

The Reluctant European

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Take a straw poll in any European country about which country was the most reluctant member of the European Union and invariably you would have a haystack of opinion pitch-forked upon the United Kingdom. Self-interested Britons, under the leadership of that 'Machiavellian' Tony Blair, have been ruthless in compromising away their rebate, devilish in their rhetoric for a more competitive and prosperous Europe, and utterly exclusionist in their embracing of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe into the Union.

But surely this does not sound like the wily machinations of a country trying to impose its own doctrine upon an ideologically distinct EU? In fact, since the U-turn on Europe and Labour's arrival to power in 1997, the UK has been increasingly pro-European in its foreign policy. The Government has often had to suffer for it at the hands of the Euro-sceptic press.

Compromise and the ambition to make the European Union workable, prosperous, safe and a force for good in the world form the essence of a productive European member. A reluctant European would be more prone to blame Brussels for domestic failings, use obstructionist tactics if it does not get what it wants and even risk the very Union itself if it feels its leadership compromised.

Counter-intuitive as it sounds, but France seems to fit the bill. The dagger of disappointment at France's failing economy has been directed toward the heart of the EU, Brussels, when in reality the inability to reform business legislation and improve competitiveness falls squarely upon Chirac's government.

When it came to improving the Union's prospects for the future, CAP reform was central. Instead of accepting the idea that the other 24 members need not subsidise France's farmers, Chirac held steadfast, proclaiming an attack upon the very soul of the country.

At the prospect of becoming part of a more manageable EU with a simplified treaty system, the French sacrificed it all to save themselves from an apparent hostile takeover by fabled Anglo-Saxon capitalism. The prospect of having to emulate their arch-nemesis, Britain, was simply too much.

France's approach to the EU is insightful for purposes of analysing the French psyche. If all the evidence is pieced together, mixed with the rhetoric that flows from Paris and set in a historical context, one begins to see something interesting.

France has always been a great proponent of Europe, everyone knows, but only ever one fashioned in its own image. Alliances with Germany have taken priority over all others, one can surmise, because it is the only nation that can threaten France's position as a leader. France only really participates in

Europe when it can take a lead, hence its anxiety over the arrival of ten new members that might dilute its power.

Put very bluntly, France does not seem to be in favour of a European Union that brings together millions of citizens in equality for the benefit and promotion of all. Instead it seems to desire the restoration of French hegemony over the continent: Napoleon by the back door. A little polemical and exaggerated, perhaps, but it provides a fresh look at French motivations.

Seen in this light, France seems thoroughly un-European and detrimental to all the good that comes from the Union. In future, as London is scolded for being 'half-hearted' and 'tentative' in its approach to the EU, one should think twice as to whether it really is a reluctant European. Further thought may reveal that it is in fact, France.