Britain Cannot Eat Cooperation

Why the Debate About Europe is Distracting Us from a Much Bigger Problem

Adam Tugwell | 22 November 2026



British politics seems destined to replay the argument about Europe every few years.

One side believes Britain's future lies in closer cooperation with the European Union: fewer barriers, stronger relationships, regulatory alignment and smoother trade. The other insists that Brexit's promise remains unfulfilled, arguing that prosperity depends on greater independence and further divergence from European institutions.

Both positions are presented as competing visions of Britain's future. Yet increasingly it seems that they are debating a secondary question.

The central challenge facing Britain is neither cooperation nor separation. It is capability.

The question is not simply how Britain manages its dependencies, but whether it is rebuilding the productive, institutional and economic capacities required to thrive regardless of whom it cooperates with. Europe matters, of course. Trade matters. Geography matters. Relationships matter. Any serious discussion of Britain's future must recognise those realities.

What concerns me is that much of the debate revolves around making dependency easier to manage while avoiding a more fundamental question: whether Britain still possesses the capabilities on which genuine resilience depends.

Nowhere is that distinction clearer than food.

Food Reveals the Problem

Consider a simple but uncomfortable question.

How did we arrive at a situation where the industry responsible for producing one of the three things every human being requires every day to survive frequently struggles to remain economically viable without subsidy, grant schemes, support payments and continuous government intervention?

This is not a criticism of farmers. Quite the opposite.

Having spent years studying food security, agricultural systems, supply chains and the policies that shape them, my respect for farmers and food producers has only grown. Most have spent decades adapting to systems they did not design, operating within rules they did not create and carrying risks that many consumers never see. The challenge is not the people working within the system. The challenge is the system itself.

Over several decades, food production became increasingly integrated into a model built around efficiency, specialisation, scale and global optimisation. The objective was understandable. Many of the changes delivered real benefits. Food became cheaper. Choice expanded dramatically. Seasonal limitations faded. Supply chains became more sophisticated. Consumers grew accustomed to abundance.

Yet while efficiency increased, something else began to disappear.

Capabilities that once underpinned resilience were gradually stripped away. Local infrastructure was consolidated or closed. Production became more specialised.

Supply chains became longer and more complex. The system became increasingly dependent upon inputs, logistics and relationships extending far beyond Britain's borders.

None of this happened because policymakers wanted a less resilient food system. It emerged because resilience was rarely the primary objective. Efficiency was.

For a long time, that distinction appeared not to matter.

Today it matters a great deal.

Feeding Ourselves and Being Able to Feed Ourselves Are Different Things

Discussions of food security often become confused because we mistake outcomes for capabilities.

Most people understandably assume that full supermarket shelves mean a country is food secure. Politicians often reinforce that assumption. If food is available, prices remain relatively stable and panic buying is absent, it is easy to conclude that everything is functioning as intended.

But food security is not fundamentally about shelves.

It is about capability.

A genuinely secure food system is one that can continue functioning when conditions become difficult. It possesses the means to absorb shocks, adapt to changing circumstances and sustain production when normal assumptions no longer hold.

That raises a series of practical questions. Can the country secure fertiliser, fuel and agricultural inputs during periods of disruption? Does it retain sufficient processing capacity? Can food be transported, stored and distributed if established routes fail? Does the system possess enough flexibility to adapt when imports become constrained or external supply chains become unreliable?

Viewed through that lens, the challenge becomes clearer.

Britain did not simply become less self-sufficient. More significantly, it lost much of the capacity to become self-sufficient if circumstances ever demanded it.

Many of the local abattoirs, dairies, processors, mills, grain stores and other layers of regional food infrastructure that once provided adaptability have disappeared. Agricultural production has become increasingly specialised and concentrated. Expertise, processing capacity and supply chains have become more centralised. The

result is a system that often appears secure precisely because it functions so efficiently under normal conditions.

The problem is that efficiency and resilience are not the same thing.

A system can be highly productive yet struggle to adapt. It can be economically rational while becoming strategically fragile. It can look stable until the moment stability is tested.

That distinction is becoming increasingly important.

What This Has to Do with Europe

Food illustrates a broader issue that often goes unnoticed in political debate.

Supporters of closer cooperation with Europe are usually making a coherent and reasonable argument. Reduced barriers can improve trade, lower transaction costs, smooth supply chains and increase economic efficiency. Closer alignment can reduce friction and provide greater predictability for businesses operating across borders.

Many of these arguments are probably correct.

What they do not necessarily address is capability.

A nation can become more integrated without becoming more resilient. It can enjoy smoother access to external systems while remaining structurally dependent upon them. Reduced friction may improve performance, but it does not automatically rebuild productive capacity, restore lost infrastructure or increase adaptability.

The same principle applies in reverse.

Advocates of a harder version of Brexit often assume that political or legal independence naturally creates practical independence. Yet withdrawing from institutions does not automatically generate capability either. Domestic capacity does not emerge because legislation changes. Productive infrastructure does not reappear because sovereignty has been asserted.

In both cases, capability is often assumed rather than examined.

The mistake is to confuse dependency with friction.

They are not the same thing.

A country can reduce friction while becoming more dependent. Equally, it can increase friction without becoming more capable. The crucial question is neither how integrated Britain should be nor how detached it should become. The crucial question is whether the country retains the capacities required to function effectively if circumstances become less favourable than expected.

Cooperation may contribute to that objective. In many cases it should. But cooperation is not a substitute for capability any more than sovereignty is.

Capability must be built.

The Question Beneath the Farming Debate

This is why farming deserves attention far beyond agricultural policy.

When farmers discuss food security, the conversation naturally focuses on production, regulation, imports, support mechanisms and commercial pressures. These issues matter enormously. Yet beneath them lies a deeper question that receives far less attention.

How did food production become detached from food security?

How did an industry responsible for one of life's basic necessities become structurally dependent on subsidy? How did Britain grow comfortable importing such a large proportion of the inputs required to sustain domestic production? How did a country that once treated food security as a strategic concern begin assuming that external systems would always provide what it needed?

These are not anti-European questions. They are not anti-globalisation questions. Nor are they criticisms of farmers.

They are questions about capability.

Food simply makes them unusually visible because everyone understands the stakes. We can debate economic models indefinitely, but the importance of feeding a population requires little explanation.

Food forces us to confront the difference between access and capacity.

That distinction extends far beyond agriculture.

When Efficiency Becomes Fragility

The same pattern appears repeatedly across modern Britain.

Energy systems increasingly depend on international markets and complex infrastructure. Housing shortages persist despite decades of policy reform. Domestic manufacturing capabilities have weakened. Infrastructure projects become increasingly difficult to deliver. Local government capacity has eroded. Defence planners openly discuss supply-chain resilience as a strategic concern.

The details differ, but the underlying question remains remarkably similar.

Do we still possess the capabilities required to adapt when conditions change?

This is why I have increasingly come to think of the modern Establishment less as a group of people and more as a shared worldview.

For decades, policymakers, institutions and businesses operated within a framework that appeared highly successful. Greater integration increased efficiency. Greater efficiency increased prosperity. Greater prosperity was assumed to increase resilience.

For a long time, those assumptions generated impressive results. Living standards rose. Markets expanded. Consumer choice increased. Entire industries became more productive.

The challenge is not that these assumptions were irrational.

The challenge is that they were developed during an unusually stable period of history.

Today many of the conditions that supported them are becoming less reliable. Global supply chains are more vulnerable to disruption. Geopolitical competition is intensifying. Energy security is once again a strategic concern. Climate volatility is placing additional pressure on food systems and infrastructure.

As stability becomes less certain, the distinction between efficiency and resilience becomes harder to ignore.

At that point, societies can spend a surprisingly long time attempting to solve emerging problems with the same intellectual frameworks that helped create them.

Why This Matters Now

None of this means Britain is about to run out of food. Nor does it imply that Europe is collapsing, global trade is ending or catastrophe is imminent.

The argument is much simpler.

The assumptions that shaped the past forty years are becoming less dependable than they once appeared. In a world characterised by greater uncertainty, capability becomes more important.

Not because capability guarantees success, but because it increases options.

Countries that retain productive capacity, technical expertise, institutional competence and resilient infrastructure can adapt more effectively when unexpected challenges arise. Countries that allow those capabilities to deteriorate become increasingly reliant on circumstances remaining favourable.

That is a fragile foundation for long-term security.

Successful nations cooperate. They trade. They form alliances. They participate in international networks and benefit from comparative advantage.

But successful nations also maintain the capacities that allow them to function when conditions become less predictable.

The balance between those two imperatives is becoming one of the defining challenges of our time.

Britain Cannot Eat Cooperation

The argument here is not against cooperation. Britain should cooperate with Europe. It should cooperate with allies around the world. Trade, diplomacy and partnership remain essential features of any successful modern economy.

But cooperation is most valuable when it connects capable nations rather than compensates for capabilities that no longer exist.

Britain cannot eat regulatory alignment. It cannot power homes with diplomatic goodwill. It cannot build resilience through market access alone.

Those things depend upon productive capacity, infrastructure, skills, institutions and systems that exist within the country itself. They cannot be created at the moment they are needed. They must be developed before the crisis arrives.

This is why the debate between integration and separation increasingly feels incomplete. One side presents cooperation as the answer. The other presents sovereignty as the answer.

Yet cooperation is not capability.

Sovereignty is not capability.

Capability is capability.

The real question facing Britain is whether it is rebuilding the capacities that allow it to prosper when conditions are favourable and adapt when they are not.

Food merely reveals the issue more clearly than most subjects do.

Once you see the distinction there, it becomes difficult not to see it everywhere else.

The question facing Britain is not whether it should move closer to Europe or further away from it. The question is whether it will rebuild the capabilities that make either choice meaningful.

Until that question is answered, we risk mistaking the management of dependency for the recovery of resilience.

And those are not the same thing.

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