We will be joining Norway in leaving the EU and in forging ever closer relations.¹

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said this in December 2017 during a ceremony to light the Christmas tree at Trafalgar Square, an annual gift since 1947 from Norwegians to Londoners as a token of gratitude for Britain’s help during the Second World War. The statement sums up the main themes of this chapter: Britain’s decision to leave the European Union and the future British-Norwegian relationship.

On 23 June 2016, a majority of British voters dismissed continued EU membership, and on 31 January 2020 the UK left the Union. This chapter examines why there was a referendum and discusses why so many voted for Brexit. Moreover, it tries to explain why it took so long to leave even though a large majority of MPs expressed that the referendum result had to be respected.

Although not of major importance, Norway played a role in the British referendum debate. Both the Remain and Leave sides used the Norwegian model of association to the European Union in their campaigns. How could Norway be an argument for and against British membership? And what did Norwegians think about Brexit?

The final part of the chapter deals with the British-Norwegian relationship after Brexit, a relationship that needs to be reshaped in a number of ways. Will they again work closely from the outside like they did in EFTA
in the 1960s, and how will Brexit affect their bilateral relations in other areas?

**Political Relations**

The second decade of the twenty-first century was a volatile period in British politics, with four general elections and two hung parliaments. Nonetheless, the Conservative Party was in power throughout the period. David Cameron formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, but they parted ways after the Tories won a majority alone in 2015. The Brexit issue shaped UK politics from that point forward. Cameron announced his resignation only hours after the referendum result was clear in June 2016. The entire premiership of his successor, Theresa May, was dominated by Brexit and in particular the search for an interim exit deal that could be accepted in Europe and at home. She failed. It did not help that she lost her Commons’ majority in 2017 and had to depend on support from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). But pressure from inside her own party was enough in itself—eventually she resigned in the summer of 2019. In December the same year, the gamble to launch a general election paid off for the new prime minister, Boris Johnson; the Tories won with a surprisingly big margin.

Brexit was the principal election campaign issue in 2019; it significantly changed the political map of Britain. Labour had its worst election result since 1935. Particularly painful was losing party strongholds in northern England to the Tories. Labour MPs who lost their seats blamed the leadership’s Brexit policy. Indeed, choosing a middle, and rather unclear, way on the heated Brexit question could hardly be a vote winner. Moreover, Jeremy Corbyn was not a popular prime minister candidate. Tony Blair characterised Labour’s election campaign as a “combination of misguided ideology and terminal ineptitude”, and claimed that it was a “cardinal error” of Corbyn to have agreed to the election. Clearly, Blair disliked Corbyn moving the party to the left, in the opposite direction of where he himself had taken it.

In Norway, the “red-green” coalition led by Jens Stoltenberg continued until the September 2013 Storting election. Since then Erna Solberg of the Conservatives has been prime minister for varying coalitions of non-socialist parties. For the first time ever the Progress Party, positioned on the right of the political scale in Norway, was part of a
government. Neither European integration, nor any other foreign policy area played a vital role in any of the elections in this period.

In public, David Cameron expressed that “Britain and Norway have an extremely strong relationship; we are very old friends, very close friends”.6 Haugevik claims that political attention around the bilateral cooperation increased after Cameron became prime minister.7 This was a paradox considering the good relationship Jens Stoltenberg had with Gordon Brown. One factor that may have played a role here is that since he became leader of the Conservative Party in 2005, Cameron had the Scandinavian countries as an obvious reference for his emphasis on family policy, research, education and the environment.8 Moreover, Haugevik argues that the Cameron government was concerned with strengthening Britain’s relations outside the Union and other established institutions.9 In 2011, Stoltenberg and Cameron signed a deal on bilateral and global partnership.10 Albeit fairly loose, it identified eight areas of cooperation, such as trade, research, environment and security. Probably not a coincidence, the first on the list was energy.

Nonetheless, similar to the previous two decades, political relations between Norway and Britain were good—but not special anymore. For Britain, it was not among the most important. And when Cameron in 2012 became the first British PM to visit Norway since 1986, it generated little attention compared to previous visits. This demonstrated the reduced role of Britain in Norwegian politics and among the public.

**Security and Defence**

Britain and Norway have continued to share many security perspectives, where the UN and NATO have remained the two cornerstones. During this period, there was also no significant dividing feature as the 2003 Iraq war had been among European NATO members.

The 2011 Libya intervention was a prominent example of Britain’s and Norway’s emphasis on the UN and NATO. When the Arab spring spread to Libya, Colonel Gaddafi violently hit back at insurgents.11 The human rights abuses put the world’s democracies under pressure to help. In February 2011, the UN Security Council opened for the protection of the Libyan population from Gaddafi forces using all available means. Britain and France took the lead politically in the UN, and in the NATO intervention that followed the next month.12 Norway was also among the first countries to participate in the Libya operation. The Norwegian use
of force was unlike anything seen before. Norway dropped no bombs in Kosovo in 1999, seven in Afghanistan in the 2001–07 period, and almost 600 in Libya.\textsuperscript{13}

In the short term, the intervention was a success. By the end of October, Gaddafi had been killed, and Sarkozy and Cameron were hailed as Libyan liberators.\textsuperscript{14} But in a longer perspective considerable problems have arisen. In 2016, the British Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that the decision to intervene was not based on accurate intelligence; the threat to civilians was overstated.\textsuperscript{15} More problematic perhaps was the coalition’s lack of a post-operation strategy. Libya today is a failed state with sectarian violence.\textsuperscript{16} This underlines how difficult decisions about international military operations are. Western democracies such as Norway and Britain are under pressure to act in cases of substantial breaches of human rights inside states, but the cost is often high and the long-term effects uncertain. The appetite for such interventions has abated in the UK and Norway after Libya. In 2013, for example, Cameron’s coalition government was voted down by the House of Commons on attacking Syria.\textsuperscript{17}

NATO has operated less out of area in this decade in part due to Russian self-assertiveness, particularly evident in Georgia in 2008 and even more so on the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Russian military activities close to Norwegian areas escalated as well.\textsuperscript{18} Norway therefore argued for a return to the focus on the core area in NATO’s new Strategic Concept in 2010.\textsuperscript{19} Some other members were sceptical—and Britain among the most.\textsuperscript{20} The UK preferred a continuation of global NATO. This demonstrated two points. First, Norway experienced Russian belligerence more directly, similar to during the Cold War. Second, the two countries still had different views on its international role. Britain has retained a more global security perspective while Norway will be mostly satisfied as long as its corner of the world is safe. In the end, the new Strategic Concept was a balance between the out-of-area approach and protection of NATO territory.\textsuperscript{21}

The British-Norwegian security relationship seems to have strengthened somewhat in this decade. Liam Fox, the Tory defence secretary, characterised Norway as “one of our key strategic partners”.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, in 2012 Britain and Norway signed a bilateral agreement on closer defence cooperation, including training and exchange of military personnel.\textsuperscript{23} The Norwegian defence minister then said that “Norway and the Nordic were back on Britain’s agenda”.\textsuperscript{24} Nonetheless, this certainly had its limits.
Trade and Economy

David Cameron inherited a difficult economic situation due to the financial crisis. It was “even worse than we thought”, he claimed. The coalition government’s answer was to introduce a number of austerity measures. These were controversial politically, but not enough for the Labour Party to capitalise on substantially.

Norway was not hit as hard by the financial crisis, and unemployment remained low in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The GDP per capita has been among the highest in the world, significantly higher than Britain’s. Oil and gas have continued as the most important sources of revenue; energy constitutes over half of Norway’s total exports of goods. However, in the spring of 2020 a sudden fall in oil prices and, above all, the coronavirus hit the economy hard. Similar to Britain and other economies unemployment spiked.

The bilateral trade patterns from the previous decade continued. Norway exports more to the UK than it imports. Britain is the number one export country for Norway. A small country like Norway is much less significant for British exporters; in 2016, it was the 26th most important market. In the first two post-war decades, Britain was the biggest exporter to Norway, but it was gradually overtaken by other countries. In 2018, the UK was in fourth place, behind Sweden, Germany and Denmark.

Bilateral trade of energy has remained particularly important. Britain has a high dependency on Norway. In 2017, 57% of crude oil and 75% of gas imported to the UK came from its neighbour across the North Sea. Norway’s very fortunate position in this area is of course essential to this pattern. Of all the OECD countries it is by far the largest net exporter of energy in percentage terms, as it sold almost six times as much energy as it used itself. Importantly, almost all of Norway’s electricity production comes from hydropower.

Britain was often Norway’s best insider ally when the EU tried to meddle in Norwegian management of oil and gas resources. Britain, as a petroleum producer, has shared interests with Norway. Espen Barth Eide, a former Norwegian foreign minister, considers that this is one reason why Brexit is something to worry about. After Britain left, only big importers of oil and gas remain around the EU table. On a number of occasions, the EU, directly or indirectly, has proposed laws that could encroach on Norwegian sovereignty over oil and gas resources.
has constantly argued that activities on the continental shelf should not be affected by the EEA. Brexit could mean that the EU will look for ways to challenge this more.

**Norway and European Integration**

The previous chapter examined the main features of Norway’s relationship with the EU after 1994. Most of this applies to the period covered in this chapter as well. Here some specific developments in the second decade of the twenty-first century are discussed.

Opposition to EU membership among Norwegians in this decade has been nothing but stronger than ever. Opinion polls stabilised around 70% “no”. One reason was the euro crisis. Many thought it exposed problematic aspects of the EU. It made it harder to argue that rich Norwegians would be better off inside the Union. Furthermore, being on the outside saved Norway from contributing to the bailouts of southern European members. The valid point made by EU supporters that the crisis was not a result of the euro itself but of national governments overspending, convinced few.

Prime Minister Solberg supports Norwegian EU membership, but the issue has remained off the table for all her governments. The smaller non-socialist parties that she has relied on in the coalition are fundamentally lukewarm. And in 2016 the Progress Party announced its opposition. Supranationalist bureaucracy was given as one reason. Another key concern for the party was the EU’s handling of migration and the refugee crisis. Moreover, Solberg, always the realist, understands that the strong public opposition most likely makes this a lost cause for some years still. “Not a good idea”, was her response in June 2020 to a proposal made by the Young Conservatives that the party should actively pursue EU membership in the coming years.

The Solberg government has continued Norway’s traditional “active” European policy. It has strengthened cooperation with the EU in many areas. One example is security and defence, where the government works primarily bilaterally to reach its goals vis-à-vis the EU. In a 2017 White Paper, it listed the EU members that it intended to increase its foreign and security dialogue with. Britain was among these, but did not stand out as particularly important, as it would have been in the first post-war decades.
The democratic challenges arising from Norway’s European relations have continued. The country has now some 70 treaties with the EU. According to the European Commission, Norway “is as integrated in European policy and economy as any non-member state can be”. The EEA is the most important pillar, and as we have seen, it involves the EU de facto deciding a wide range of new Norwegian laws. “Five a day” has become an expression used in the domestic debate, referring to the number of EU acts adopted by Norway every day the Storting is in session.

Indeed, Norway’s ability to influence EU policy making has diminished. With an increasing number of member states, the views of third countries like Norway were necessarily pushed further down the list of priorities for the Union. Furthermore, EU decision-making has become more complicated. More decisions are made by agencies and directorates, and new laws often come in packages of which only parts are relevant to Norway via the EEA. The EU also passes some laws quickly before Norway has time to act. Moreover, the European Parliament has gradually increased its power. In a 2016 interview Prime Minister Solberg said “we used to talk to the Commission and we could call up the countries. It is much more difficult to get the European Parliament to understand that Norway… should have special favours.”

The Solberg government tried to deal with these challenges by establishing a Minister of EEA and EU affairs in 2015. It also established a European committee led by this minister to coordinate all ministries’ contacts with the EU. Another motive for these initiatives was to regain some political control over the management of Norway’s European policy from experts and the civil service. The Centre Party, the most ardent anti-European party, argued that this ministerial position should be removed since Norway is not a member of the EU. The party leader, Trygve Slagsvold Vedum, also claimed that the ministers that held the position appeared to be acting as spokespersons for Brussels in the domestic debate. In 2018, the prime minister reluctantly decided to scrap this post, not as a response to the criticism but to allow room for new ministerial posts when the Liberal Party joined the government coalition.

Yet a majority of Norwegians still favour EEA membership. The euro crisis made the arguments stronger for the EEA, the Conservatives and the Labour Party argued. According to the Solberg government, it is Norway’s “lifeline to the European market.” But left-leaning trade
unions have increasingly criticised it, arguing that it ruins the Norwegian model and labour rights. One of the most powerful unions, Fellesforbundet, has demanded that the government reviews the effects of the EEA on Norway. This view reverberates to some extent into the Labour Party, which has traditionally been a staunch EEA supporter. Such reviews do not often materialise into significant changes. However, if Labour were to change its stance, it would mean that all parties of the only credible alternative to the Solberg government in the 2021 Storting election would be anti-EEA. Such a scenario could have a dramatic effect on Norway’s European policy.

BREXIT

Britain’s relationship with Europe as an EC/EU member was always strained, from Wilson’s renegotiations, Thatcher’s Europhobic rhetoric, Major’s Maastricht ratification problems, Blair’s inability to move the UK closer to Europe and to increasing calls for a referendum on membership in the twenty-first century. In this perspective, it was no surprise that the British public voted to leave in 2016.

Britain has consistently been the most Eurosceptic member since accession in 1973. Of course, dissatisfaction about an EU democratic deficiency has been widespread in Europe for decades. The northern European states have generally been more reluctant to accept greater integration than the southern. And the eastern and central European countries applied for membership as soon as they fulfilled the conditions; they needed support for their young democracies and weak economies. In 2017 about half of the British people thought their country could better face the future outside the EU, more than in any other member country.

It is likely that British newspapers have played an important role in shaping EU opposition. A large section of the press has been strongly Eurosceptic, often depicting a Europe trying to cheat Britain. “Tabloid discourse especially, … engages in crude stereotyping and xenophobic outbursts, distorts issues, omits information and is heavy with ideological force”, Gowland et al. argue. A well-known example is The Sun’s “Up yours Delors”, another is the same newspaper’s characterisation of Gordon Brown signing the Lisbon Treaty: “Surrender signature”.

Europe was the most difficult issue in the negotiations for the coalition government platform in 2010. The Liberal Democrats have since their
formation in 1988 been the most enthusiastic EU supporter of the three major parties. The Tories had for decades been divided on European matters and UK membership. The European Research Group, working within the party since the 1990s, pressed for an in/out referendum. The coalition parties agreed that Britain would not join the euro, and if further transfer of powers to the EU was proposed in the future, the people would have their say.

A petition calling for a referendum on British EU membership quickly achieved so much support that the Parliament had to debate it in October 2011. Although as many as 81 Tory MPs voted in favour, and 20 abstained, the House rejected a referendum by 483 to 111 votes. But the issue would not go away. Pressure continued on Cameron from within and outside the party.

An important part of this pressure was the increased popularity of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). It did well in European Parliament elections: it came second in 2009 and was the most popular in 2014, the first time in modern history that neither of the two main parties won a national election. UKIP was also beating Conservative MPs in by-elections. Evans and Menon point to the many British voters who had become disenchanted and distrustful of the political class, due to, for example, the parliament-expenses scandal. This group of voters was clearly open to a populism movement. Another factor was that Labour and the Tories had become more similar. This created a climate for rebellion. Many in the Tory Party argued that something had to be done to counter these developments. David Laws, a Liberal Democrat MP, writes that senior Conservatives told him privately in late 2012 that “We need to come out for an EU referendum, or we will be destroyed by UKIP in the 2014 referendum, and maybe lose a lot of votes in 2015 too”.

On many occasions, Cameron chose a confrontational style regarding Europe. When the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December 2012, he sent his coalition partner Nick Clegg to the ceremony, which he labelled a “jamboree”. Yet there was always a group inside the party that was even more negative. Boris Johnson, London mayor at the time, characterised the EU Nobel Prize as “preposterous”. Cameron also chose a relatively tough approach on policy. At the European Council in December 2011, he vetoed a treaty amendment about new rules for the eurozone. This enraged many in Europe but was hailed by Eurosceptics in Britain. It caused strains in the coalition government because the Liberal Democrats opposed the veto. Whether it was pressure
from within his own party or government, or Cameron’s own beliefs, he did little to improve Britain’s European relations. He was unable to form a good relationship with his EU partners and was repeatedly “wrong-footed”.64

In January 2013, Cameron announced his support for a referendum on whether Britain should remain an EU member. Pressure from within his own party was crucial for the decision.65 Cameron wanted first to renegotiate UK membership terms as well as reforms of the EU, thereby making membership more attractive to British voters. The 2015 Tory election manifesto promised an EU referendum. Implicitly, it argued that with renegotiated terms membership was the best option. In February 2016, Cameron finished the negotiations on the EU reform deal. He obtained some changes, such as a guarantee that non-euro states such as Britain would not fund bailouts, and a commitment to exempt the UK from “ever closer union” to be written into new treaties. But many thought that this was not significant.

The Referendum Campaign

Unsurprisingly, Cameron came out in favour of Remain after the reform negotiations. However, the strong divisions in the party made him suspend the convention of collective cabinet responsibility so that ministers could campaign as they pleased. A majority of them supported Remain. But it was a blow when seniors such as Michael Gove and Boris Johnson announced their opposition. A popular media figure, Johnson became the political leader of the Leave side. This was important as he was “capable of matching the Prime Minister for sheer star quality, as well as influence”.66

The role of the opposition parties contributed to Brexit. Labour was formally committed to membership, but the leadership, with Jeremy Corbyn at the top, was criticised for making a half-hearted effort for the Remain side.67 Corbyn, traditionally a Eurosceptic, was even accused of sabotaging the Remain campaign.68 The Liberal Democrats were significantly weakened after the 2015 general election, and their Remain arguments had limited impact.

The referendum campaign was extreme in many ways, and one of the most divisive in modern British political history.69 Well-considered arguments and balanced views took a backseat to the turmoil. The press contributed its fair share to this. Its coverage of the referendum “was
at times both hyperbolic and misleading”. A majority of the press supported Leave. The campaigns themselves were hardly any better. Boris Johnson warned that the EU shared the “same flawed ambition to unite Europe that Hitler pursued”. He did acknowledge, however, that the EU adopted other means than the Nazi Germans.

A crucial Brexit argument, and probably the most important for Leavers, was immigration. This had some nasty sides, but it was also a valid issue. In 2015 net immigration to Britain was 333,000—the second highest figure on record. Britain was a popular destination for those seeking a safer and more prosperous future for themselves and their families—in other words, the country’s soft power was still among the greatest in the world. Due to the rules of the Single Market, the huge bulk of immigrants came from the European Union and in particular Eastern Europe. The British government, underestimating how many would come, had not imposed restrictions on immigration from these countries when they became members in 2005/2007, unlike most other EU states. This resulted in Britain receiving “a historically unique inflow of migrants from the EU accession countries”. Despite making significant contributions to the British economy, many argued that these people came to exploit the country’s welfare system. The hard-line Leavers and the press also portrayed them as a threat to British culture and way of life.

Another vital point for many Leavers was the question of sovereignty. While this was related to immigration, it was also a much wider questions that had existed since the start of European integration. After the Second World War, the principle of complete sovereignty was almost sacred for the UK. The supranational elements of European integration had always been problematic to a majority of the British public and politicians. That so much of British law, normally made by the House of Commons, was now coming from Brussels disturbed many Britons. It undermined the traditionally strong sovereignty of the British parliament. Of course, Britain was a part of “Brussels” through its EU membership and could thereby influence decisions—but that was apparently often disregarded by many sceptics.

Money was a third issue. Many thought Britain paid too much to the EU. Contributions to the EC/EU budget had been controversial ever since Britain had negotiated for membership in 1971. Britain had always been a net contributor, despite rebates achieved in the 1980s, partly because the regulations had been made by the EC before Britain joined.
The Eurozone crisis, with massive bailouts of Greece, coincided with the referendum campaign. This did not help the Remain side.

The Vote Leave organisation was very important in the Brexit debate. It distanced itself from UKIP and leader Nigel Farage since he was seen to be off-putting to undecided voters. Vote Leave had MPs as members but proclaimed itself an anti-establishment uprising. Boris Johnson portrayed Brexit as “a bit of a David and Goliath story”. The organisation focused on dissatisfaction about immigration. “Take back control” became a persuasive slogan, encapsulating the public’s emphasis on sovereignty. Also, the issue of contributions to the EU budget was important. Most people remember the red double-decker bus painted with the message that Britain was sending £350 million a week to the EU, which could be spent on the NHS instead. This claim was hotly disputed, and many Leavers later admitted that the figures were inflated. But it had an effect on voters.

The main argument for the Remain campaign centred on the economic dangers of leaving, including increased unemployment. In April 2016, the UK civil service sent a booklet to every home in Britain setting out the case for remaining in the EU. It was primarily based on economic arguments. The Treasury later the same month warned that leaving would involve serious negative economic consequences. It presented concrete sums on how much worse off each household would be with the various non-membership options in the future. But this was not credible and only hurt the Remain side. The government and Remain side were accused of scaremongering. A major problem for pro-Europeans ever since the question of membership arose in the 1960s has been that it is virtually impossible to calculate exactly how much membership improves the economy.

Britain Stronger in Europe was the key Remain organisation. It struggled to achieve similar clarity as the Leave side. A general problem was that Remainers had to be more nuanced than their opponents. Very few in Britain, or anywhere else for that matter, thought that the EU was perfect, so it was necessary to acknowledge its weaknesses to be seen as credible. Leave supporters could be more categorical. But perhaps the Remain side should have connected more with the hearts of the people? Its campaign was perhaps dry and lacked emotion. The Leave side adopted a more visceral approach. Goodwin, Hix and Pickup claim that “arguments regarding the positive effects of EU membership were far less prominent as they received a fraction of the media attention” compared
to the Leave arguments. The dynamics of a referendum differ from the usual parliament debate. Winning the support of the people often requires different skills than winning in parliament. MPs can be persuaded by party carrots and whips. And, importantly, the level of knowledge about the subject naturally varies more among a whole population than for MPs who are more used to dealing with large amounts of information and, ideally, considering different sides of a complex matter.

**The Result**

“A wave of shock is reverberating around Europe”, the BBC reported the day after the Brexit referendum. Most experts had not predicted the result. However, Evans and Menon argue that some 80% of the votes matched the responses to a poll on the EU in 2010. Shock or not, it was a fact that 51.9% had voted to leave, and the turnout was 72.2%, higher than any general election since 1992. Andrew Marr described it as the “biggest democratic rebellion in modern British history”.

Why a majority of British voters turned down EU membership has been discussed widely. How could the government and establishment, including the major parties, with such huge resources lose? Why did the electorate not prefer the status quo, which is normal in referendums. There are a number of explanations.

Remain politicians made several mistakes. One factor was that Cameron and other cabinet members could not campaign for British membership until the reform negotiations were finalised. This left them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the Brexiteers; Remainers were fighting a defensive battle. Moreover, most Britons observed no substantial changes in Cameron’s reform deal on such important matters as British sovereignty and measures for limiting EU immigration. The negotiations did not match the expectations that Cameron had created. As such it could be asked whether they were in the end detrimental to the Remain side. It would arguably have been better to hold the referendum as soon as possible after it was promised in 2013. Finding solutions that would please British Eurosceptics and at the same time be acceptable to the EU partners was virtually impossible. Why then try?

A distrust of the political elite played a role for many Leave voters. The major parties misjudged how strong this feeling was among the people. A growing part of the electorate had felt overlooked by the centrist elite, and the referendum finally gave them an opportunity to
oppose to them directly. 92 The mainstream parties were more socially liberal than the public on questions of order, morality and freedom. And the socially conservative voters preferred the Leave option. Voting patterns therefore cut across the traditional left–right party lines. But not completely: the Tory voters were the most anti-EU—61% voted Leave, while the percentage for Labour voters was only 35. Even 32% of the Liberal Democrats voted for Brexit. 93

The discontent with the elite was related to another explanation for Brexit: the voting pattern of the working class, even though some researchers warn against oversimplification on this. 94 Particularly in central and northern England, this segment of the electorate was more likely to vote Leave. This was typically in the former manufacturing areas where unemployment was higher and wages lower than the national average. David Goodheart labels this group as the “somewheres”, as they are more rooted in geographical identity, not cosmopolitanism. 95 They are often older and less educated. Over 40% of Leave voters were aged over 55. 96 They feel they have lost in the globalised economy. Importantly, they have been marginalised politically by the “anywheres”, who also dominate culture, society and business life. 97 All four UK capitals voted Remain, underlining that urbanites with higher education and better paid jobs were more comfortable with and benefitted more economically from globalisation and immigration. Goodheart argues that the “somewheres” are more disposed to populism. Traditionally, the working-class and less-educated people had given up voting more than other groups, hence the trend of decreasing voter turnout in the national elections. They had grown disillusioned and disinterested. Many of the three million more people who voted in the referendum, compared to the 2015 general election, belonged to this group—and a majority of them were Eurosceptics. 98 The Remain side’s main argument was fear of economic downturn, but many of these people felt that they had lost economically already for decades.

Immigration was closely related to this. More people in areas with high immigration from Eastern Europe voted leave. 99 And it was in these regions that people struggled more economically, and felt, correctly or not, that foreigners came and took their jobs. Moreover, Virdee and McGeever claim that the Leave campaign was racially charged. 100 It won by focusing on a restoration of Britain’s greatness, back to the Empire, where Britain was above its colonial subjects. In this perspective, globalisation should be rejected because it threatens Britishness. Leaving the
question of racism aside, we have seen that the idea of Britain as a greater
nation than it is in reality has endured among many Britons throughout
the post-war period. This has often constrained British politicians when
dealing with Europe, but also made the EU a useful scapegoat at times.

It also mattered for the Brexit voting that the Leave campaign rather
cleverly managed to switch the argument about the status quo. The
campaign argued that the important issues of sovereignty, immigration
and economic and cultural demotion connected with globalisation would
only continue and strengthen with EU membership. In other words, the
political status quo option, if Britain were to remain a member, would
really mean a gradual change towards an even worse situation.

Finally, Cameron has been widely criticised for his political manoeu-
vring. Smith passes a harsh verdict. It was a huge gamble to open for a
referendum, and he failed.\textsuperscript{101} He lost in three ways: Britain would now,
most likely, leave the European Union; his party would be just as divided
in the subsequent years; and he lost his job.

**How to Brexit?**

Theresa May won the leadership battle and took over as prime minister,
a position described as a “poisoned chalice”.\textsuperscript{102} Similar to Norway, refer-
endums in Britain have no formal constitutional status, they are only
consultative. It would be up to the House of Commons to decide whether
to Brexit or not. Other EU countries had in previous decades held refer-
endums that resulted in the people turning down a European treaty that
a government or parliament majority supported, and the electorate had
to vote again to get the “right” result after some modifications of the
treaty. The Conservative Party’s 2015 election manifesto had promised
to respect the result of the referendum, and it was expected that the
House of Commons would honour it. Undeniably, May did. “Brexit
means Brexit” became a mantra for her, despite being a Remainer in the
referendum campaign. She triggered article 50 of the Treaty on European
Union in March 2017. But it would turn out to be extremely difficult to
find an interim withdrawal agreement that could be accepted in London
and Brussels. Moreover, Seldon passes a hard verdict on May as a prime
minister.\textsuperscript{103} It is hard not to agree at least when it comes to her handling
of Brexit.

It added to May’s difficulties that she lost the Tory majority in the
June 2017 election. She had had a comfortable lead in the opinion
polls all year, but ran a disastrous campaign. Brexit played a small part in the election though; both major parties had promised to respect the referendum result. It was rather dominated by traditional issues like the economy and social care policy. The personal abilities of the contenders for prime minister, May and Corbyn, also mattered. The election seriously damaged May’s authority in parliament and inside her own party. Importantly, she now had to govern at the mercy of the DUP.

The fundamental question was how “hard” the Brexit deal should be. Or to put it another way, how should Britain be connected with the EU in the transition phase before more permanent arrangements were settled at a later stage. A majority of MPs preferred a soft Brexit, which would involve close alignment with the EU’s customs union and Single Market. That would secure trade links and reduce significantly negative economic effects. But importantly, it would mean that Britain had little say in the making of new rules pertaining to these important areas. Brexiteers refused to accept such a solution, arguing that it betrayed what people had voted for in the referendum. A hard Brexit would involve cutting completely the institutional ties with the EU and focusing on free-trade arrangements. This, however, would involve much uncertainty, probably economic downturn and the need for customs checks at the Irish border. But it would mean that Britain no longer had to accept so many laws made by the EU. Fundamentally, it was problematic that it was so unclear what the people had really voted for in 2016. Norwegian prime minister Erna Solberg was correct when she said that it was obvious that Britain did not have a well-thought out plan for what should be done if the people voted to leave the EU.

Negotiations with the EU on the withdrawal agreement were tough. Important matters were the amount of money to pay into EU budgets, the rights of EU citizens living in Britain and not least the Northern Irish border. The UK government and the EU played a game of chicken—none of them wanted no deal at all. But May often said that “no deal for Britain is better than a bad deal”. The prime minister and most of her cabinet colleagues were extremely keen on reaching an agreement. But the EU had the better hand. May’s deal of November 2018 was largely a soft Brexit: in the transition phase Britain would have to abide by EU law, also new laws, continue its payments to the budget and be under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ).

Negotiations in Brussels were almost trivial compared to the battle-ground in Westminster. The Tories were so divided that May was unable
to get her deal through parliament. A group of hardliner Brexiteers thought she had accepted far too EU-friendly terms. Moreover, the Labour Party often played party politics and thus rejected May’s deal. Meanwhile, the DUP refused to accept that Northern Ireland would have different status from the rest of Britain. The Irish government, and consequently the entire EU27, were concerned that there would be a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.\textsuperscript{108} This could threaten the Good Friday Treaty of 1998. May’s leadership was challenged from inside the party, but she managed to scrape by after a vote of confidence among her own MPs. In the end, she decided to quit. It was just not possible to get her deal through with the frozen situation in parliament.

Boris Johnson’s initial move as prime minister was to suspend parliament in order to hinder MPs from stopping a “no deal” Brexit.\textsuperscript{109} This largely failed, and in October 2019 Johnson’s government negotiated a new withdrawal agreement with the EU. The terms were primarily similar to those May had achieved, but there were important changes on the issue of the Northern Irish border. In the general election in December, the Tories capitalised on the dominance of Brexit in the campaign. The Liberal Democrats argued for a new referendum, which was not well received, and the Labour position was unclear.\textsuperscript{110} Johnson’s catchphrase “get Brexit done” resonated with many voters who had grown tired of the whole issue. By the end of January Britain left the EU, with a transition regime not very dissimilar to membership—but with less influence.

**Brexit and Norway**

Norway was not of high importance in the Brexit debate but attracted more interest in British politics than in a long time. We probably have to go all the way back to the “Norway debate” in the House of Commons in May 1940 to find a period where it played a more significant role.\textsuperscript{111}

The Norwegian relationship with the EU was used by both sides in the Brexit debate. Remainers argued that while Norway was rich, it was politically dominated by Brussels. David Cameron dismissed a Norwegian model for Britain, in effect EFTA and EEA membership. He categorised such a solution as “government by fax”, since Britain would be unable to influence EU laws that would affect the country.\textsuperscript{112} As we have seen, this description was not far off the mark. Cameron also emphasised that Norway is the tenth largest contributor to the EU.\textsuperscript{113} The think tank Open Europe found that a Norway option for Britain would
involve contributing 94% of what Britain contributed as a member. The government therefore saw little future for Britain in companionship with non-EU members.

Among Eurosceptics Norway had long been seen as a model for Britain to follow. It demonstrated how a country could be prosperous and well-functioning without being an EU member. The people had dismissed membership twice and Norway therefore retained full sovereignty, they argued. However, a majority of Brexiteers gradually dismissed a Norwegian solution when they realised what it really entailed. The Vote Leave campaign director, Dominic Cummings, wanted a looser arrangement in order to “end the supremacy of EU law”.

But at times when the deadlock in the House of Commons made a “no deal” Brexit more likely, several MPs regarded the “Norway solution” as a safe option. One was Labour’s Stephen Kinnock, who argued: “We are navigating straight towards the ice berg now, like Titanic,... it may be Norway that provides a safe harbour at the well-established EEA”. Moreover, “Norway plus”, which would also include remaining in the EU customs union, gathered more support as the exit date approached, for example, from cabinet minister Amber Rudd. It was argued that this option would mean going back to the sort of economic relationship that Britain had with the EC in the 1970s and 80 s. In the chaos of the House of Commons’ debates on Brexit on 27 March 2019, there were eight indicative votes. The Norwegian model received the lowest support of all proposals, 65 for and 377 against. “Norway plus” fared better, 188 in favour and 307 against. It was supported by both Labour and Tory MPs. Fundamentally, many argued, any Norwegian-based solution, in particular the “plus” model, would be a Brexit only in name. It would mean accepting EU laws and, indirectly, being under ECJ rule, as well as accepting the principle of free movement of people.

What then did Norwegians think about Brexit? A majority of national politicians preferred that Britain would remain in the EU. Norway’s foreign minister, Børge Brende, argued that it was better for the UK since it would have more influence on the inside. Many also considered that it was a better option for Norway if there was no Brexit. Prime Minister Solberg emphasised that it would provide more orderly relations for her country. In the light of its considerable dependency on the EU27 and Britain, instability in Europe is always seen as negative in Norway. Furthermore, Britain shares Norwegian transatlantic and anti-federalist
instincts. Brexit could involve having less ways of putting the brakes on further EU integration that would inevitably affect Norway.

Accepting that Brexit was a fact, the Norwegian voices that were heard in Britain generally advised against a Norwegian model. Espen Barth Eide, former Labour foreign minister, warned that access to the Single Market from outside the EU also means “retaining all the EU’s product standards, financial regulations, employment regulations and substantial contributions to the EU budget”—Britain would continue to be “run by Brussels”.122 He also emphasised that the UK would have to follow the EU’s rules on the movement of people. Prime Minister Solberg had a similar message to the Eurosceptics in Britain who hoped to adopt the Norway solution: “they won’t like it”.123 Of course, these voices came from the pro-European Norwegian Labour Party and Conservatives. The Norwegian anti-Europeans, on the other hand, celebrated Brexit as a “victory for democracy”.124 The Centre Party argued that it will provide opportunities for Norway to strengthen cooperation with an important ally.125 While this may be true, the future bilateral relationship holds many uncertainties.

**The British-Norwegian Relationship After Brexit**

Brexit has many possible ramifications. A main question during the transition period in 2020 was whether Britain and the EU would reach a deal on their future relationship by the end of the year, as Boris Johnson promised in the 2019 election campaign. Both the EU and Britain realised that failure meant a “no deal” Brexit unless an extension was agreed. Nonetheless, more interesting here are the more fundamental long-term issues for Britain. One is the shape and nature of the permanent relationship to the EU. Will Britain become like any other third country, such as Canada, or will it end up with closer links, for example to the Single Market? Another is the UK’s international position. Will Brexit improve this by allowing opportunities to deal freely with whomever Britain wants while enjoying full national sovereignty, as the Remainers have contended? Or will the UK be weakened economically and politically, which was the Leave side’s major concern? A third important question is whether the UK will dissolve. In the Brexit referendum, Remain was the preferred option in Northern Ireland (56%) and Scotland (62%). Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland, has thus demanded that Westminster must allow a new referendum on Scottish independence.126 In Northern
Ireland, Brexit has increased calls for a United Ireland. These are all issues of great political importance to Britain, but our focus now moves to how Brexit may affect various aspects of the UK-Norwegian relationship.

It is in Britain’s interest to maintain and develop further good relations with Norway. The security links will still be important, and the UK depends on Norway for much of its energy needs. More than half of Norway’s petroleum resources are still not produced, so the country will be an important energy power also in the future. Boris Johnson’s abovementioned prediction about forging closer relations with Norway may very well come true. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that there will be substantial changes in their relationship. The security and energy cooperation already works very well, and it is hard to identify areas with great potential for improvement. Moreover, it is doubtful that there is enough political will in Oslo and London combined to prioritise an extensive change of the relationship. Norway will never be the most important European country to Britain. In his discussion on British foreign policy after Brexit, Hill contends that the UK may retain its good bilateral relations with states such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway, but what really matters in European relations is the future relationship to France and Germany. This is correct. But on some issues, Britain and Norway will as non-EU members naturally take a joint position. And Britain will generally need all the friends it can hang on to.

Norway will seek close relations to Britain after Brexit. Security partnership and trade in energy and fish are important factors. But it is unlikely that Norway will try to jump back into the arms of Britain as in the post-war years. Since 1999 Norway has had a special strategy for Germany. When this was renewed in June 2019, the Norwegian foreign minister, Ine Eriksen Søreide, stated that “Germany is a central EU country and Norway’s most important partner in Europe”. This very good bilateral relationship is based on the countries’ shared fundamental views on foreign policy, not least the emphasis on multilateral cooperation and a rule-governed world. Norway also share many of these values with Britain, but as we have seen in previous chapters the bilateral relationship has faded. Haugevik correctly comments that, before the Brexit decision, Britain was “rarely singled out as a chief bilateral partner for Norway in the EU”.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Britain had feared that the Nordic countries would move towards the European Community without them. This is what has happened with Brexit: Sweden, Denmark and Finland will
remain members, and Norway seems to choose the EU over Britain overall.

A slightly closer British-Norwegian security relationship could develop. Both countries will continue to be firmly committed to NATO and will want a strong US role in Europe. But if EU members increase their defence coordination, it will add to Britain’s and Norway’s outsiderness. Whitman argues that in such a situation the two countries will have a common interest to coordinate within NATO. 132 Since the 1990s, Norway has feared that the Alliance will be dominated by negotiations between Brussels and Washington. Foreign and defence ministers meet far more often in the EU context than in NATO. This could now be a common Norwegian and British concern. There is also some unease related to a more active EU outside NATO. The former Norwegian EU affairs minister, Vidar Helgesen, said about being outside the Union on security and defence: “Norway is experiencing in a concrete way [what it means] not to be at the table when the EU is making decisions on policies towards our biggest neighbour, Russia”. 133 This could be a problem for Britain too, although it allows more room for an independent approach. Moreover, if Britain decides to participate in EU military and civilian operations under the CFSP, as Norway has done since 2003, the two countries could work together to get non-EU countries more say in planning and implementation. 134 We can also expect to see some strengthening of bilateral defence cooperation. In June 2020, the Norwegian defence minister announced that Britain will be allowed to pre-position more military equipment in Norway. 135 This makes sense in a practical perspective as it will be used for UK troops’ winter training. But it could also be interpreted as a sign of Britain’s increasing role as Norway’s most important European security ally.

The most significant changes from Brexit on this bilateral relationship are expected within trade. The prospect of a “no deal” Brexit increased awareness of how tightly integrated both countries are with the EU and with each other. Right after the 2016 referendum, the Norwegian government began to work eagerly to prepare as much as possible for Brexit. The EU affairs minister, Frank Bakke-Jensen, told the Storting in 2017: “hardly any countries have had more government-level meetings with the UK” than Norway. 136 Despite making a whole range of preparations for a “no deal” Brexit, the Norwegian government was relieved when the House of Commons finally passed the withdrawal agreement in January 2020. As an EEA member Norway could follow this EU-UK deal.
However, after the transition phase Oslo and London must agree on new arrangements because Brexit means that Britain will also be leaving the EEA, which has been essential for regulating their bilateral trade. Without the EEA and the common four freedoms, tariffs will increase, and probably more important, other trade barriers will arise. Prime Minister Solberg characterises trading on only WTO rules as “extremely demanding”. Nevertheless, both countries have an interest in securing good arrangements, so this is unlikely. But Brexit certainly complicates the future trade relationship. For example, there is a risk that there will be one set of rules with the EU and another for their bilateral trade. The extent of this is determined by how much Britain in the future chooses to adopt Single Market regulations, because it appears as given that Norway will continue to adapt to the EU in this area.

For Norway, it is problematic that Britain preferred to finalise a deal with the EU before moving on to other countries. It makes sense considering that the EU in 2019 accounted for 47% of Britain’s total trade. Trade with Norway was 2.2%. This had been a problem also before the interim agreement was in place. The Norwegian government maintained that it was “very well prepared, but the danger in such situations is that you can only prepare for what you know.”

A new long-term British-Norwegian deal would have to cover a wide range of areas, from air traffic to the sale of fish and the use of mobile phones. Normally it takes years to negotiate comprehensive bilateral trade agreements. In one sense, this is easier as oil and gas, which comprise about 80% of Norway’s export to Britain, are transported in pipes and thus not dependent on border controls. These resources are already regulated by bilateral treaties. Regarding fisheries, traditionally an issue of dispute between Norway and Britain, it is likely that competition will increase. Both want to sell fish to the EU, but Britain will lose its advantage vis-à-vis Norway since it will most likely no longer have entirely free access to the EU market. Moreover, the joint management of fish stocks in the North Sea will become more complicated with three rather than two main actors.

A simple way forward would be that the UK joins EFTA and thereby the EEA. Then it would obtain important trade agreements with as many as 38 countries in an instance. Moreover, Britain would almost automatically adopt new Single Market rules, making trade with the EU seamless. Seen from the Union this would have been an ideal solution.
Nevertheless, as we have discussed above, there are some major British objections to such a solution.

Moreover, the Norwegian government and business preferred that Britain remained in the Single Market—but not that it joins EFTA or the EEA.142 The Conservative MP Heidi Nordby Lunde said outright: “I do not believe it is in Norway’s interest to invite the UK into the EFTA bloc”.143 One thing is that British membership would radically change Norway’s role as the unquestionable dominant power on the EFTA side of the EEA. Another is that if Britain joins EFTA but not the EEA, it would seriously undermine the role of the EEA inside the Association. Conversely, if the UK remains in the EEA, but does not join EFTA, it will be such an important outsider that the EFTA members’ opinions on the formulation of new EU directives will matter even less than today. In general, Norwegians are concerned that some kind of British participation in the EEA would be detrimental to Norway. It would make the arrangement more open to disputes due to the traditionally strained UK relationship with the EU. The Secretary General of the Norwegian European Movement stated in 2019 that Britain is “an obstructive nation and now with a dark blue nationalism in half the Tory party”.144 Regardless of the party in power in London, it seems likely that it would be hard for a big state like Britain to accept EU laws as easily as Norway has done since 1994. And a reservation from one country would affect the other non-EU EEA members. The main strategy in Oslo is to avoid jeopardising the EEA; despite its flaws, there is a fundamental interest in safeguarding it.145

Prime Minister Solberg in her usual diplomatic terms emphasises that Britain inside the EEA is a hypothetical question. And that if the British want to join, Norway will welcome them.146 Clearly, if Norway were put on the spot, it would be very difficult to refuse outright UK membership. Nonetheless, the Norwegian considerations about Britain’s role in this connection demonstrate how much has changed since the early decades of European integration. Then most Norwegians would have cheered at the thought of the UK together with Norway in EFTA. Now the EU27 is more important than Britain.

Conclusions

Brexit was a shock to experts, politicians and many ordinary Britons, indeed to most observers outside the UK as well. How could Britain choose to leave when it was so integrated with the EU and so many
strong forces in British society emphasised the benefits of membership? Moreover, for many Europeans it was hard to fathom that integration could be seriously reversed like this. They had grown up thinking that it was virtually a natural law that Europe would always integrate wider and deeper. Could this be the beginning of the unravelling of the whole European Union? That is a question for another book. But it is important to remember that Britain had been a somewhat odd and unusual member since its accession in 1973. It had continued its Atlantic and global orientation more than other members. It had opted out of important EU policies. And Euroscepticism among Britons had been stronger than in any other member state. As such, Brexit was the culmination of decades of British awkwardness, reluctance and outsiderliness in European integration.

Brexit dominated the British-Norwegian relationship in much of the second decade of the twenty-first century and will do so in the next one. Their trade relationship in particular needs to be reshaped so that their extensive trading can continue as before as much as possible. Whether this will revolve around the EU Single Market or only directly between the two remains to be seen—the former would certainly make matters easier. Furthermore, the political relationship will remain good. They share much in terms of history and values and, above all, they have many common interests. Relations may be strengthened to a degree as a result of their common outsidersness. We may see a slightly greater security cooperation since they both now are non-EU NATO members. They will at least have a common interest in the EU not gaining a dominant position within NATO. What is certain, is that Britain and Norway will be outsiders for a long time. A new Norwegian membership bid seems far away, and those who hoped that Britain might not leave the EU despite the referendum, or somehow re-join soon after Brexit, seem to have given up.

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