It’s time to establish what kind of relationship with the EU will be in the national interest

One of the myths put about by opponents of Brexit during the referendum campaign was that a Leave vote was a ‘leap into the dark’, or less energetically, a ‘step into the unknown’. While this may have suited Remain’s campaign narrative, suggesting that there was more fog around than could be found in a James Herbert horror novel was not a fair representation of the reality.

The truth is that a lot of work has been done on Brexit. But most of it has not had wide public recognition. That is not the fault of Eurosceptic thinkers and planners, but a counter-intuitive inevitability of our mass communications age – a matter of volume and noise, chance and choice.

It’s to improve the neon lighting that I have updated four major pieces of work from late last year. These were originally circulated in Eurosceptic circles by Better Off Out before the referendum started to motor. They are now more immediately relevant, especially for those engaged in restructuring the UK’s relationship with its EU counterparts, and have been further revisited to accommodate certain additional data that has since emerged.

The first in the updated series is being published today, for which I am hugely grateful to BrexitCentral. It’s intended to encourage those contemplating Brexit across Government to go back to brass tacks and think about what drove planners towards the EEC in the first place.

Simplistically put, the UK joined because key people concluded

that the UK's economic best interest lay in joining a developing customs union with economies that were amongst the best performing in the world, at a time of immense geo-strategic turbulence and threat.

We might usefully apply the same criteria today, though we would reach very different conclusions. Indeed, as the old Eurosceptic saying goes, if we weren't already a member, we wouldn't today want to join.

Looking more strategically at aspects of our relationship with the EU, there are several key components to the formula that I urge our diplomats and planners to reflect on afresh. *The National Interest* thus proposes a number of principles to help ministers and negotiators work out where the balance of interest lies. How close does the UK need to be with EU institutions? What areas does it genuinely need to cooperate in? At what point does Single Market affiliation start to add more costs that it saves? These are fundamentals that deserve to be challenged from scratch.

The answers to these questions will vary from country to country. The needs of the Slovakian economy (let alone the wider state) are very different from those of, say, Ireland. So this formula will carry separate significance for every nationality, and not just be of interest for Eurosceptic groups across the continent at that.

Reviewed dispassionately, the nature of all these variables puts the United Kingdom in a particular category that suggests a much looser arrangement is likely to be needed. That in turn implies that Whitehall has to be bold, ambitious, and to scan the horizon, if this country is to find its best relationship with the EU. Anything short of that will be at best a missed opportunity, at worst a strategic failure.

But we can't get there without a reboot.

A problem the Brexit department faces is the starting

biosphere, and the many streams and wells that have fed Whitehall ponds over the past decades. There has been too much of a monopoly on acquired wisdom fuelled by the Jean Monnet system – and its other EU-funded cousins, as we have seen in recent criticisms of the track records of some of our High Court judges.

This has had consequences less dire in the UK than in other states (a comparison that should be of some pride to our academics), but coupled with the EU's immense PR machinery, it has still left deep marks on the base narrative.

Consider briefly the issue of the "Euromyth", the media story that the Commission denies ever happened. As it turns out, as the source behind a number of those stories over the years, I can vouchsafe that many did indeed flow from genuine plans and proposals caught at an early stage. These were then, once they became public knowledge, subsequently and sensibly repudiated. Had they not been spotted, it is more than likely they would have become bad laws – again to be criticised, but at a point when they were beyond the point of easy repeal, and after causing millions of pounds of damage to the UK economy. (Unlike Will Straw, there was never a CBE for any Eurosceptic engaged in that thankless task, I might add.)

However, there is then a world of difference between saying a project that didn't happen is a myth, and saying the Commission listened to the public's concerns and then pulled the plug. Rather than ingeniously following the latter option, tellingly their press team resorted to the former. One is led to the conclusion staff do so because they believe their own spin, that nothing was happening. *Eppur si muove*, as Galileo might murmur before such inquisitors.

Couple this unhappy world of smoke and mirrors along with the complete strategic buy-in of government that has outlasted civil service careers, and one can begin to see how ingrained perceptions and interpretations might have become, and how a

fresh appraisal by a new generation of civil servants can prove useful.

The baseline assumption across the Foreign Office has been that the UK's national interest lay in EU membership, while lobbying to avoid the EU integrating too closely (or too quickly and perceptibly: it depended on whose notes you read).

Notwithstanding the entire Margaret Thatcher era, the hand of Heath still lies heavy on the Locarno Suite. While it has been exorcised by Thatcher from the rest of government, the Ghost of Suez still roams King Charles Street, wailing warnings of British decline. The policy response to that crisis was profound. Ditching EFTA was quite possibly the greatest strategic error since 1945. The 23rd June vote may have come just in time to allow a second model of European co-operation fully to re-emerge, an alternative with genuine prospect, more liquid in its form and thus less brittle.

In their review, planners need to go back to the foundation elements, reassessing what the national interest may be for any given state in its dealing with the EU, and how close its orbit profitably needs to be. Law drafters also need to grapple with the realities and complexities on the hierarchy of international standards setting (which has much less to do with the EU than most people believe). Business figures and City analysts need to acquaint themselves with what the default deals mean without the red tape generated just for EU suppliers and manufacturers and not for anyone else. In short, everyone in Central London needs to put the kettle on and completely rethink what trade agreements are there to do.

I choose to be optimistic. Our civil servants are intelligent, hard-working, patriotic people. They will tackle this task head on – if inspired to do so, and given the tools and leadership to be bold and innovative.

But four decades of assumptions need to be dumped across

Government first, and across all levels of management. I hope these four short e-publications help achieve that vital national reboot, starting today with the base coding.