

Global Citizenship Public Lecture

Britain and the EU after the Crisis

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Abstract

The United Kingdom has always had an uneasy relationship with its European Union partners. This covers most areas of the EU's range of interests from foreign policy through justice and home affairs, including the vexed question of border controls, to social and labour relations. At the heart of this lie some of the original concerns of the EU in the area of the economy which have brought into sharp relief the contrasts between the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon' approach of free markets and liberal free-trade and the 'European Social Model' approach of more regulated markets and social intervention. For much of the past two decades, since the ignominious ejection of the UK from its brief flirtation with the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992, the UK had been contentedly claiming its approach was superior as unconstrained growth in a booming economy appeared to outshine the rest of the EU15 and bring new allies in the shape of many of the new member states which joined in 2004. This all came to grief in the financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent recession which has been in many respects deeper and more prolonged in the UK than in the other big economies of Europe. This lecture poses the question as to whether this abrupt change in relative fortunes will change the fundamental nature of the UK's relationship with its European partners. Will the consequences of this lead to a realisation of the need for closer economic cooperation, including joining the Eurozone, or will it force the UK even further away from integration and back to being the awkward partner? With a change of government likely in 2010 this could be a turning point, not least because the Lisbon Treaty provides for the first time an exit route from membership.