

# Being European – is it geographical, cultural or political?

During last year's referendum campaign, one helpful piece of advice we were given was to make sure we made a differentiation between "Europe" and "the European Union". My experience was typical inasmuch as our opponents – deliberately, so it seemed – tried to confuse the two, as if leaving the EU meant somehow leaving "Europe".

In fairness, however, no one against whom I debated went as far as Nick Clegg, who seemed to believe that leaving the EU would somehow change our physical location. "There's nothing bulldog about Britain hovering somewhere in the mid-Atlantic" he once said on the Andrew Marr. Well, Nick, old chap, to my knowledge Dover is still only 21 miles from Calais after the Brexit vote and even the most astute observers of the Brexit process have not heard a whisper of any plans to move our island further away from the European mainland in March 2019.

Seriously, though, what does it mean to be European? I had always believed it was a matter of geography. The UK is not an Asian or African country; we may feel a closer cultural affinity with North America or the Commonwealth realms than, say, with Estonia or Portugal, but these places are thousands of miles away. We may also place immense symbolic and historical value on those 21 miles of water separating us from France, but we are Europeans, like it or not.

The EU, however, seems to think otherwise. In 2023, there will be a number of new European Capitals of Culture and Brussels has told Leeds and Dundee, among others, that they are not eligible to bid because by then we will be neither in the EU, the EEA nor an EU accession state. It seems quite bizarre when

you look at the list of countries which have already gained this designation and consider that there in the heart of our continent is Switzerland which is excluded. Yes, even a great city like Geneva which has exercised a huge influence in the development of Europe cannot be regarded as "European" by the EU! Russia likewise, which includes Peter the Great's European-style capital city and which has given us composers in the European tradition like Glinka, Borodin and Tchaikovsky is also excluded.

And now we will find ourselves made shut out as well. The EU has decided that being European is a matter of politics. We can only regret that the EU will not swap competences for the Capitals of Culture with the European Broadcasting Union, which currently determines eligibility for the Eurovision Song Contest. Being excluded from this display of banality and mediocrity, in which our artists fail year after year, would not perhaps be the biggest benefit of leaving the EU but one which, if on offer last year, might nevertheless have helped secure us a larger majority!