. It gives everybody the chance to express their opinion and their vote on that issue, but one of the

problems we discovered was that you often end up often simplifying what is a very complex issue into a simple 'yes or no', 'black and white' kind of question. So one of the difficulties around the referendum is that issue about over-simplifying. And also, we were talking about it can be very divisive - you used the word divisive - meaning it creates divisions between people, conflict between people, and certainly, though I don't think it happened particularly in 1975, but the most recent referendum we've had, has undoubtedly led to that. And we also talked a bit about the Scottish referendum, would you say a bit about that, John, As you were actually there, at the time?

[9:50]

- J: Yeah, I voted in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. I voted for Scotland to remain part of the UK. I was living in Glasgow at the time. But yes, some of the issues that Mark has just highlighted around these matters, constitutional matters becoming divisive, I certainly saw and experienced this in Scotland. People who had been friends for many years, arguing like cat and dog, over a yes vote or a no vote - all with passionate views on both sides of the argument. But again, some of more nuanced, complicated ideas of breaking up the United Kingdom, or leaving the EU, kind of got broken down into black and white arguments, which, you know, back to one of the difficulties of using the referendums to plot a political course.
- M: Yeah. So then we came to the 2016 referendum and this was on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union or whether we should leave, and the leave side of the argument became known as Brexit - 'Britain' and 'Exit' - and that was a very significant referendum and the result in that one was much closer, wasn't it?
- J: Yeah - 52% "to leave" and 48% "to remain". Something of a shock to many people, certainly in the political establishment. You had, in terms of the remain side, most of the major trade unions, most of the Labour Party, most of the Conservative Party - not all - and the Liberal Democrats, the CBI, so - you know, right across the board, much of what you would class as the political establishment, of either right or left, were saying we should remain, but a 'leave' campaign had grown over the years with the growth of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), people like Nigel Farage, Many people within the tabloid right-wing press were pushing for a 'leave' vote. We discussed as well some of the - getting back to the difficulties of referenda that, you know, many people in the country were angry .. about a lots of things in terms of de-industrialisation, casual work, you know things that had happened over the last thirty or forty years and much of this anger was effectively directed at Brussels and the European Union itself, so we ended up on 24th June 2016, with a very close vote in favour of leaving the European Union. And as Mark pointed out in the class, the political class have been ... and the British Parliament have been trying to get to grips with that vote ever since.
- M: Yeah I think we would argue that one of the problems with referenda, and that particular referendum, was you, you generate a question that has a simple yes or no answer, but actually you then have to interpret what the outcome is and whilst everybody accepts that 52% of people in that referendum voted to come out of Europe, within that 52% there were lots of different views about what exactly that meant, you know. Did that mean having nothing to do with Europe afterwards? Did it mean being in a very close trading relationship? And there were lots of things in between and that is the debate, that in many senses, still goes on. Certainly, that was the debate that was at the heart of the election that, as we recall, this happened, just last week. What would you say the significance of that general election is now, in terms of the Brexit debate?

[14:00]

J: I think one of the main significances is that Boris Johnson's Conservative Party were able to go into that election with a very clear-cut, snappy, one-line, almost, position, in terms of 'get Brexit done'. It was very much the line that Mr Johnson and his Cabinet were constantly pushing during the election. I think a lot of folk identified very strongly with that message and terms of many of the seats that we've seen, perhaps, in the Midlands and the North of England many of them returning a Conservative MP, many of them, for the first time in generations. I think that is very clearly been a significant factor in that.

M: And there seems little doubt now that Brexit, in the basic first stage process of that, is now going to happen, it will happen at the end of January 2020. But there will still be lots of things to sort out about what does that mean about the future relationship between the United Kingdom and Europe. We did go into a few of the arguments that were on both sides of the debate in the referendum. What would you say were two or three of the key things that the Brexit people used?

J: In terms of the arguments for Brexit we looked at the idea of sovereignty, so at the beginning of the lesson, we discussed that the EU is a supra-national body, where the constituent members pool some of their sovereignty i.e. they give up a certain amount of political power.

M: What's the word sovereignty mean in this context?

J: Effectively, it goes back to the king or queen being 'sovereign', so it is to do with political power. You quite often hear people in the UK say that Parliament is sovereign, which means that is where power and authority rests. Obviously, as a member state of the EU, we had pooled or shared some of our sovereignty with the other member states. This has led to rules or legislation being passed in Brussels, being enforced in the United Kingdom. Many people on the Brexit side of the argument would be very much against this and would talk about regaining sovereignty for the UK. Another issue which came up was about the free movement of people. There again, people on the leave side of the argument, had criticised, and said that that has meant very large swathes of immigration over recent years, which, they see, as being detrimental to the state of the UK economy and society.

[16:44]

M: I suppose the other key one is around cost - that, you know, Britain does pay to be part of the European Union and the Brexiteers have argued: 'is it really worth paying about £30 billion a year, into Europe?' On the other side of the argument, people will say that we've had a lot of benefit from being part of Europe, including some direct financial benefit for some projects in the UK.

J: On the other side of that coin, we looked at some schemes called Objective 1 which was a programme run by the European Union to push funding towards places that were some of the poorest places in the EU. In the UK, that included places like Liverpool, Teeside, South Wales, Cornwall - they received extra funding from the EU, into their infrastructure, to bring it up to a better standard.

M: So what would you say were some of the arguments on the remain side?

J: On the remain side, that we have tariff-free trade access to a vast market - pretty much most of continental Europe. There is also the other side of the 'freedom of movement' argument: people from the UK can live, work and study freely anywhere, from Finland all the way down to Greece or Spain. And the economic arguments that many of - for example, automotive industry companies like Nissan, Toyota, Honda employ thousands of skilled people, do so because they have access to European markets.

M: I suppose maybe we finish by ... cos this brings us back to the origins of the European project, if you want to call it that. There is that argument that says, essentially the European Union has, not just kept the peace, but actually brought countries together, achieved a great deal together, and there are people who would argue that the UK should be a part of that project. Maybe lets just finish by saying we do ... there are some challenges for the United Kingdom, as a United Kingdom, that arise out of Brexit. Say a bit about that, John.

J: Yeah. We looked if you like at the divisions across the UK over Brexit - as Mark pointed out in the class, the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain within the EU; the sense that the border in the north of Ireland has become much less relevant to people who live there, with the Republic of Ireland and the UK both being EU countries, there has been freedom of trade and movement across that border. The EU has also done quite a lot in terms of promoting the peace process - the Good Friday agreement. So there were worries in Northern Ireland and across the UK, that that might be put at risk, as a result of Brexit. Also in terms of the Scottish vote in the 2016 referendum, the majority of people in Scotland expressed their will that they wished to stay within the EU, so they could put further pressure on the Union in terms of the UK in that the Scottish National Party and their supporters would be further now encouraged to break from the UK, in order to gain their place within the EU. So lots of things to discuss and find out about, going forward which we'll probably touch on and discuss in some of our lessons, next year, may be.

M: Undoubtedly. Thanks very much John.

[Music]

[20:50]

Language Support

In this section of the Podcast, I pick up on just some of the words and phrases used in this episode just to help people who may be struggling to understand what actually were quite a lot of technical terms that we ended up using today. Don't worry if you don't understand them all - that's not necessary, but this is an extra little piece of help for you, if you did struggle in some of that.

So, first of all, John referred to the 'post-War period' or 'post-war world'. If you say 'post' in front of something, it usually means "after" - so post-war means 'after the the war' - in this case, the Second World War.

We talked about member states: this is because the European Union is made up of a number of member states and then the state is simply a country.

There was the use of the phrase 'raison d'etre' - which is actually French, but is often used in English, and 'raison d'etre' means the reason, or the purpose, behind something - so, we were talking about the reason behind, the purpose behind, having a European Union - what was its raison d'etre'?

John referred to the European Union being a 'counterweight' to communism. Counterweight simply means - if you think of the idea of a balance, where you have weight on one side, if then you then put weight on the other side, then we have more of a balance - so in this case, we have this strong, soviet communist union, Europe needed a strength of its own, as a counterweight to that.

Quite specifically, the Euro was referred to, in this episode. The Euro is, of course, the currency of the European Union. Not all members of the European Union use the Euro. Obviously the United

Kingdom doesn't - we continue to use the pound - but the majority of the countries in the EU do use the Euro as a currency.

Another language point: John referred to the referendum question being a 'black and white' question. If we talk about something being black and white, we mean a simple opposite, so you have black on one side, you've got white on the other. If you like, you've got a simple 'yes' on one side, 'no' on the other. In this case, in our referendum, it was exit/leave the European Union on one hand, remain/stay in the European Union, on the other. It was seen as a black and white issue. However, John then went on to talk about the fact that the question actually is nuanced (N-U-A-N-C-E-D) and that means: something that is actually quite complex and subtle, so it isn't really black and white, it is actually more complicated than that.

John also used the phrase that people in families who disagreed over Brexit were arguing like 'cats and dogs' - again that is a phrase that's often used, because cats and dogs really don't like each other, often end up scrapping, fighting, chasing each other and so it's that idea that if you are arguing like cats and dogs, it's quite a serious argument that you disagree on.

There was a reference to the 'infrastructure' of a country and the infrastructure usually means the means of transport and trade between countries. And in that respect, we also talked about trade being 'tariff-free' - that means tax-free - it means you can trade goods across countries, without having to pay any additional duties or taxes, or tariffs is another word for that.

John referred to the 'tabloid press' at one point. The tabloid press tends to be those newspapers they are actually smaller in size and the size is known as 'tabloid', which is where the name comes from, but the tabloid press tends to present things in a rather more simple way, rather more direct way - less intellectual, less academic if you like, compared with other newspapers, which go into in more detail, more analysis of issues.

And John referred to the fact that the Brexit result had been a shock to the political establishment. The political establishment is usually a phrase used for those people who are actually engaged in politics at the highest level in the country, so that would include members of the government, members of parliament.

John also referred to trade unions and he talked about the CBI: that stands for Confederation of British Industry, and that's a group that represents large companies, and those people who run companies and employ other people. It's known as the 'Employers organisation' because they employ other people.

Finally, when we were referring to Ireland and some of the challenges that will remain in Ireland, having come out of Europe, John referred to the "Good Friday agreement". The Good Friday agreement was a form of treaty, signed between the Irish Government - that for Southern Ireland - and the UK, British, government, also with the involvement of the major politicians in Northern Ireland; and it is widely regarded as having brought peace to Northern Ireland, after years of considerable conflict and violence. So it was a very important agreement and part of the principle was that Southern Ireland and Northern Ireland would work more closely together. Now, of course, with Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, coming out of the European Union, whilst Southern Ireland, (often called Eire), will remain in the European Union. This will create some challenges as to how to manage the relationship between the two and the border between the two, into the future.

That's it for today. Quite a long and complicated episode, so well done if you've kept going right to the end of it. I hope you've found it useful.

That's our last episode for this year, 2019. We will be back with a new episode in January, 2020. Until then, to those that are listening at this time year, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

[Music]

[29:34]