

What if we had lost?

It's now over 10 months since the referendum. After the initial euphoria at the result, we enjoyed a brief and well-deserved break before plunging in to the next campaign – ensuring that we end up with the best Brexit deal possible. With Article 50 now triggered, however, the negotiations about to begin in earnest and memories of the referendum itself beginning to fade, it's easy to forget how hard we had to work to achieve last June's result.

Suppose, however, that it we had lost.

David Cameron had spelt out in no uncertain terms that this referendum, like Scotland's vote in 2014, was a “once in a generation” decision. Admittedly, Nicola Sturgeon is straining every nerve to try to engineer a second vote on Scottish independence, but given that it was 41 years since our previous referendum on EU membership, we all knew that if our countrymen had voted to remain in the EU last June, we would have faced many more years of campaigning before a third vote would ever become even a remote possibility.

But just suppose a further vote had eventually been held in, say, 2025, what sort of state would our country – or indeed, the EU – be in by then?

We know that there was a great deal of unease on the Continent following the Conservatives' 2015 General Election victory, which meant Cameron was going to have to make good his promise to hold the referendum. Laurent Fabius, France's Foreign Minister, called his pledge “dangerous”. Until last June, Cameron had been described as a “lucky” Prime Minister, winning the 2015 General Election when many pollsters were predicting a hung parliament and securing the results he wanted in both the AV and Scottish independence referendums. Perhaps his track record helped calm nerves in Brussels and

Berlin. After all, if remain had won, the implications for the EU would have been enormous.

A vote by the most consistently eurosceptic member state to remain in the EU would have been a green light for a further push towards federalism. Such a move may have initially been focussed on the Eurozone, especially given the victory of the enthusiastic federalist Emmanuel Macron in last Sunday's French Presidential Election, but we would have inevitably found ourselves swept along in the federalist slipstream. Furthermore, even if voters in other EU member states voted the "wrong" way in any subsequent plebiscites, the EU could have pressed on confident that opposition could be muzzled. If even the truculent UK ultimately had decided to submit to the yoke of Brussels, the EU would have felt emboldened in the pursuit of its objective of creating a superstate. To put it another way, all 28 member states would have themselves been locked into an EU where the Jean-Claude Juncker mindset would have reigned unchallenged. "'If it's a Yes we will say "on we go", and if it's a No we will say "we continue"', he famously said.

Now, however, there will be much nail-biting whenever a new treaty is put to a popular vote. The Brexit vote has shown that electorates are happy to defy a powerful combination of their own political leaders, businessmen and senior figures from both Europe and the wider world. The results of the Dutch general and French presidential elections may have been greeted with huge sighs of relief in Brussels, but it is worth remembering that in the first round of the French elections, 46% of voters opted for an EU-critical candidate. Macron's victory does not imply a renewed love for the EU in France.

A remain vote would have bolstered the EU's credibility in the wider world. It is doubtful whether it would have altered the course of events in Turkey, where accession to the EU now looks highly improbable following President Erdogan's revisions to his country's Constitution. It would, however,

have strengthened the pro-European forces in Norway and Iceland. Maybe even the Swiss would have felt that sooner or later, they would have to join up. Instead, our vote to leave essentially buries the prospect of membership for Western Europe's non-EU members and also makes the EU a harder sell in the Balkans and the former Soviet republics.

After all, although many of us are aware that one country, Greenland, had earlier left the EEC (as it then was), how many of us can actually remember it happening? It was a pretty minor piece of news at the time whereas the Brexit vote was splashed over front pages across the world, complete with pictures of either Donald Tusk or Angela Merkel looking distinctly gloomy.

The EU was never going to be the same after our referendum, however we voted. Its credibility would either have been boosted or dented.

As for how our country would have been affected by a remain vote, as Rupert Matthews pointed out, defeated leavers would have accepted the result with far more grace than the appalling behaviour we have witnessed from remainiacs like Gina Miller, Richard Branson and Tony Blair. We would have vowed to continue the fight but would not have accused voters in the opposite camp of being stupid. Nor would we have been cry-babies saying that the people didn't know what they were voting for.

However, within a matter of only a few years, we would have seen much of our remaining distinctiveness gradually eroded. How long would we have been able to remain outside the single currency? How long before our armed services would have been absorbed into an EU army? What of the safeguards of our common law-based criminal justice system, so superior to the Napoleonic inquisitorial system of continental Europe, which the EU eventually would have replaced with a single criminal justice code? Would metrication have been pushed with renewed

vigour?

Thankfully, instead of this nightmare scenario, we voted to leave and in so doing, besides the eventual benefits to our own country, we may well have put a big spanner in the works to the whole federalist project, for the good of the whole continent. As William Pitt the younger famously said 200 years ago, "England has saved herself by her exertions and will, as I trust, save Europe by her example."