

Dorling, D. (2016) 'Our problems are not created by EU membership. Many of our benefits are', Times Higher Education, June 9th, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/european-union-eu-referendum-scholars-weigh-case-for-and-against-brexit>

'Our problems are not created by EU membership. Many of our benefits are'

Public debate in the UK over whether to remain in the EU has been criticised for casting little light.

June 9, 2016

Danny Dorling



Source: iStock

Life is not a bed of roses for many in the UK, but that is not because of the European Union. If the UK were a far more progressive state, at the forefront of social progress on this continent, we might have cause to grumble that Brussels was holding us back. But we are the social laggards.

We need EU legislation to stop us exploiting workers over holiday pay, working hours and redundancy payments. Our political establishment would happily tolerate levels of air pollution far above those that currently incur fines from the European Commission. And we would not know about our extraordinary levels of economic inequality were it not for European legislation that forces our highest paid bankers to [release details of their salaries and bonuses](#).

That information reveals that 2,926 of them are paid more than €1 million (£800,000) a year, compared with just 939 in the rest of the EU combined. The chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, [tried to stop these figures being collected and released](#). He will have known that, between 2012-13 and 2013-14, the number of bankers in the UK who received more than €1 million rose by 840 while it dropped by 153 in the rest of the EU. Presumably even George was embarrassed by their ever more stratospheric greed. And despite David Cameron's success in [watering down related EU transparency laws](#) concerning family trusts, the regulations are better than we would have had otherwise.

It is sometimes claimed that we can fund the NHS only because of the taxes imposed on our financial services industry, or that it is the contributions that we pay to the EU that result in the NHS being so underfunded. However, of all affluent European nations, the UK is among the lowest in its spending on health. Only Greece and Italy spend slightly less per person, and only then in very recent years. Elsewhere in Europe, health spending per person is twice as much in Switzerland as it is in the UK, 81 per cent higher in Norway, 59 per cent higher in the Netherlands, 49 per cent higher in Germany and 27 per cent higher in France. The EU is not the reason.

Norway and Switzerland are often cited as successful European countries that are not fully integrated into the EU. What is often forgotten is that they are also remarkably economically equitable countries. The best-paid 1 per cent in Switzerland take half the proportion of total income that their equivalent in the UK take, so the poorest tenth of households in Switzerland

enjoy three times as much (in real terms) as the poorest tenth in the UK. In Norway, inequalities are even less pronounced. Both countries are prosperous largely because of their social solidarity, not because of their autonomy from a few EU regulations.

I could go on. I could cite the UK's risible educational performance compared with other EU countries. I could mention the high cost and poor quality of our housing – no fault of the EU. Or how we benefit from exporting millions of pensioners to the European mainland and importing fit young people we have not paid to educate. Our problems are not created by EU membership. Many of our benefits are.

We are so unusual in Europe because our past was so different. We [relied on an empire](#). Leaving the EU will not bring it back.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography at the [University of Oxford](#).

His latest book, *A Better Politics*, from which most of the statistics in this article are taken, can be [downloaded for free](#).