Conversations on the EU:
Why European nations *joined* the EU

Throughout 2012, a series of public Conversations were held between Ambassadors of the EU Member States and Australian politicians, diplomats and officials. The following two articles provide a short overview of the series. This article discusses why the EU was created and the reasons why countries wanted to join.

From February 2012, a series of Conversations was held each month between EU Ambassadors accredited to Australia and Australian representatives drawn from current and former ministers, diplomats, officials and academics.

The Conversations were held at the Europe Centres – nine were held at the Australian National University Centre for European Studies in Canberra and one each at RMIT University and Monash University, in Melbourne. They set out to ascertain why 28 Member States were attracted to founding and joining the EU at different times in history. The Conversations discussed what benefits were derived from EU membership and how their membership had affected their relationship with Australia.

Each Conversation was adroitly moderated into a one-hour timeframe by alternating journalists. The journalists were: Paul Barclay, whose Radio National program *Big Ideas* was broadcasting most of the series; Sky News' Kieran Gilbert with the A-PAC channel televising the series; and Network Ten's Paul Bongiorno, a self-confessed Europhile.

This article provides a snapshot of the series, through the main guiding questions. The audio of the full series can be found on the EU Delegation's website, **http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/australia** >

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His Excellency Mr Stéphane Romatet,
Ambassador of France

The creation of the EU

Why was the EU created? What attracted so many countries to EU membership?

The EU Ambassadors from the original six founding member countries explained that the European Union was born out of war, out of the ravages and destruction of both World War I and II, and the myriad of European wars before that.

His Excellency Mr David Daly, EU Ambassador to Australia, described how the Founding Fathers of the EU sought in the late 1940s to 'construct a different sort of Europe, one that was more integrated, more interdependent and one where the prospect of war between very recent enemies became unthinkable. By this very high standard, I think that some 60 years later, we have to say Europe has been a tremendous success'. Ambassador Daly continued, 'The economic part of Europe is often misunderstood as simply an economic union of some sort…but the origin is a very political idea, a political idea to break out of the cycle of war.'

A personal anecdote by His Excellency Mr Christoph Mueller, German Ambassador, captures the antagonistic feelings that existed between some European countries pre-EU and how drastically this had changed. His father was a schoolboy at the beginning of World War I and he was bitterly disappointed that he was too young to join in the war against France – 'the arch enemy, Germany's hereditary enemy'. That contrasts starkly today, with Ambassador Mueller reflecting on how vastly different the mood is within his own family – his two daughters having studied in different European countries, having very close friends from different nations, and having no frontiers to cross. 'When you look at how much has been achieved since our beginnings of the European Steel and Coal Community in 1950, it's just incredible what has changed,' he said.

His Excellency Mr Stéphane Romatet, Ambassador of France, readily agreed. 'For us Europeans, Europe is a dream. Europe is a quest. We have been dreaming about uniting the countries of Europe for centuries…and this

dream has just one objective: to make war between France and Germany – two hereditary enemies – impossible. With three wars in the last century, enough is enough.'

Associate Professor Don Kenyon, former Australian Ambassador to the EU (1997–2000) emphasised how the EU had chosen an economic path to deliver much more sensitive political objectives which proved too difficult to achieve on their own. 'Even though the focus of European integration to this point has been on economic aspects, everything the EU has done – such as the customs union, the single market, and the euro – has been done with a political purpose, for political reasons,' he said.

A founding member of the original six countries, His Excellency Mr Patrick Renault, Belgian Ambassador to Australia, recalled that the part of Europe now called Belgium had virtually been at war for over 2000 years, going back to the times of the Romans and later, when the Gauls and Germanic tribes roamed the land. This explains why the country is, still today, divided into French and Dutch/German language speakers with the political, religious and cultural differences that this implies. 'This remarkable history, with parts of the population partly belonging to the Germanic world and partly to the Latin world, still confronts Belgium today but that has also been a big advantage for us,' said Ambassador Renault.

His Excellency Mr Gian Ludovico de Martino di Montegiordano, Italian Ambassador to Australia, emphasised Italy's involvement in Europe: 'We are one of the founding members of the European Union. In June 1955, Italy hosted a conference in Messina which laid the foundations for the Treaty of Rome when the founding six members decided to pursue the path of economic integration as a means to achieve political union. The original treaties establishing the EEC and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) are kept at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome,' he said. >

Top: The Treaty of Accession of the Future Member States of the EU was signed in 2003 for 10 new members, including the Czech Republic. In the Conversations series, the Czech Ambassador to Australia, described the Czechs joining the EU as a homecoming: 'Our culture is Western, our thinking is Western, our institutions were Western.'

Credit © European Union, 2013

'Belonging to the EU means sharing a common identity, symbolised by the reality of "European citizenship", which has its roots in a common history and experience, and through its relationship with the rest of the world in a spirit of openness and understanding, yet guided by essential principles such as respect for diversity and human rights, the protection of political, civil and social rights, the promotion of peace and security between the nations, the constant search for dialogue and multilateralism and sustainable development,' the Ambassador continued. 'Italy remains a proactive partner of the European Union, playing a main role in strategic choices and in operational decisions, contributing to shape its policies. In recent months, Italy has made a point of advocating the need to combine budgetary discipline with a more decisive action for economic growth.'

The EU's success in achieving peace in Europe was highlighted by His Excellency Mr Willem Andreae, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Australia in 2012. He recalled that when Europeans celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in 2007, it marked the longest period in European history where there had been no wars between the member countries. 'There has been a lot of criticism of the EU of late, but it has achieved a lot – let's not forget that,' stressed Ambassador Andreae.

Belonging to the economic community

By the time of the first enlargement of the EU in 1973, when Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom joined the EU, the notion of peace, though still at the core of the EU, started to wane in profile. Political reasons, the importance of the economy, and of belonging to the 'economic community' were powerful driving factors for accession, given the relatively unrivalled success and performance of the six original countries.

'Denmark is a small country, with a population of just over five million. Being a member of the EU makes us part of a major global actor, which is fantastic. The things we can do and are doing as a group, in areas such as climate change, food security and the environment in general, have a much larger impact than we could have achieved individually.'

Her Excellency Ms Susanne Shine, Denmark's Ambassador to Australia in 2012

His Excellency Mr Noel White, Ireland's Ambassador to Australia, pointed out that back in the 1960s when Ireland first put forward its candidature to become a member of the EEC, 'we were a small country, isolated in many ways, politically and economically. Our economy was almost entirely dependent on agriculture, protected, and dependent on the vagaries of the UK market. A strong view developed that we needed to open up our country, economically, socially and politically. Membership of the then EEC, combined with our own efforts to bring about change, offered a way to achieve that objective,' he said. 'Forty years on, we have lived through enormous development and change. Quite simply, our country has been transformed.'

Her Excellency Ms Susanne Shine, the then Danish Ambassador, also spoke of the advantages of belonging to the EU. 'You have to remember that Denmark is a small country, two-thirds the size of Tasmania, with a population of just over five million. Being a member of the EU makes us part of a major global actor, which is fantastic,' she said. 'The things we can do and are doing as a group, in areas such as climate change, food security and the environment in general, have a much larger impact than we could have achieved individually.'

In 1981, Greece joined the EU and was closely followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. In all three cases, political and economic objectives were paramount.

Greece had first envisaged membership of the EU as early as 1961 when it signed an Association Agreement but the process towards membership was interrupted by the military dictatorship years of 1967–1974, explained His Excellency Mr Haris Dafaranos, Greek Ambassador to Australia.

Once the country returned to democracy in 1974, accession negotiations were quickly accelerated allowing Greece to join formally in 1981. Ambassador Dafaranos said, 'the restoration of democracy in Greece enabled us to become a member of the European family. After all, through the ages, we have been a constituent pillar of European civilisation. In the years after accession, Greece has received assistance in the order of 3% of her GDP.'

His Excellency Mr Rui Quartin-Santos, Portugal's Ambassador to Australia in 2012, said, 'Portugal joined the EU for two main reasons: the first was to consolidate democracy given its colonial history, political revolution and challenges with democratic stability in the past; the second reason was certainly economic – to develop economically by becoming more open to trade and investment, to build infrastructure projects to enable the country to catch up to European standards and improve the living standards of its citizens.'

The negotiations for Spain's membership took seven years due to the complexity and diversity of the Spanish economy, according to His Excellency Mr Enrique Viguera, Spain's Ambassador to Australia. 'But thanks to this long negotiating process, Spain turned from a protectionist, inward-looking self-sufficient economy into a free trade, outward-looking competitive one in a relatively short period of time. Despite some initial adverse social consequences – high structural unemployment rates mainly because of industrial restructuring and a wide transformation in rural areas – the Spanish economy was able to become the 10th largest world economy in only 25 years. I have to add that, in this process, Spain had also received a significant financial assistance from all EU funds,' Ambassador Viguera said. >

'A few years ago, the Europeans celebrated 50 years of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. That was the longest period in time that there was no war between European countries – 50 years – in European history.'

His Excellency Mr Willem Andreae, Ambassador of the Netherlands in 2012

Right: The 5th Australia and Europe in Conversation in June 2012 featured (left to right) moderator, Paul Barclay, H.E. Mr Willem Andreae, the then Ambassador of the Netherlands to Australia, H.E. Mrs Maija Lähteenmäki, the then Ambassador of Finland to Australia and Dr Andrea Benvenuti, Associate Member at the Monash European and EU Centre and Senior Lecturer of European Studies and International Relations, University of NSW.

Image: David Sheehy, Monash University.

By 1995, the desire for accession was still strong, with the accession of two Nordic countries Finland and Sweden, as well as the central European country of Austria. The objectives were still political and economic, if different in nature. Pivotal was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War enabling 'neutral' countries like Austria and Finland to seek membership.

His Excellency Dr Helmut Böck, Austria's Ambassador to Australia said, 'After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the perception of Austria as a "buffer zone" between the East and West changed and thus membership of the EU was no longer seen as a contradiction to Austria's neutrality.' With this political hurdle cleared and Austria already participating in the European Economic Area through its membership of the European Free Trade Association, which allowed EFTA countries to participate in the EU's single market, 'it was a natural and logical step to take to join the EU formally and thus regain Austria's place at the heart of Europe,' explained Ambassador Böck. Over 66% of Austrian citizens voted in favour of accession at the referendum.

With the question of neutrality no longer in play, it also made good sense for Sweden and Finland – another two countries with export dependent economies – to join the EU.

'The Swedish economy is very much dependent on the outside world with 55% of our economy comprised of exports, and mainly to Europe,' said His Excellency Mr Sven-Olof Petersson, Sweden's Ambassador to Australia. 'With regulatory decisions being decided more and more in Brussels, it was important for Sweden to have a seat at the table.'

Her Excellency Ms Maija Lähteenmäki, Finland's Ambassador to Australia in 2012 said, 'It makes good sense for Finland to be part of the EU. Finland's economy is very export driven with some 40% of our GDP coming from exports – and EU member states take 60% of those exports. And there are good political reasons to be a member of the EU, as Finland gets to sit in various forums where, on her own, she might not.'

The fifth wave of enlargement 2004, 2007

'Foremost in the mind of the generation of politicians that led the UK to accession was the peace and stability that the EU had achieved. This was something that everyone in the UK would certainly endorse as a key element of the European Union, alongside the benefits of the single market,' said His Excellency Mr Paul Madden, British High Commissioner. 'More recently, the wave of enlargements – particularly to the Eastern European countries which helped embed in those countries democracy, free markets as they emerged from the shadows of communism – are also a huge success of the EU.'

These sentiments expressed by High Commissioner Madden were very much in the minds of the Ambassadors from the fifth wave of EU enlargement. Twelve nations from Central and Eastern European countries, which were formerly behind the Iron Curtain, along with the two Mediterranean countries of Cyprus and Malta, joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.

Professor Ian McAllister, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, neatly encapsulated the incentives for these countries to join the EU when asked whether certain benchmarks for freedom and democracy had been met through accession.

'They have been met, but they've been met at different levels and at different times,' Professor McAllister said. 'It's probably worth remembering that the initial experiment with democratisation in the EU was Spain and Portugal in the 1970s, so that effectively established the model for the enlargement to the various post-communist states. The EU was quite enlightened by setting up a set of criteria in 1993 with the Copenhagen agreement. Of course, in each of these countries there was a real incentive for the political elite to engage with the EU and to join at the earliest possible opportunity. It's also important to remember that the transition to a market economy in these countries was very fraught – so the EU was really important in terms of smoothing over the transition, by mentoring, by encouraging foreign investment and other things. So, the political elites in these countries had a real incentive to join the EU, and there was quite a disincentive for them not to.' >

'Being a member of the
EU is a political vision.'

His Excellency Mr Francis Tabone,
Malta's High Commissioner to Australia

His Excellency Mr Andrej Jaroszynski, Poland's
Ambassador to Australia in 2012, noted that
'while the suffering endured under a totalitarian
system cannot be erased from memory, Poland's
accession first to NATO provided the country with
external security, and then the EU, allowed Poland
to modernise the country in all its spheres – social,
economic and most importantly, political. While a
lot of work remains to be done, the benefits derived
from the EU's single market, access to funding and
better, broader education means Poland can now
have better access to expertise, innovation and
capitalise on the benefits from fair competition.'

There are external benefits as well brought on by
a matter of association and visibility. 'For decades,
countries such as Poland, Hungary and Slovakia
were perceived as members of the fading socialist
bloc,' Ambassador Jaroszynski added. 'As a
member of the EU, all that has changed, and with
these countries now being open, tourists from
all over the world can visit. We also have better
access to markets – for instance Poland's trade
volume with Australia has doubled since our
accession in 2004.'

'Coming home' to Europe from the Soviet bloc

His Excellency Dr Hynek Kmoniček, Czech
Ambassador to Australia, said that for Czechs
joining the EU, it was a mental homecoming.
'We were part of the West all the time, our culture
is Western, our thinking is Western, our institutions
were Western, but in 1948 we suddenly got a
communist regime with Russian tanks out on
streets'. Joining the EU was not only for economic
reasons but they wanted to be part of the
European project which they believed had the right
future. 'It was never primarily economic for us,'
said Dr Kmoniček. 'The EU was not only home,
it was the civilisation project of the future. We didn't
want to be out of this project.'

Similar sentiments were expressed by His
Excellency Dr Mihai-Stephan Stuparu, Romania's
Ambassador to Australia. 'Romania was always in
Europe and, after the fall of communism in 1989,
it was a natural thing to do to regain one's
place in Europe,' Dr Stuparu said. 'Moreover,

the benefits which are offered by the EU as a community, not only on the economic side, but also socially, politically, as a representation worldwide, are extremely important and should be valued as such by the Member States.'

Her Excellency Ms Anna Mario Siko, Hungary's Ambassador to Australia, compared joining the EU as becoming a member of a club. 'We think it is a process, that all of us are Europeans and that we should come together. We have fought long and hard enough for hundreds and hundreds of years on various issues. And being European now with a code of conduct, it is like a club, you have to accept the rules. The members have to vote for you to be part of it. Membership has created a lot of opportunities for all these countries, Hungary included. This is like being members of a club, people then know what to expect of you. They know that you behave in a legal, transparent, and recognised way and in this way you can take advantage of the benefits of membership,' Ambassador Siko said. >

'For decades, countries such as Poland, Hungary and Slovakia were perceived as members of the fading socialist bloc. As a member of the EU, all that has changed…We also have better access to markets – for instance Poland's trade volume with Australia has doubled since our accession in 2004.'

His Excellency Mr Andrej Jaroszynski, Poland's Ambassador to Australia in 2012

Top: Her Excellency Ms Eva Ponomarenkova, Slovakia's Ambassador, remarked that 'with our capital Bratislava being only some 60 kilometres from Vienna, Slovakia is really at the heart of Europe. There was never any question that we would not become part of the EU and restore our democratic institutions'.

Image: Bratislava, Credit © European Union, 2013

Slovakia's path to the EU was similar to other new democracies that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Slovakia's priority, after becoming an independent country in 1993, was to become a member of the EU. The negotiations for Slovakia's membership took less than three years – the shortest term of negotiations ever. Her Excellency Ms Eva Ponomarenkova, Slovakia's Ambassador to Australia, remarked that 'with our capital Bratislava being only some 60 kilometres from Vienna, Slovakia is really at the heart of Europe. There was never any question that we would not become part of the EU and restore our democratic institutions'.

His Excellency Mr Krassimir Stefanov, Bulgaria's Ambassador to Australia, said that while there were a number of factors for his country's push to EU membership, the most decisive one was 'the feeling of belonging'. Bulgaria's European credentials are without question. In fact, Bulgaria is one of the oldest European countries, dating back some 1300 years under its name. As with the other countries, the disintegration of the Soviet bloc allowed Bulgarians to choose their destiny, and there was no hesitation, with 82% voting in favour of the EU. 'The feeling of belonging and the attractiveness of the European project offering a lot of advantages, a lot more opportunities for our people, a guarantee for security and the irreversibility of the process was a driving force of our membership to the European Union,' emphasised Ambassador Stefanov.

EU Ambassador David Daly noted that 'the EU's successive enlargements from six to 27, but particularly from 15 to 27, was very much an expression of the importance of peace, stability, as well as prosperity in Europe'.

A political vision for the future

Slovenia was not part of the Soviet bloc. It declared itself an independent state in 1991 following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. His Excellency Dr Milan Balažic, Slovenian Ambassador to Australia, said joining the EU was a 'natural decision, the same values, politics, economy, security, and it is also some kind of common house, like family with agreements and disagreements. You're married for the good and the bad, but we are all equal in this partnership'.

For the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus and Malta, the path to the EU was slightly different. Both countries have strong historical European links and had concluded Association Agreements with the EU, which came into force in 1973 and 1966 respectively. But for differing reasons, negotiations for full membership did not start until 1990s, eventually joining the EU in the enlargement of 2004.

His Excellency Mr Yannis Iacovou, Cyprus High Commissioner to Australia, said, 'Cyprus is part of Europe historically and culturally. We are very happy to contribute towards this European structure. Cyprus will continue to play its positive role in cooperation with her partners towards European integration'.

His Excellency Mr Francis Tabone, Malta's High Commissioner to Australia, said, 'being a member of the EU is a political vision. It is a place where Malta naturally belongs given our history and our links with Europe. Now we sit at the table with our European colleagues participating in the decision-making process which is basically determining our future'.

The last nine years have changed Malta dramatically and positively. In times of economical and financial turbulence, it is easy to focus on the difficulties and underestimate the benefits that EU membership has brought with it. 'Joining the world's largest internal market upon accession and then adopting the euro in 2008, boosted the image of Malta as a sound and attractive destination for foreign investment and similarly opened up trade and investment opportunities for Maltese entrepreneurs,' High Commissioner Tabone said.

2013: Membership of Croatia

The newest Member State, Croatia, joined the EU in July 2013. His Excellency Mr Vicencije Biuk, Croatia's Ambassador to Australia, said it is an opportunity 'to attain further enhancements of a country's democratic rule, legal system and economic structure through harmonised laws, common policies and the four freedoms of the EU single market.

'Membership of Croatia in the EU means endorsement of peace, prosperity and stability in the once troubled region of South Eastern Europe. In this respect, we are happy to be able to provide assistance to our neighbours in their endeavours on the way to the EU membership. Cooperation and interdependence within the EU framework means that any new war in Europe is unthinkable.

'Another important reason why smaller countries like Croatia need the European Union is a possibility for us to be one European voice in today's globalised world. Competition with the rising powers like China and India is possible only if we act together as one strong EU identity, one voice of 500 million people,' Ambassador Biuk said. •