



HANSARD  
SOCIETY

**HeadsUp** Forum

[www.headsup.org.uk](http://www.headsup.org.uk)

'The European Union - Where is it on your radar?' (May 4th - 14th 2004)

A debate platform for young people to share their views on the impact of the European Union on the UK.

Since the launch of HeadsUp, young people participating in the forum have regularly referred to the European Union when discussing issues linked to the work of the Westminster Parliament. In the run-up to the European elections (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004) and with a great deal of media coverage being concentrated on the EU Constitution, it was decided to dedicate a Forum to a discussion of the impact of the EU on the UK, the influence of the UK in the EU and the perceptions of the EU held by the British public, especially, young citizens.

'The European Union - Where is it on your radar?' ran from May 4<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The debate involved ten schools from England, most of which were using the HeadsUp Forum for the first time. The ages of the participating students were between 12 - 16 years old. With its secure, anonymous and structured forum space, HeadsUp is uniquely positioned to offer young people a platform for sharing their ideas, opinions and experiences.

All HeadsUp debates are accompanied by objective background information prepared for the young people taking part. The facts and figures contained in this section of the site ('BackUp') are designed to ensure that every student has at least a rudimentary understanding of the workings of the European Union and its relation to the UK. Aspects of the EU covered in this edition of 'BackUp' included:

- The types of issues dealt with on a European level
- Why decisions taken in Europe affect the UK
- Where the UK fits into Europe
- Which countries are in the EU
- What the various institutions of the EU are and what functions they perform
- Who MEPs are and what responsibilities they have

The student-centred background information could also be used in parallel with notes that were specially prepared for teachers. These pages contained more in-depth articles on the EU, lesson plans and guidance on preparing students for the experience of asynchronous online debating.

## The European Union - Where is it on your radar?

### Introduction

For every issue or problem that a country faces - be it social, economic or political - there will be a number of potential solutions. Some solutions will be more suitable than others and the best answer may prove very difficult to find. This is especially true in our increasing globalised society - where we face problems on a large scale and across a range of cultures and communities.

Last century countries in Europe started to band together to address common economic, social and political problems. They created the European Union to find consensus, share burdens, create prosperity and resolve conflict. Today the EU is the biggest trading bloc in the world with a budget of billions. It covers a landmass of nearly 2 million square miles and has a population of 455 million people. The UK has been a member-state since 1973.

June 10th, 2004, sees a fresh round of elections for the European Parliament taking place across the UK. British citizens will have their first chance in five years to vote for the people they want to represent them in Europe. But at the last European Parliament elections (in 1999) turnout in the UK was only 24% - the lowest of any European Union country.

So, what are the issues at the root of the British public's disengagement from the European Union and its various institutions? In their attempts to find answers, the HeadsUp participants chose to hook their debate around the issues of the euro currency and European identity.

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## The Euro - fan or foe?

### Key Findings

In the first HeadsUp Forum, participating young people were asked to identify issues that they thought presented a pressing challenge to the UK and were of particular consequence to young citizens. The euro figured prominently in their responses.

Judging from the debate taking place in the mass media, it might appear that the UK public's attention has been diverted from the euro to the EU constitution. However, the most popular topic space in this HeadsUp Forum, asked whether a single European currency was something that would benefit or harm the UK.

From the off it was evident that the body of opinion in the Forum was not in favour of the UK's adoption of the euro. In many instances this opposition was expressed in bold, terse statements:

*sgill... down wit the euro*

A large number of participants made similarly short and sharp posts in the beginning. However, as the debate progressed the reasoning behind these opinions began to emerge.

Some participants founded their opposition on economic grounds. They felt that whilst the UK economy was strong there was insufficient argument for switching from sterling to the euro:

*jpuffett... to me joining the euro is losing the right to control our economy. Britain is doing better outside the euro, with the lowest unemployment and inflation for a generation, and a stable economy so joining the euro is giving this up*

Some participants were keen to point out that the euro is already in usage in other EU countries and, therefore, was already having an impact on the UK economy:

*Naomi... changing to the euro would be a big change but when it has happened would we really be that bothered. 12 other countries have changed why shouldn't we. It would make travelling so much easier!*

Others acknowledged this and went a step further to highlight the fact that in some instances the euro was valid tender in the UK:

*gthomas... i don't think that we should adopt the euro but others do. I also think that people have a fair argument. Some shops in Britain do accept the euro and i think that it should just stay as it is but we shouldn't accept it fully. We have had the same style for years.*

In the wider public debate a lot of the opposition toward the euro rests on emotional or sentimental grounds, and this was reflected in the HeadsUp Forum. At an elementary level, there were some participants who opposed a switch to the euro because it meant change. However, most of the students did not support this line of argument; change, for them, was a good thing but not necessarily when it came to the euro:

*lozop... I think that it's ridiculous for people to say they won't accept the euro because they don't like change. There are plenty of valid reasons for not wanting to join the single currency, but if we don't accept change then we'll never get anywhere.*

For a lot of the young people involved, dropping the pound was not so much an economic concern but more a threat to British identity:

*rtovey... our country needs to be individual and how do you expect that happen if we have the same currency as everyone else?*

It was very evident that many of those debating shared a belief that in the pound was to be found an important symbol of their identity and they were very concerned about its potential loss:

*simplicity... I believe that we should not join in with the euro, I think this because england's pound is one of the only things that foriegners can recognise us by, losing the pound will lose englands pride, joining in with the euro will just make us some european country. The pound is our britishness!*

Other participants, however, were not so convinced of the link between the pound and what it meant to be British:

*ghendry... wiv all due respect its not da pound da mks ppl proud 2 b british, its jst a lump of metal*

Up to the point where the affect on British identity of adopting the euro was brought into the debate, those who were opposed had been largely unified. The identity question created a split and many of participants began to reassess the reasons for their opposition:

*beckyd... When you introduce yourself to someone do you say 'hi, I'm so-and-so and I use the Euro'. So does the fact that you use the Euro really affect the way you view yourself and other's view you?*

## Are you European?

### Key Findings

In the euro topic-space an interesting discussion about identity materialised and eventually carried over into its own area of the forum. Young people have very interesting insights into identity. There are many levels to a young person's identity and it was intriguing to find out where being 'European' figured with these young British citizens.

People, whether adult or younger, find it difficult to discuss identity but, seeing its importance to the debate, the young people in the HeadsUp Forum were eager to discuss it. From the beginning they acknowledged the complexity of identity issues:

*gthomas... I think that there are alot of factors to take into consederation when thinking about what makes you you. If you are european, british or what ever you are.*

On a purely geographical level, the participants thought there could be little argument about being European, but there was a question over the extent to which this should influence their identity:

*lozop... We are all a geographical part of europe but this does not mean that everyone should be expected to have this sense of 'being a european.*

Problems, for some of the students emerged when they considered the potential for Europe to develop into more than a geographical entity:

*Chocy... We are all connected as we live on the same planet, we are all geographically connected... but this does not mean are politically connected. The EU is trying to set up a system where we are politically connected. This may mean trying to make us culturally connected, as laws and ruling of countries will be similar. This means we loose our indentity and are swallowed up in a larger sceme, in which it is harder to make people hear what you are saying.*

For a large number of participants, 'European' was something that sat uneasily with their British identity on a political, social or economic level. Yet, there were a considerable number of other participants for whom 'European' was less problematic:

*beckyd... I have no problem calling myself European. When British people do well in sports or are impressive in history, it makes us proud to be British. So why can't other people's attempts to create a better future and perform equally impressive tasks make us proud to be European?*

Some students believed that the degree to which they felt European would increase in parallel with the influence of the EU:

*Saffs... I don't have a problem with European. There's a bunch of things that make me me. British is high up there but so is European. I might become more European as the Eu develops.*

For those students taking a similar stance, there appeared to be a greater willingness to co-operate with other countries:

*lozop... If the idea of the European union is to bring the best things from each country then that is definitely something that I would want to be a part of. The effectiveness of the EU will be defined by the willingness of each country to share ideas and to participate.*

Although, many of the participants agreed with the general sentiments of the above post, there were those who were more cautious. They saw value in the European Union and learning from a collective experience but were also concerned that its powers should be balanced against those of individual nations:

*monty... an EU government has its good side and its bad side. other european contarys have beter laws such as germany on waste products but the laws will fail in some places like educaton or health service*

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## The European Union - Where is it on your radar?

### Conclusions

This HeadsUp Forum showed again that young people in the UK are far from apathetic about political issues or processes. They demonstrated a passion for political debate and a willingness to learn. On the issue of the euro there was strong opposition to the UK joining the 12 other member-states currently using the currency. However, this did not prevent the very same students being supportive of the EU and some students positively looked forward to the influence of Europe increasing in the UK. When the students were asked if they really did think that the EU was something that young people should have an interest in, the response was clear:

*mhinton... yes it is worth making a fuss about because it affects everyone in this country and we all wanna say summit about it. Us young people who're gonna be spending the money and paying the government with it should be allowed to say what we wanna say!*

However, there is still a question about the sources from where these young people were getting their information about Europe and the EU. Are they forming opinions on the basis of what their family thinks, what they are taught in school or what they read and hear in the media? A program of research that set out to investigate would surely be of great value in terms of tracking the mood of UK society toward the European Union.

Ross Ferguson, Web Manager [May 2004]

## The European Union - Where is it on your radar?

### Quotes

#### The Euro - fan or foe?

*sgill... down wit the euro*

*jpuffett... to me joining the euro is losing the right to control our economy. Britain is doing better outside the euro, with the lowest unemployment and inflation for a generation, and a stable economy so joining the euro is giving this up*

*Naomi... changing to the euro would be a big change but when it has happened would we really be that bothered. 12 other countries have changed why shouldn't we. It would make travelling so much easier!*

*gthomas... i don't think that we should adopt the euro but others do. I also think that people have a fair argument. Some shops in Britain do accept the euro and i think that it should just stay as it is but we shouldn't accept it fully. We have had the same style for years.*

*lozop... I think that it's ridiculous for people to say they won't accept the euro because they don't like change. There are plenty of valid reasons for not wanting to join the single currency, but if we don't accept change then we'll never get anywhere.*

*rtovey... our country needs to be individual and how do you expect that happen if we have the same currency as everyone else?*

*simplicity... I believe that we should not join in with the euro, I think this because england's pound is one of the only things that foriegners can recognise us by, losing the pound will lose englands pride, joining in with the euro will just make us some european country. The pound is our britishness!*

*lozop... You're pride is all about the pound... that's sad*

*ghendry... wiv all due respect its not da pound da mks ppl proud 2 b british, its jst a lump of metal*

*beckyd... When you introduce yourself to someone do you say 'hi, I'm so-and-so and I use the Euro'. So does the fact that you use the Euro really affect the way you view yourself and other's view you?*

twilliams... *i don't want the euro cause i don't like change!*

jogs... *we wouldn't be our own country any more!*

rtovey... *our country needs to be individual and how do you expect that happen if we have the same currency as everyone else?*

jogs... *britain is sterlin and has been for a long time. There's no point in changing because it won't achieve anything! the euro is too compicated!*

dbissex... *i dont think that the euro is complicated, its just different*

mhinton... *yes it is worth making a fuss about because it affects everyone in this country and we all wanna say summit about it. Us young people who're gonna be spending the money and paying the government with it should be allowed to say what we wanna say!*

monty... *i think that we should change to the euro even thought this lose some of our 'brisishnes' that your tablodes want you to love and cherris so much its like asylum seekers people cant welcome anything new and the euro is now more stable than the pound sterling at the moment people anrnt folward thinking*

acaswell... *well if we were going to change our currecie we should chande to the doller and go with the americans*

lozop... *I don't feel personally affected by either but I think MEPs have more influence over the bigger decisions at the moment. The problem is that often the really big things don't seem that important in everyday life because we're too busy to notice them*

### Are You European?

Chocy... *We are all connected as we live on the same planet, we are all geographically connected... but this does not mean are politically connected. The EU is trying to set up a system where we are politically connected. This may mean trying to make us culturally connected, as laws and ruling of countries will be similar. This means we loose our indentity and are swallowed up in a larger sceme, in which it is harder to make people hear what you are saying.*

beckyd... *I have no problem calling myself European. When British people do well in sports or are impressive in history, it makes us proud to be British. So why can't other people's attempts to create a better future and perform equally impressive tasks make us proud to be European?*

Saffs... *I don't have a problem with European. Theres a bunch of things that make me me. British is high up there but so is European. I might become more European as the Eu develops.*

*lozop... If the idea of the European union is to bring the best things from each country then that is definitely something that I would want to be a part of. The effectiveness of the EU will be defined by the willingness of each country to share ideas and to participate.*

*monty... an EU goverment has its good side and its bad side. other european contarys have beter laws such as germany on waste products but the laws will fail in some places like educaton or health service*

*lozop... We are all a geographical part of europe but this does not mean that everyone should be expected to have this sense of 'being a european.*

*gthomas... I think that there are alot of factors to take into consederation when thinking about what makes you you. If you are european, british or what ever you are.*

*monty... people are too nationalistic and patriotic*

*simplicity... Geographically i am but mentally i only feel english, i don't think anyone thinks like europeans, they think like individuals from there countries. People live in there own world not everyone else's.*

*lozop... If the idea of the European union is to bring the best things from each country then that is definitely something that I would want to be a part of. The effectiveness of the EU will be defined by the willingness of each country to share ideas and to participate.*

