Bringing the family together: the story of the European Union

The Second World War ended in 1945. It had been a time of terrible destruction and killing, and it had started in Europe. How could the leaders of European countries stop such dreadful things from ever happening again? They needed a really good plan that had never been tried before.

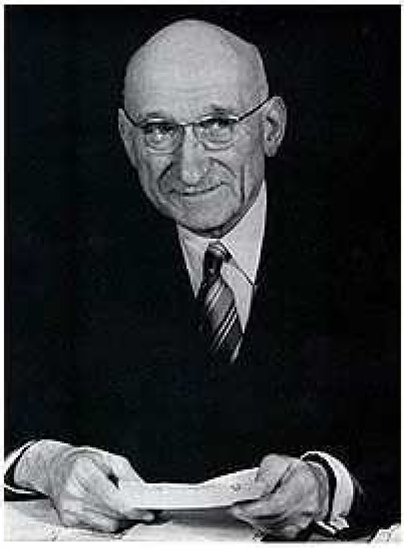
A brand new idea

Jean Monnet

A Frenchman called Jean Monnet thought hard about this. He realised that there were two things a country needed before it could make war: iron for producing steel (to make tanks, guns, bombs and so on) and coal to provide the energy for factories and railways.

Europe had plenty of coal and steel: that's why European countries had easily been able to make weapons and go to war. So Jean Monnet came up with a very daring new idea. His idea was that the governments of France and Germany – and perhaps of other European countries too – should no longer run their own coal and steel industries. Instead, these industries should be organised by people from all the countries involved, and they would sit around a table and discuss and decide things together. That way, war between them would be impossible!

Jean Monnet felt that his plan really would work if only European leaders were willing to try it. He spoke about it to his friend Robert Schuman, who was a minister in the French government. Robert Schuman thought it was a brilliant idea, and he announced it in an important speech on 9 May 1950.



The speech convinced not only the French and German leaders but also the leaders of Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. They all decided to put their coal and steel industries together and to form a club they called the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). It would work for peaceful purposes and help rebuild Europe from the ruins of war. The ECSC was set up in 1951.

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The common market

The six countries got on so well working together that they soon decided to start another club, called the European Economic Community (EEC). It was set up in 1957.

'Economic' means 'to do with the economy' – in other words, to do with money, business, jobs and trade.

One of the main ideas was that the EEC countries would share a 'common market', to make it easier to trade together.

Until then, lorries and trains and barges carrying goods from one country to another always had to stop at the border, and papers had to be checked and money called 'customs duties' had to be paid. This held things up and made goods from abroad more expensive.

Bored at the border... Queues like this used to be part of normal life in Europe

The point of having a common market was to get rid of all those border checks and delays and customs duties, and to allow countries to trade with one another just as if they were all one single country.

Food and farming

The Second World War had made it very difficult for Europe to produce food or to import it from other continents. Europe was short of food even in the early 1950s. So the EEC decided on an arrangement for paying its farmers to produce more food, and to make sure that they could earn a decent living from the land.

This arrangement was called the ‘common agricultural policy’ (or CAP). It worked well. So well, in fact, that farmers ended up producing too much food, and the arrangement had to be changed! Nowadays, the CAP also pays farmers to look after the countryside.

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From EEC to European Union

The common market was soon making life easier for people in the EEC. They had more money to spend, more food to eat and more varied things in their shops. Other neighbouring countries saw this and, in the 1960s, some of them began asking whether they too could join the club.

Joining the club. In this picture, Denmark signs up for membership

After years of discussions, Britain, Denmark and Ireland joined in 1973. It was the turn of Greece in 1981, followed by Portugal and Spain in 1986, Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. So now the club had 15 members.

Over these years, the club was changing. By the end of 1992 it had finished building the 'single market' (as it became known), and it was doing a lot more besides.

For example, EEC countries were working together to protect the environment and to build better roads and railways right across Europe. Richer countries helped poorer ones with their road-building and other important projects.

Protecting the environment includes reducing air pollution - for example, using wind energy to make electricity

The governments were discussing other new ideas too – for example, how policemen from different countries could help one another catch criminals, drug smugglers and terrorists.

In short, the club was so different and so much more united that, in 1992, it decided to change its name to the 'European Union' (EU).

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Bringing the family together

Meanwhile, exciting things were happening beyond the EU’s borders. For many years, the eastern and western parts of Europe had been kept apart. They weren’t at war, but their leaders disagreed strongly. The rulers of the eastern part believed in a system of government called ‘Communism’ which did not allow people much freedom. Because of the way they were governed, those countries were poor compared to western Europe.

The division between east and west was so strong it was often described as an ‘iron curtain’. In many places the border was marked by tall fences or a high wall, like the one that ran through the city of Berlin and split Germany in two. It was very difficult to get permission to cross this border.

1989: demolishing the Berlin Wall

Finally, in 1989, the division and disagreement ended. The Berlin wall was knocked down and the ‘iron curtain’ ceased to exist. Soon, Germany was reunited. The peoples of the central and eastern parts of Europe chose for themselves new governments that got rid of the old, strict Communist system. They were free at last! It was a wonderful time of celebration.

The countries that had gained freedom began asking whether they could join the European Union, and soon there was quite a queue of ‘candidate’ countries waiting to become EU members.

Before a country can join the European Union, its economy has to be working well. It also has to be democratic – in other words, its people must be free to choose who they want to govern them. And it must respect human rights. (Human rights include the right to say what you think, the right not to be put in prison without a fair trial, the right not to be tortured, and many other important rights as well).

The former Communist countries worked hard at all these things and, after a few years, eight of them were ready: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

They joined the EU on 1 May 2004, along with two Mediterranean islands – Cyprus and Malta. On 1 Jaunary 2007, two more former Communist countries were ready and Bulgaria and Romania joined the group.

Never before have so many countries joined the EU in such a short time.This is a real ‘family reunion’, bringing together the eastern, central and western parts of Europe.

Test yourself now !

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