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Lionel Barber, Editor

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The single market and questions of identity

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Sir, Your letter writer Yugo Kovach imagines teleologically that a single market must lead inevitably to a US of Europe, no matter how many opt-outs (“The single market and a United States of Europe”, September 8).

And he holds up the US erroneously as exemplar. Britain’s exclusion from Schengen and its retention of sterling were significant breaks on the trend of “ever closer union”. David Cameron had obtained concessions on welfare benefits to migrants that would have slowed immigration flows had Britain voted for Remain — establishing a four-year qualifying interval before becoming eligible to receive benefits and for established migrants, receiving benefit at the rate provided by their country of origin. Here the principle of free movement would have been upheld but with important limitations.

Similarly, the North American Free Trade Agreement, in addition to embracing the free movement of goods and capital, might have also adopted the principle of the free movement of labour, albeit with protections for Americans threatened by the movement of capital out of the country, and with limitations on the inflow of Mexican labour, through a regulated guest worker programme.

None of this would have led to political union in the long term. And had it been done, moreover, there would not now be an immigration crisis, nor a Northeastern rust belt.

One might observe, too, that the US achieved political union before it became a single market. That is what the US civil war was partially about. And it did so on the basis of a common language and a cultural melting pot in which immigrants sought to assimilate.

This would not happen in Europe. Migrants would retain their national identities while simultaneously coming to regard themselves as Europeans. They would embrace dual identities and do so indefinitely.

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