

“The Suppression of Nationhood”: Euroscepticism in the United Kingdom

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JULIAN NEAL, JUL 28 2011

Humble beginnings

Under the leadership of Conservative Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath, the United Kingdom ascended to the membership of the then European Economic Community (EEC) on January 1st, 1973. Since this date, the extent of the United Kingdom’s membership within the now European Union (EU) has been continuously debated, both by supporters of European integration and those who are against Britain’s inclusion in the EU and the subsequent implementation of its various institutions in the country. Euroscepticism, which can be defined as “... a person, *esp* a British politician, who is opposed to the European Union or the increase of its powers ...”[1] is a prevalent force in modern British politics. It is a philosophy which has created an extensive dividing line across the political parties of Britain and has fostered followers on both sides of the European argument amongst politicians, political thinkers and, ever increasingly, the British public.

There are political parties in Britain which harbour a favourable view upon the European Union and see it as beneficial to the social and economic standing of their nation, such as the Liberal Democrats. Concurrently, there are those which base their platforms on Britain’s full withdrawal from the European Union, and see such a union as not only harmful to the United Kingdom, but as a primary source for a number of its economic issues. Highly negative views on the EU akin to this in British political parties can be associated with the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a right-wing party founded on the idea of Euroscepticism itself which aims to pull Britain out of the EU. The Conservative Party, a centre-right political party in the United Kingdom, maintains a less severe form of Euroscepticism as part of its European policy, advocating Britain’s continual membership of the EU, but may oppose particular European policies and laws they disagree with.

With such a wide breadth of opinions regarding Europe in British politics, it is important to understand what role Euroscepticism as a belief plays in the politics of the nation and the many effects it can have over this politics. What is without doubt is that the scepticism of Europe – its structure, its purposes and its influence – is an increasingly important and decisive matter in the United Kingdom today.

The Evolution of Euroscepticism

In what was perhaps one of the earliest examples of political backlash against Britain’s movement into the European Common Market, a nationwide referendum – the first in the United Kingdom’s history – was held on June 5th, 1975. It crucially asked the British public whether the country should remain in the European Economic Community (EEC). The then Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who succeeded Edward Heath in 1974, supported continued membership of the EU, putting his position forward that “Her Majesty’s Government have decided to recommend to the British people to vote for staying in the Community.”[2]

While this referendum resulted in the continuation of EEC membership for Britain, it marked a point in British politics which thenceforth has been wrought with strong contention amongst the political parties of the country. Subsequent

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Labour and Conservative governments have implemented their mandates regarding Europe during their tenures, and these policies have helped to shape the position of the United Kingdom amongst its European partners as a vital part of such an ever changing, growing union.

Margaret Thatcher, who became Prime Minister of Britain after the Conservative Party's general election victory in 1979, proved to be a spearhead of Eurosceptic following through her notoriously staunch opposition towards greater European integration and what she called the formation of a “European super-state”:

“We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain... to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels. Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country ...”[3]

What Thatcher successfully laid bare in “The Bruges Speech” and indeed via her entire time as leader was a depiction of Europe (as it stood then) as a threat to both British sovereignty and economic wellbeing. It was a springboard for her Eurosceptic attacks and would cause her ministry to divide over her anti-European rhetoric and the political issues posed thereof.

“... the Delors Report in April 1989 ... planned for European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) to be achieved in three stages: ... if a country accepted the first stage (ERM [Exchange Rate Mechanism] membership), it would be bound to continue with the remaining two ... this was unacceptable to Mrs Thatcher.”[4]

To Margaret Thatcher, the idea of the EMU and particularly the ERM – the latter of which “... would require unification of currencies and the end of sterling's independence ...”[5] – was politically detestable. The difficult battles she had fought against domestic inflation, general economic stability and retaining the pound's dominance, including the hard won monetary rebates for Britain agreed in the 1980 EC budget (demanded by her due to the belief that “... Europeans were taking excessive British money and thus depriving British tax payers of improvements to their own public services.”[6]), would be relatively in vain. She would find her deeply resentful opinions over Europe to be a main source for her political isolation (stemming from numerous cabinet resignations) and, in many regards, the ultimate downfall she eventually suffered in 1990, despite the fact that “... ironically it was Prime Minister Thatcher who in 1987 signed the Single European Act, the landmark treaty from which much of the EU's future integration has flown.”[7] However, it was Mrs Thatcher which provided some of the harshest criticisms of the EU supplied by any modern political leader as well as the basis for a respectable proportion of the Eurosceptical argument – and policy – that is used against it today.

John Major, who replaced Thatcher as Prime Minister after her resignation on November 28th, 1990, would endure his own decisive (and governmentally divisive) saga with Europe. By signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 – a pinnacle marker in “... the deeper integration of once independent nation states ...”[8] – Major would wrestle with protests of the party he led and the public he served. Euroscepticism still remained among high ranks within the Conservative Party after Thatcher's forceful resignation, but Major's more diplomatic, less hard-line style with Europe and its progression earned him some praise.

“... He [Major] favoured the creation of the single market but was resolutely opposed to surrendering the national veto, an increase in the use of QMV [Qualified Majority Voting] or any other measures seen to be promoting the development of a federal structure.”[9]

While Major's stance on the EU echoed somewhat in the vein of his predecessor's, the aspects of his position (one that “... commentators found ... difficult to decide whether [it] belonged in the Eurosceptic or Europhile wing of the Conservative Party.”[10]) which differed to it – and this arguable swaying of inconsistent EU strategy – would fuel Eurosceptic flame and help to challenge his leadership like that of Thatcher's.

“... Their views [Eurosceptics] ... covered a wide spectrum. For them the idea of life outside the Union was by no means unthinkable or ... unattractive ... there was a common determination to halt, indeed reverse, what was seen as

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a ... drive towards the creation of a European super-state [and] pooling sovereignty.”[11]

This description of Eurosceptic attitude and objective came about most profusely from Major’s time in office until his ejection in the 1997 general election by Tony Blair and the “New” Labour Party which brought forward its own set of European policies when it entered government. It is now a powerful factor, still existing in much the same fashion as quoted above, in British politics and the parties therein. Through the premierships of Gordon Brown and currently David Cameron, the distaste and fears of the EU are an unavoidably splitting issue in the United Kingdom’s parliament and public voice. How it behaves within Britain now can make and break policy from all parties and evermore shapes its future domestically and internationally.

A Truly Eurosceptic Nation?

Alongside France, Great Britain is continually considered to be one of the EU’s most Eurosceptic member states. Its largely anti-European conservative principles have guided its place in the union for now well over thirty years. This has perhaps most vehemently risen out of a grand feeling of British sovereignty and post-imperialist demeanour. “Euroscepticism emerged as the guardian of powerful national myths ... [it] appears as part of a degenerating approach to international affairs ... characterised by ... ‘exceptionalism – a free country confronting an unfree European continent.’”[12]

This statement sheds light on the argument that Britain as a once mighty imperial power may be naturally Eurosceptic due to its past filled with overseas rule. There is evidence that Britain is not opposed to Europe as an economic trading and cultural sharing outlet, but the ways in which the EU has increasingly taken a role in commanding and intervening in what were once fully sovereign affairs in the land is where its dislike for the union stems from. An Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) Occasional Paper on the subject of UK European withdrawal writes “... by being a member of that bloc [the EU], Britain loses significant rights and powers over the way in which it conducts its external affairs.”[13] However, in weighing economic costs and benefits of such membership, the paper argues that low EU trading tariffs and the benefits towards British industries from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) – a high amount from outside the EU of which is available precisely because Britain is an EU member – are economical reasons for Britain’s EU support.

“FDI, especially from Japan, may be a response to EU protection, real or imagined. That raises the possibility that companies will invest in the EU even if it is more expensive to invest in the EU than to export it from elsewhere.”[14]

All of this said, the fact that the most Eurosceptic of British political parties has enjoyed such a hegemony in its time in government – especially in the 20th century – is an acceptable testimony to the opinions regarding the EU from the British population. It also appears to be a set of negative opinions that need not fear a genuine chance of abating.

Twisted Talking

“In June 2009, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) beat the ruling Labour Government as well as the Liberal Democrats in the European elections ... UKIP achieved 2.4 million votes and 16.5% of the national vote. The message was clear: UKIP is here to stay.”[15]

While the UKIP still do not enjoy direct representation in the House of Commons with a Member of Parliament, these statistics would suggest that Euroscepticism as a political ideal is something that is strongly held by British voters and, too, is there to stay. Nigel Farage, leader of the party and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) has been endlessly strident in his opposition to the EU and Britain’s membership of it:

“British jobs for British workers will only be a possibility when Britain is ruled by Britons again. When we leave the European Union and become a free and independent nation, when we who live here are able to decide what are the laws here, something that is the very essence of the democratic ideal.”[16]

Immigration, legal sovereignty and the high financial costs of remaining in Europe are amongst the most regularly contended subjects by Eurosceptic believers and thus challenged by those who support the EU. With the free

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movement of people and labour, a key part of the EU constitution, comes those many European citizens seeking livelihood and employment in the United Kingdom and other EEA nations. There has been an increasing fear of job deprivation for British nationals since further nations have ascended to the EU and EEA – perhaps most notably from Eastern and Central Europe – for example Poland in 2004 – with such a large influx of migration from these areas bringing a response from the then Labour government in the form of the aforementioned “British jobs for British workers”[17] promise.

Such a slogan was met with a tepid, from some an outright negative, response. It would miss its purpose and become hijacked by extreme Eurosceptics found in the British National Party (BNP), a far-right wing quasi fascist political party also committed to completely removing Britain from the EU and severely limiting, even totally barring, immigration from inside the union and elsewhere. It was also viewed as part of Labour’s individual supposed failings regarding Europe, just as the Conservative’s approach suffered its own Eurosceptic attacks, a number of which have been outlined.

“The real area of weakness for Labour, however, has been in respect of building any domestic consensus behind its European policy. Tony Blair’s own efforts to change domestic public opinion’s perception of the benefits of European integration were not sustained and not successful. In spring 1997 just 36 per cent of respondents in the UK considered membership of the EU to be a good thing ...”[18]

The Labour Party is generally considered to be more comfortable with Europe in its philosophy and policies when compared with the Conservatives’ own EU ideals. As such, Eurosceptic forces across the nation were vehemently opposed to Labour’s acceptance of further integration within the EU and the “surrendering” of British authority to its institutions while they were in power. Despite this, even Labour abided by a degree of Eurosceptic attitude when it was last in government between 1997 and 2010, as Tony Blair shifted its socialist left-wing adherences closer to the centre- and even very minor right- of the political spectrum. The party’s behaviour when conducting its EU policy was very different to its exceedingly pro-European stature during its opposition years under Michael Foot (Labour leader from 1980-1983), Neil Kinnock (leader from 1983-1992) and latterly John Smith (who succeeded Kinnock in 1992 until his sudden death in 1994).

“Tony Blair’s predecessors, Neil Kinnock and John Smith, were strongly pro-European, supporting British entry into the ERM, welcoming the Maastricht Treaty, and criticising the Tories for opting out of the Social Chapter. Under Blair, however, Labour began to drift, in tandem with the Major government, in a more Eurosceptical direction.”[19]

Labour’s 1997 manifesto which helped sweep them to victory in the general election of the same year contained important European policy adjustments from those it published previously. Amongst other pledges, it promised to hold a national referendum on the adoption of the single currency (the Euro) – which was never held since the British government did not agree to its inception – reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to be better geared towards British economic advantage and, above all, it opposed the creation of the so-called European federal superstate.[20] Blair’s partially sceptical approach to Britain’s involvement in the EU was just that – continual involvement, but with a nature of anti-European sentiment adopted from Tory policy accepted by the electorate and modified from past Labour European principle election failures. The later Labour general election manifestos – 2005 and 2010 – contained similar pledges upon the European Union, with Gordon Brown using the union throughout his premiership – in economic policy when tackling the global recession and when overseeing Britain’s social development – but holding to his predecessor’s purposely careful standpoint in the area. Yet, it was under Brown that one of the strongest Eurosceptic outcries since Maastricht would rally against another constitutional enforcement – that of the Lisbon Treaty ratification, which secured further British attachment to EU rule and Brussels’ dominance over the country’s laws.

The Lisbon Case

The aim of the Lisbon Treaty, which had been in gradual overarching development since the fruition of ongoing Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) at the European Council and the signing of previous EU treaties – the Treaty of Nice in 2001, the EU constitution in 2004 – was “... to make the EU ‘more democratic, more transparent and more

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efficient.”[21] Its formal creation took eight years to reach from the haggling and clashing of EU member states, with a draft for the treaty being produced in 2005. Achieving comprised economic might on an international level in the wake of growing North American and Asian economies (e.g.China) while concurrently securing greater authority by the European Parliament to secure democracy in member states are the chief defences given by the treaty’s proponents. Like those signed into before it, the Lisbon Treaty has been ferociously attacked by Eurosceptics of all political allegiances.

Daniel Hannan, Conservative MEP for South East England since 1999, regularly argues that the ways in which the EU operates is damaging to its member states. He is a supporter of European culture, values and trade, but is strongly anti-European Union. As such, his defiant rebukes with regards to the Lisbon Treaty’s ratification are weaved with some of the most Eurosceptic rhetoric available in the British media.

“... Britain is no longer a sovereign nation. At midnight last night [December 1st 2009], we ceased to be an independent state ... and became instead a subordinate unit within a European state. Until yesterday, the EU could not annex additional policy areas without a new treaty, which needed to be ratified by all its constituent nations. Parliament ... no longer has the final say on extensions of EU jurisdiction. Formal sovereignty has been stifled ... It is appalling, demeaning, disgraceful ...”[22]

Hannan successfully echoes similar and at times identical sentiments made by individuals of Eurosceptic tendencies. His specific thoughts on the treaty in question are an amalgamation containing historical European fears his and other parties beheld beside modern EU opponents’ disagreements with how the union exists today beyond its multiple changes.

Then British Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown signed the Treaty of Lisbon (or rather then “the EU reform treaty”) in 2007 with a view to it coming into effect two years later. This eventual signing received haranguing from politicians and regular citizens alike, if not for its apparent sovereignty disheveling features then due to the fact that a promised referendum on its ratification was not held. In what was a stark renegade by Britain’s three major parties – Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat – the British public were never given a choice in agreeing to the treaty by the ballot box. Then Leader of the Opposition and Conservative Party Leader David Cameron (now Prime Minister) stated that a Lisbon Treaty referendum was a “cast iron” election pledge he aimed to enact in government, and his reversal on this once solid pledge received an array of criticism. Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats (Deputy Prime Minister since the UK’s last general election) also reversed on a Lisbon referendum promise by stating that he and his party would vote against the proposition.

With a referendum over the following of the same treaty, Irish voters were given a vital opportunity to choose whether their republic would accept its implementation, which at first resulted in a ‘No’ vote. A second referendum in fact produced a decently large ‘Yes’ vote. The lack of this same referendum in the United Kingdom buttresses one of the common British Eurosceptic ideas that “In abandoning the process of using referendums to approve European Union treaties, the European Union has cut itself off from a significant source of democratic legitimacy.”[23] While a small number of European nations had the privilege of a Lisbon referendum, the majority did not.

The approaches to the Lisbon issue by David Cameron and Nick Clegg are an interesting topic when looking at Britain’s current government and its policies on the EU. It is these two politicians and their respective parties which are changing governmental Eurosceptic attitude due to a miraculous formation that is unseen in its specific nature throughout British politics.

Eurosceptic Europhiles

For the first time since 1974 the British electorate returned a hung parliament in last year’s general election, held on 6th May, 2010, whereby no single party was able to achieve a majority of seats in the House of Commons. The Conservative Party received the most votes and seats – 307 – with the incumbent Labour Party suffering heavy losses. The Liberal Democrats (the party of third power in the Commons) also lost seats and once again came third in vote share. Stunningly, after days of haggling and deal breaking, a coalition government, Britain’s first during

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peacetime, was created between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, with David Cameron becoming Britain's Prime Minister and Nick Clegg its Deputy Prime Minister. This forging of government is unfounded with respect to EU policy, as it consists of the most Eurosceptic of the major parties alongside its most pro-European.

Remarkably these two parties have come to a rather anti-EU consensus as part of their coalition agreement. The proposition of a United Kingdom Sovereignty Bill, refusing to adopt the Euro as Britain's currency, the desire to cease further authoritative power transfers to Brussels – these agreements between the Tories and Liberals are a binding of their desires for Britain in Europe, but it is clear from many angles that they mostly abide by the Conservative Party's defiant philosophy on Europe.

“... the issue of Europe was believed to be a major barrier to any potential arrangement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In this sense, the European Union Bill can be seen as embodying concessions made by the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives. The package is clearly eurosceptic in tone and intent ... it approaches the pooling of sovereignty by the UK at EU level exclusively as though it amounts to the transfer of power to an alien body, rather than the sharing of responsibilities with partners ...”[24]

This has not ceased feelings of trepidation from Eurosceptical wings of Cameron's party, which still act in a great deal of Thatcherite vigour even after his skilful attempts to modernise and realign it, though the government has attempted to soften its anti-European rhetoric. This coalition is a new, untested environment for political Euroscepticism with numerous possible consequences.

Britain's European Future

To this date, the United Kingdom has remained a fundamental part of the European Union. There are no significant signs that this will change in the near future, yet with so much Eurosceptic sentiment amongst its politics and people, British EU withdrawal is not an action that is at all fantasy. While it is not feasible that a mainstream party would propose fully departing the EU on an electoral platform, the robust anti-EU policy from a number of parties which make up a major proportion of vote share – Conservative, Labour, UKIP and (worryingly) BNP – shows voter intention in this area. Europe has been a decisive subject in the history of British politics and will be so in its future. Norman Lamont (a strong sceptic of Europe) who was Chancellor of the Exchequer for a period under John Major writes:

“... the question of Britain's membership of the EU has not been settled for all time; it is provisional, not unconditional. Those who tell you otherwise cannot bind the British people or history ... General de Gaulle had good reason to veto Britain's ... attempts to join the community. He had a clear understanding of the tensions between Britain's interests and those of the Community.”[25]

Decades on, tension between the UK and the European Community has not seriously eased. Whether belonging to the EU is beneficial or damaging to Britain is a matter of opinion. It is fact, however, that Euroscepticism is not a belief that will lose its discipleship in Britain soon. This will cause ongoing British governments to set their own mandates for Europe on a similar sceptical, protectionist path to those previous.

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