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The case for retaining Brexit

Policy briefing for A-Level Politics | October 2026

AQA and Edexcel UK Government and Politics | A Brexit Delivered briefing

Executive summary

1. Brexit returned to Parliament, and so to voters at general elections, the power to decide trade, migration and regulatory policy. Its strongest justification is democratic control, the value of which cannot be settled by economic forecasts alone.
2. Independent trade and regulatory policies create real opportunities, from the CPTPP and the India agreement to new rules for financial services, insurers and gene-edited crops. Their benefits depend on how well they are used.
3. The Office for Budget Responsibility's 4% figure is an assumption, not a measured loss. It was drawn largely from studies written before the actual trade deal was known, it works out at about a quarter of a percentage point a year over 15 years, and even taken at face value it would take the Treasury between 14 and 22 years to recover the cost of rejoining.
4. Polls suggest that support for Brexit has weakened, but they measure membership in principle. When people are told the UK would lose its former opt-outs, support for rejoining falls sharply, from 55% to 35% in one YouGov survey.
5. The Prime Minister has now said that rejoining is among the options under consideration. A new member would not regain the rebate or the opt-outs, so any reversal should require a fresh, explicit democratic mandate based on an honest account of the terms.

Background

On 23 June 2016, Leave won 51.9% against 48.1%, with a turnout of 72.2% (Electoral Commission, 2016). The referendum was legally advisory but carried powerful political authority, and Parliament subsequently authorised and implemented withdrawal. [1, 2, 19]

Article 50 was triggered on 29 March 2017. In December 2019 the Conservatives won 365 seats on 43.6% of the vote with a commitment to complete Brexit: a parliamentary mandate, rather than a second referendum (Commons Library, 2020). The UK left on 31 January 2020 and the transition period ended on 31 December 2020. [2, 3]

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), agreed on 24 December 2020, applied provisionally from 1 January 2021 and entered into force on 1 May 2021. It provides tariff-free and quota-free trade in goods where rules of origin are met, alongside new non-tariff barriers such as customs declarations and checks. [4]

The case for Brexit

Sovereignty and democratic accountability

Parliamentary sovereignty means that Parliament is the UK's supreme law-making authority. Legal sovereignty concerns final legal authority; political sovereignty concerns who can actually determine policy, including the electorate and the constraints imposed by economic power. Popular sovereignty locates legitimate authority in the people, without making every referendum legally binding. [5]

EU membership involved pooled sovereignty: states accepted shared decisions in return for collective influence. *Costa v ENEL* (1964) established the primacy of Community law, and in *Factortame* (1990) UK courts disapplied provisions of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 that conflicted with it. Parliament had accepted these constraints through the European Communities Act 1972 and retained the ultimate power to repeal that Act. [6]

Brexit therefore expanded Parliament's practical legislative autonomy. Governments can propose different trade, migration and regulatory policies, and voters can hold them responsible without those choices needing agreement across EU institutions. Accountability is clearer when ministers cannot attribute choices within their control to Brussels.

The EU does have democratic institutions, including an elected Parliament and ministers in the Council, and leaving gave up the UK's share in those decisions. International commitments still constrain UK action, specified EU rules continue to apply in Northern Ireland under the Windsor Framework, and executive dominance at Westminster can weaken parliamentary scrutiny. [4, 7] The defensible claim is therefore greater domestic choice, with costs and limits. Philip Whyman's Civitas argument for an active industrial policy (2018) shows that support for Brexit is not confined to the political right. [8]

> **Exam link 1**
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> Evaluate the extent to which Brexit restored parliamentary sovereignty. Use *Factortame* to establish the practical constraint while the UK was a member, distinguish ultimate legal sovereignty from policy autonomy, and assess continuing treaty obligations such as the Windsor Framework before reaching a qualified judgement.

Independent trade policy

Outside the EU customs union, the UK negotiates its own trade agreements. The Australia and New Zealand agreements entered into force on 31 May 2023, and CPTPP membership took effect on 15 December 2024. The India agreement was signed on 24 July 2025 and entered into force on 15 July 2026 (GOV.UK, 2023 to 2026). These create additional market access and a voice in shaping trading rules in the fastest-growing regions of the world. [9 to 11]

Geography and existing supply chains still matter. The EU received 41% of UK exports of goods and services in 2025 (Commons Library, 2026, using ONS data), and customs paperwork, rules of origin and regulatory checks fall hardest on smaller exporters. [12] The government's own assessment projects that the India agreement will add 0.13% to UK GDP in the long run, a useful but modest gain. New agreements support diversification; they are not presented as a full replacement for the EU market. [11, 13]

Regulation and economic opportunity

Regulatory autonomy has concrete applications. The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 provides the framework for replacing inherited EU financial rules with UK rules made by domestic regulators. The Solvency UK reforms give insurers more freedom to invest in long-term assets such as infrastructure while retaining prudential supervision. [14, 15]

In England, the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 and its regulations create a distinct authorisation route for eligible gene-edited plants and food, subject to safety assessment. [16] These changes establish the capacity to choose different rules where the benefits exceed the costs, under the oversight of Parliament. Businesses exporting to the EU must still meet its requirements for those exports.

Borders and immigration

The end of free movement on 1 January 2021 moved decisions on new EU migration into domestic policy, while protecting existing residence rights and the arrangements for Irish citizens. Ministers can now change visa eligibility, salary thresholds and dependant routes for all arrivals on the same basis. [17]

High migration after 2021 reflected domestic choices about work, study and humanitarian routes; it was not an obligation of EU membership. The ONS provisionally estimated net migration at 171,000 in the year ending December 2025, following earlier rises and subsequent falls. [18, 22] Control over policy does not guarantee a particular outcome, and it does not on its own resolve irregular migration, which requires enforcement and international cooperation. British citizens also lost reciprocal free movement in the EU. [19]

An international role outside the EU

The UK retains its permanent seat on the UN Security Council and its roles in the G7 and NATO. Military assistance, sanctions and training for Ukraine show a continued capacity to act with allies outside EU membership. [20] These positions pre-date Brexit, so they show that an independent international role is viable rather than proving that withdrawal increased British influence. Effective European defence depends above all on NATO, bilateral partnerships and practical UK–EU cooperation, none of which requires membership.

The case for rejoining, and why it falls short

The OBR's 4% estimate examined

The strongest economic argument for rejoining rests on the Office for Budget Responsibility's assumption that long-run UK productivity will be about 4% lower than if the UK had remained in the EU. It deserves to be understood precisely, because it is often quoted as more than it is.

It is an assumption, not a measurement. The OBR first built the 4% into its March 2020 forecast, taking it from a range of external estimates of leaving under a "typical" free trade agreement, and has kept it unchanged ever since, including in March 2026. The OBR itself says it will be very difficult to isolate the effect of Brexit from the pandemic, the energy shock and the weakness of productivity since the financial crisis. [21]

Most of the studies behind it predate the deal actually signed. Catherine McBride of the Institute of Economic Affairs points out that they were written between 2016 and 2019, before the TCA was known, and modelled agreements with tariffs and quotas; the TCA has neither. [35]

It is a level reached gradually, relative to a hypothetical. Spread over 15 years, 4% amounts to about a quarter of a percentage point a year off growth compared with a UK that had stayed in the EU. It is not a fall in GDP, and it is often wrongly quoted as a one-off loss.

The weakness it is blamed for began long before Brexit. ONS figures show that UK productivity growth fell behind the rest of the G7 from 2007, nine years before the referendum. [37] Briefings for Britain finds that productivity since 2016 has grown at much the same rate as after 2008, that manufacturing, the sector most exposed to trade, has outperformed the wider economy, and that UK productivity growth between 2016 and 2024 was second only to the United States in the G7. [36]

The trade evidence is disputed. Between 2019 and 2022, UK goods exports grew by 13.5% to the EU and 14.3% to the rest of the world in current prices (McBride, 2023), and trade has risen from 63% of GDP

in 2016 to 66% in 2025 (Briefings for Britain, 2025). The OBR maintains that its trade assumption remains broadly on track and has itself recorded strong growth in services exports to the United States. [34 to 36]

The forecasting record calls for caution. HM Treasury's analysis of May 2016 forecast that a vote to leave would cause a recession and the loss of between 520,000 and 820,000 jobs within two years. Neither happened, and employment rose. [38] Long-run estimates drawn from the same kind of modelling deserve the same scrutiny.

Rejoining would not simply buy the 4% back. Even taken at face value, the gain from rejoining would arrive slowly while the cost would start at once. Four per cent of 2025 GDP is about £121bn, which at a tax take of 37% would yield about £45bn a year in extra tax once the full effect had arrived after 15 years. Against an illustrative payment of £30bn a year from the first day, with no rebate, the Treasury would not be back in credit until year 22, or year 14 if a quarter of that payment came back as EU spending in the UK, as it did in 2020. On Frontier Economics' estimate of 2.2% for Best for Britain it would take 71 years even with a quarter returned, and would never pay back without it. On Professor Patrick Minford's estimate, rejoining would shrink the economy. [39, 40]

The rejoining arithmetic

The UK paid £17.0bn in 2020 after its rebate, into a smaller EU budget. A rejoining UK would have no rebate and would contribute to a budget proposed at almost €2 trillion for 2028 to 2034.

Using the OBR's own 4%, phased in over 15 years, and a £30bn yearly payment, the Treasury is back in credit in year 22, or year 14 if a quarter of the payment returns as EU spending in the UK. On lower estimates of the gain, it takes decades or never happens. Readers can test their own assumptions with the Brexit Delivered break-even calculator at brexitdelivered.com/rejoin. [39]

Small firms' fixed compliance costs do strengthen the case for reducing trade barriers. Simpler procedures and targeted agreements can ease some of these burdens without membership, although they cannot reproduce every advantage of the single market. The real question for rejoiners is proportionality: whether any additional gain justifies the obligations that full membership would bring. [12, 23]

Young people and public opinion

Lost opportunities to work, study and travel are real concerns. Membership is not essential to every remedy: UK participation in Erasmus+ from 2027 has been agreed, and a time-limited youth experience scheme is under negotiation, although such schemes are narrower than free movement. [24, 25]

Polls suggest that support for Brexit has weakened. Averaged across polls in 2026, and excluding those who do not know, about 60% say they would vote to rejoin and 40% to stay out (Professor Sir John Curtice, UK in a Changing Europe, June 2026). Among those who voted Leave in 2016, 72% would still vote to stay out. [41] These figures need careful handling for four reasons.

1. They measure membership in principle. There is no referendum, no negotiated package and no campaign, and the headline averages leave out those who are undecided.
2. Different pollsters ask different questions, so their results are not directly comparable, and one survey carries a margin of error of two to three points either way.
3. The answer changes sharply once the likely terms are described. In YouGov's survey of 2,114 adults on 2 and 3 June 2026, 55% supported rejoining in principle and 34% were opposed. When the question described rejoining without the UK's former opt-outs, which could mean adopting the euro and joining Schengen, support fell to 35% and opposition rose to 43%. [26] A fall of 20 points is far larger than any margin of error.
4. Hypothetical questions cannot capture what a real campaign would test: the cost of membership, the loss of the rebate and the euro commitment.

Polling therefore shows sympathy for the idea of membership, not settled support for the terms on which it would be offered. It merits attention, but it does not by itself authorise constitutional change.

Who supports which policy

Party positions are more varied than a simple left and right division suggests.

- **Conservatives.** The party opposes rejoining the EU. Kemi Badenoch has argued that scrapping the food and farming (SPS) agreement would free British farmers from EU rules, and at the October 2026 conference the Shadow Chancellor, Andrew Griffith, was reported to have pledged that a Conservative government would scrap the reset deals. [45]
- **Reform UK.** The party opposes rejoining. Nigel Farage has said that a Reform government would reverse the SPS arrangements through legislation, arguing that they give away "vast amounts of our sovereignty for very little in return". Its deputy leader, Richard Tice, accused the Prime Minister in September 2026 of trying to "sneak us back into Brussels via the back door". [43, 44]
- **Labour.** Under Sir Keir Starmer, Labour ruled out rejoining the single market, the customs union and free movement. Andy Burnham, Prime Minister since July 2026, told the Labour conference on 29 September 2026 that all options, from staying as we are to going "all the way" back into the EU, were open, and said he would set them out at a summit with EU leaders. No application to join has been made. [28, 42]
- **Liberal Democrats.** The party keeps EU membership as a long-term aim and now advocates joining the single market and a customs union. [27, 28]
- **Greens and the SNP.** The Greens support rejoining; the SNP's central proposal is EU membership for an independent Scotland. [28]

The divisions also cross party lines. George Osborne, a former Conservative Chancellor, has called for a customs union, while Philip Whyman has made a left-wing case for Brexit. [8, 42]

The sovereignty concern about the reset is specific. The proposed SPS arrangements involve dynamic alignment with relevant EU rules and a role for the EU Court of Justice in interpreting EU law, with no UK vote in the EU institutions that make those rules. [23] The EU has also reportedly sought a so-called "Farage clause", under which the UK would compensate the EU if a future government withdrew from the SPS agreement. [45] This is selective integration rather than formal rejoining, but it shows how closer alignment can limit the choices open to future Parliaments.

What rejoining would involve

Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union requires an accession process, the unanimous agreement of the member states, the consent of the European Parliament and ratification by every member state and the applicant. The UK's familiarity with EU law could help, but it cannot remove any one government's power to withhold agreement. [29]

Issue	UK membership before 2016	Standard position on re-entry unless negotiated otherwise
Currency	Treaty opt-out from the euro	Commitment to adopt the euro once the conditions are met, with no fixed timetable
Schengen	Opt-out, alongside the Common Travel Area	Participation expected after evaluation; any UK exception would need negotiation
Budget	Rebate reduced contributions by several billion pounds a year	No automatic rebate; a substantial net contribution, amount unknown
EU decisions	Ministers and MEPs took part	Representation restored, alongside acceptance of shared decisions and the primacy of EU law

The former settlement cannot simply be reclaimed. The UK's euro opt-out would not return automatically, and any new budget correction would need the unanimous agreement of all 27 existing members. Accession terms can contain negotiated transitional periods, and the Common Travel Area with Ireland would be an important consideration, but the commitment to the euro is a condition of membership for new members, even if adoption is not immediate. [28 to 31]

Budget payments buy some shared benefits. The IFS (2018) explained why savings in contributions alone cannot prove a fiscal dividend from leaving; the same principle applies in reverse, and requires a full assessment of what rejoining would cost as well as what it might return. [32, 39]

> **Exam link 2**
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> Evaluate whether pooled sovereignty increases a state's power. Contrast greater influence over collective rules with reduced unilateral control, and use the reset, including dynamic alignment under the SPS agreement, to distinguish legal autonomy from practical economic influence.

Evaluation and conclusion

A referendum cannot bind future generations permanently. Parliament could legislate for re-entry, and a fresh referendum is not an automatic legal requirement. However, reversing this constitutional decision without an explicit electoral mandate would weaken its political legitimacy. Now that the Prime Minister has put full membership among the options, that question is no longer theoretical. A clear manifesto commitment followed, preferably, by a referendum on negotiated terms would provide the strongest authority. [5, 19, 29, 42]

The balance favours retaining Brexit while removing avoidable barriers to trade. This judgement gives substantial weight to democratic accountability and policy choice, and it does not rest on denying that Brexit has had economic costs. It rests on the evidence that the most-quoted cost is an assumption rather than a measurement, that rejoining would not recover it quickly or cheaply, and that public support for rejoining falls sharply once the terms are explained. Rejoiners must show that an achievable new settlement offers enough to justify giving up the powers that Brexit returned; dissatisfaction with Brexit alone does not make that case.

Three likely counterarguments remain:

- **Economic gains outweigh autonomy.** This is a legitimate value judgement, but it needs an assessment of the terms actually available. Treating the OBR's 4% as an automatic rejoining dividend ignores the timing, the budget cost and the loss of the rebate.
- **Membership restores a vote over the rules.** That is true, and it is the best argument against the reset, which has Britain following EU rules without a vote. But the answer is not to rejoin. It is to keep alignment to a minimum, so that Britain writes its own rules where that matters most. Even as a member, Britain would be one voice among 28 and could be outvoted under qualified majority voting.
- **Today's electorate should choose again.** It may do so through a fresh mandate, but that choice should set out the obligations of membership clearly, including the euro commitment, Schengen and the absence of a rebate, and the alternative outside.

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