

The big ISSEU

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The issue of our EU membership has been contentious for decades, provoking strong responses on either side of the debate. Now, in less than three months, on 23rd June, the British will finally answer the question of whether we want to remain in the EU or leave.

The renegotiation of the terms of British membership has secured some guarantees, but the reality of the UK's 'special status' in Europe is open to interpretation.¹ Campaigning is well under way and both sides are strident in their arguments. There are Christians in both camps, and good reasons for both positions, but it is almost impossible to separate fact from propaganda. This article aims not to give a simple In/Out answer, but to articulate a biblical framework within which we might start to ask the right questions.

1 Sovereignty and subsidiarity

Firstly, there is the matter of the sacrifices a country makes in order to gain the benefits of being in the EU. These benefits are numerous and include access to the single market; freedom of movement; influence in matters of defence and international order; and a co-ordinated response to organised crime. Downsides include direct costs of membership; bureaucracy and unwanted regulation; and lack of control over our borders.

The idea of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching states that no group or organisation should carry out a task that could better be completed by a lower, more local one.

Decentralisation, local responsibility, curbs on the concentration of power – these are all biblical principles, worked out in the way that ancient Israel was structured as a nation and the safeguards that were in place to prevent the kinds of abuses of power (whether financial, political or military) that they had experienced in Egypt.

Subsidiarity is supposedly enshrined in EU law, but the objections around our membership suggest that many Brits still view Brussels as too powerful, with decision-making centralised far away from those it affects the most. And yet, Subsidiarity is not against centralisation: it is about *appropriate* centralisation. There are matters that can only be dealt with effectively at the international level.

The question this ultimately raises is, where are we on the scale of centralisation? Are we past the point where the cost-benefit calculation is no longer in our favour? Are we heading in the right direction?

2 Migration

The topic of migration has become inextricably linked with our EU membership. Net migration currently stands at over 300,000. The Conservatives have renewed their pledge to decrease this to 'tens of thousands';² but it is hard to see how this can be achieved under our present circumstances, since freedom of movement means we cannot stop European migrants from entering the country. The point forcefully (and not illogically) made by UKIP is that the only way to reduce migration is to pull out of the EU. The temperature of the argument has been raised several degrees by the migration crisis which has seen millions of displaced people travelling to Europe, including a large number of refugees fleeing from the Syrian conflict.

We typically look at immigration through an economic lens. Can we afford to pay these people benefits? Are they going to take our jobs? Are there jobs we need to give them that no one here is qualified or prepared to

do? We are consumeristic about immigration; we're happy to accept the 'brightest and best' who will pay their taxes and contribute to GDP, but wary about the ones who might not be so beneficial to our national bottom line. As an illustration of the mismatch in perceptions we need to address, a recent MORI poll asked respondents what proportion of the UK population they thought were immigrants. The average was 31%, whilst the reality is 13%. Meanwhile a Comres poll found that just 36% of Brits think EU citizens should have the right to live and work in the UK (46% disagreed); however, 52% think Brits should be free to live and work anywhere in the EU (26% disagreed).³

Then there is the cultural lens and concerns about integration – concerns which recent terrorist attacks have only made more acute. What if the refugees we let in include extremists, IS-sympathisers and terrorists?

The Bible has a different approach to immigration (or rather, to immigrants – it says little about immigration per se). There are broadly two categories of migrant in the Bible. There is the *ger*, who is typically landless and risks being on the margins of society, frequently mentioned alongside other vulnerable groups such as the orphan and the widow. The Israelites were commanded to look after them, because the experience of being oppressed in a foreign country was one that was core to their own national identity. *Gerim* were generally willing to integrate into Israelite life, and if they did so, they were to be treated the same as any native-born Israelite under the law.

Then there was the *nokri*, the 'true' foreigner, who was often economically independent and whose allegiances lay outside of Israel. Recognising the threat that *nokrim* posed to Israelite culture and religion, the Bible is more cautious in its treatment of them (there are repeated warnings about *nokrim* leading Israel into idolatry and apostasy, for example, and the *nokri* is the only category of people the Israelites are allowed to charge interest – partly



Parliament of the United Kingdom, London

Photo credit: David Iltiff

to avoid the exploitation that would otherwise result).

The biblical emphasis is therefore on circumstances and need, as well as willingness to integrate, rather than a financial calculation of how the migrant might benefit the host country. Such a shift in thinking is challenging. When welcome is given, it is unconditional.

We have a duty to look after the vulnerable, and show the compassion to others that God shows to us.

3 Business and bureaucracy

Subsidiarity is keenly relevant to small businesses. Although larger corporations are generally supportive of EU membership, smaller companies struggle to deal with the time and financial costs of red tape from Brussels. The regulation that is a reasonable price for well-resourced companies to pay for access to the single market can choke smaller businesses – something we might view as an injustice that needs to be addressed.

Financially, there are significant costs to our EU membership. 'The UK's net contribution to the EU Budget in 2015 is estimated at £8.5 billion, up from £4.3 billion in 2009 and down from £9.8 billion in 2014. It is forecast to fluctuate between £11.1 billion and £7.9 billion a year between 2016 and 2020.'⁴ The direct cost of EU membership is a key argument for the Vote Leave campaign: 'We negotiate a new UK-EU deal based on free trade and friendly cooperation. We end the supremacy of EU law. We regain control. We stop sending £350 million every week⁵ to Brussels and instead spend it on our priorities, like the NHS and science research.'⁶ Fraud and waste cost billions. Such abuses are exactly why the Bible is sceptical about centralised power (1 Samuel 8).

The net figure above includes the billions of pounds we receive in farming subsidies and research grants, amongst other things (though this is significantly less than the amount we pay). However, this does not take into account the financial benefits of EU membership,

including trade – roughly half of the UK's exports and half of our imports are from the EU. As the Britain Stronger In Europe campaign puts it, 'we get out more than we put in. Our annual contribution is equivalent to £340 for each household and yet the CBI says that all the trade, investment, jobs and lower prices that come from our economic partnership with Europe is worth £3000 per year to every household.'⁷

It is not clear how long it would take or how difficult it would be to negotiate new arrangements to replace existing ones, and what the medium-term consequences would be for UK businesses. Balancing the argument of unnecessary centralisation is therefore the idea that leaving the EU might leave us dangerously isolated, out of relationship with a major trading partner and less able to represent the interests of our citizens and businesses.

4 Security and international relations

Lastly, there is more in the balance than our economic wellbeing. Our defence and security primarily rely on Nato, not EU membership (not counting the economic interdependence on which the EU was founded, which makes going to war with our business partners much more unlikely). However, there are benefits that EU membership provides, such as the exchange of criminal records that enable effective responses to terrorist threats and organised crime. The EU has been at the forefront of dealing with situations such as Iran's nuclear programme and Russia's annexation of Crimea. More recently, Nato has warned that Russia and Syria are 'weaponising' migration, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee Syria for Europe as an aggressive strategy to destabilise and undermine the continent.⁸ By pulling out of Europe, we might regain control of our borders, but at the cost of being a part of the wider solution through our influence in the EU – with potentially serious long-term consequences.

Closer union or better relationship?

The referendum implicitly asks the question about the kind of organisation of which we want to be a member. Britain has secured an opt-out to the principle of 'ever closer union among the peoples of Europe'. The recent agreement states this clearly, 'The United Kingdom is not committed to further political integration in the European Union. References to ever-closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.' There is a difference between closer union and better relationship; independence and interdependence; the sense of good fences making good neighbours. So far so good, but what does it mean to be a part of a club and fundamentally disagree about the rules by which members generally adhere?

Britain's membership of the EU is fraught with problems, but so is leaving. What we decide will have huge implications, but it is an emotive issue and many people will vote based on gut reaction instead of carefully thought-through arguments. There is a need for strong leadership in the Church, of people like the men of Issachar 'who understood the times and knew what Israel should do'. (1 Chronicles 12:32)

The arguments are complex and, as Proverbs 18:17 states, 'The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.' We should not underestimate the effect of our decision to stay or leave. However, we should also remember that whatever happens, unlike the UK, the sovereignty of God is not in question.

1 <http://ind.pn/1Qtr8Ew>

2 <http://bit.ly/1U6Cor9>

3 <http://bit.ly/1Lgz0rc>

4 House of Commons briefing paper, Number 06091, January 2016.

5 This corresponds to our gross payments to Brussels, not the net figure above of £8.5 billion, which equates to £163 million per week.

6 www.voteleavetakecontrol.org

7 <http://www.strongerin.co.uk/economy>

8 <http://bbc.in/1RGFWwJ>



European Parliament, Strasbourg

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