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The impact of 40 years of the UK's membership of the EU on British politics

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In 1974, Harold Wilson, leader of a divided Labour party in opposition and with an eye on maintaining party unity, criticised the terms Prime Minister Heath had obtained for British membership of the EEC and promised to renegotiate them and then organise a referendum to approve the new settlement – which was duly carried out in 1975. As we celebrate the fortieth anniversary of UK entry in the EC, the Prime Minister and leader of an equally divided Conservative party, though much more anti-European on the whole, is promising to negotiate the repatriation of a number of EU policies to the UK and to organise a referendum on the results of these negociations half-way through the next Parliament (if re-elected), again to maintain party unity and gain electoral advantage at the next election. It looks as if we have come full circle, as if nothing has changed in the British debate about Europe in spite of the institutional and policy changes that have taken place in the EU and in Britain in the last four decades. This suggests a striking continuity in the British political system's response to European integration, characterised by internal divisions and widespread popular and media unease and distrust towards the European project.

Indeed, the starting point for this analysis is the tension between 'euroscepticism' and 'Europeanisation', two apparently contradictory developments which have been taking place in the UK as a result of EC/EU membership. 'Euroscepticism' is understood in the now classical sense described by Szscerbiak & Taggart, referring to a range of critical attitudes towards the process or outcome of European integration. Their distinction between 'soft' eurosceptics, who are worried about some aspects of this process, and 'hard' ones who reject the whole principle of European unity, is still relevant to describe party attitudes and divisions in the UK, at least as a starting point (Szscerbiak & Taggart 2008). Similarly, Ladrech's definition of 'Europeanisation' as 'an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making' is helpful (1994 : 69).

Here I mean to explore the two-way influence of membership of the EU on the British polity, politics and policy as well as the influence of Britain on developments in the EU. My argument, drawing from work by David Allen (1998) and Bulmer and Burch (2009) is that in contrast to the successful Europeanisation of the national government system (polity) and successful 'bottom-up' influence on EU-level policies, British politics still remains constrained by a pervasive, though at times more or less salient, ideological euroscepticism largely disconnected from the reality of British power and interests.

In the first section, I will briefly recall the successful adaptation of British state structures to the demands created by membership of the EC/EU as well as the sometimes overlooked success of British governments in exporting their national preferences to Brussels. The second section will focus on the depth of inter and intra-party divisions, which still, I will argue, make the UK exceptional in spite of the growth of euroscepticism in all member states. The third section will examine the

differentiated Europeanisation of the main political parties in Britain. Finally, in the last section I will map the different explanations put forward to explain the continuing gap between Europeanisation and euroscepticism.

1. The two-way Europeanisation of domestic structures

At the systemic level, Europeanisation has taken place both in the British executive and legislative arenas. Research has shown a successful adaptation of British administrative structures and policy-making to membership of the EC/EU. In their seminal work, Bulmer and Burch identified an adaptative trend in Whitehall going back to the 1960s, before accession, in parallel with the reform of the Foreign Office and the absorption of the Commonwealth Office. They describe the result as a well-coordinated and efficient organisation around the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Office and the European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office. Hussein Kassim has also stressed the important role of the British representation in Brussels, UKREP, in producing a coherent view in the day-to-day negociations taking place there (Kassim 2001). Other Departments, especially the Treasury, Home Office, Ministry of Defence and DEFRA are also drawn in the policy-making process when needed. An important new development has been devolution to Scotland and Wales from 1999. The mechanism has been adapted so that specific Scottish or Welsh needs could be accommodated within the British policy-making process in London and then defended in Brussels, even if the SNP government in Edinburgh sometimes complain about not being adequately represented in Brussels in order to justify the need for Scottish independence (Salmond 2011). Thus far no difference between London and Edinburgh, even under SNP administration, has resulted in a crisis over European policy. In contrast other countries, like Germany, have found it more difficult to speak with one voice in Brussels (Menon & Wright 1998; Bulmer & Burch 2009: chap. 5; Ladrech 2010:59).

The parliamentary system has also been transformed in the last decades in order to process European legislation. The two select committees, the European Scrutiny Committee in the House of Commons and the European Union Committee in the House of Lords, provide reports on documents received from Brussels, encourage debate and scrutinise the different policy areas (Mannin 2010 : 105). The number of documents involved is such that effective scrutiny cannot always take place, but the difficulties faced by different governments with their backbenchers and parliamentary rebellions in the early 1990s and since 2010 testify in a way to an efficient strutural adaptation of Westminster to membership of the EU (Allen 2005 : 134).

Similarly, absorption of EU law into British legislation has also been relatively easy, at least at the judicial level (Allen 2005: 133). Political debates about, for example the European Court of Human Right, (though unrelated to the EU) have become fierce in the last few years, with Conservative MPs complaining about the 'diktats' of the Court on issues like prisoners' voting rights. But in purely legal terms, it has not been problematic. As is well-known by now, Britain has a positive record of implementation of EU directives, much better than the French for instance (Menon & Wright 1998 : 60). UK governments often talk tough on EU matters, but usually act in compliance with Brussels in everyday relations, especially when away from the media glare.

So the 'top-down' Europeanisation of the British polity has taken place smoothly and effectively. The same is true of the 'bottom-up' influence of the UK governments on EU objectives and policies, including what Börzel calls 'pace-setting', where preferred domestic policies are submitted to and subsequently adopted by other member-states (Börzel 2002 : 197). Indeed British governments have been much more adept than often acknowledged in the domestic political debate at shaping the EU in a way compatible with perceived British national interest– and not just under Tony Blair, who explicitly stated this as a goal for his government (Featherstone 1999 **p?**). Before 1997, Conservative governments shared their preferences for a single market and liberalisation with a number of countries, including Germany, but were also effective in their lobbying of EC institutions in order to achieve their aims (Menon & Wright 1998: 59). Completion of the single market was an objective that Britain got accepted by the Commission as well as by other member states. Enlargement to Eastern, Central and Southern Europe is another example which British diplomats pushed successfully in Brussels from the end of the cold war onwards, sometimes in the face of resistance from other large member states. Cooperation in the field of foreign policy was also encouraged by London very early on, and developments – however limited – in the field of European defence after 1998 could not have taken place without the British engagement offered by Tony Blair.

These achievements, going back to the 1980s, show a successful Europeanisation of the administrative and institutional structure, on a par and sometimes better than other, apparently less 'awkward' member states. The contrast with the divisive nature of the debate on European integration on the domestic political front is all the more striking.

2. Enduring Euroscepticism

Although the EU seldom rates high in voters' priorities, the EU remains one of the most disruptive issues for mainstream political parties in the UK, with the possible exception of the Liberals/Liberal Democrats. As has been well documented, the unity of both the Conservative and Labour parties was challenged at different times by the widely differing views their members and leaders over European integration (Baker & Seawright 1998, George 1998, Gowland & Turner 2000, Young 1998, Smith 2012). Labour was most anti-European and divided on the issue in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s: Wilson's referendum pledge was more about papering over these divisions than anything else. Following the 1979 general election defeat, Michael Foot promised to withdraw from the EC (viewed as a 'capitalist ramp') in the 1983 party manifesto, which represented the nadir in the party's attitude to European integration. Prior to that, the party split of 1981 and the linked creation of the SDP were also partly a result of the leadership drift towards anti-Europeanism which was rejected by the centre-right of the party, largely accounting for why the party stayed in the electoral wilderness throughout the 1980s. Change came gradually between 1983 and 1987 and accelerated after the party's third general election defeat, when the European issue was included in a general reappraisal of the party policies in an attempt to make it electable again. Only then was the European single market and foreign policy cooperation accepted and a new social agenda looked at favourably in the party, leading to more unity (Featherstone 1999, Baker et al. 1996).

The Conservative party was also divided in the 1960s and 1970s, this time between a majority favourable to membership for economic reasons and a minority opposed to it on sovereignty grounds, led by the likes of Enoch Powell. But even the europhiles seemed uninterested in the political dimension of the European project, with the possible exception of Edward Heath. The

argument was mostly utilitarian, about the benefits the British economy would enjoy thanks to the common market. In the mid to late 1980s the two party lines crossed as Labour gradually moved to a more positive view of membership while a number of Conservatives became outright 'eurosceptics' (the word appearing at this time) as they felt Europe was moving away from the original project with its new plans for monetary and political unions. This led to deepening tensions over Europe within the party, with direct consequences over the governments of the country (Forster 2002, Baker et al. 1994). Margaret Thatcher's downfall in 1990 was in part a result of divisions over, amongst others, membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the EC and John Major's leadership was continuously challenged by the highly vocal eurosceptic minority in his party between 1992 and 1997, jeopardising his ability to govern to an unprecedented degree – such that he felt compelled to resign as party leader and force a leadership contest in 1995 to attempt to re-establish his authority.

Another disruptive effect of the EU for the British party system was to prompt the creation of new single-issue parties (at least at first). The Referendum Party was created by James Goldsmith to fight the 1997 general election demanding a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. Although it collapsed soon afterwards, its stance was taken over by the right wing populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which campaigns both for a withdrawal from the EU and strict limits on immigration. Although none of these parties has ever won a seat in a general election due to the First Past the Post electoral system, they have been seen as threats by the Conservative party, from which many of their voters originate. UKIP has also been doing increasingly well in the European elections held under proportional representation (13 seats won in 2009). In the Autumn of 2012, as controversy over membership of the EU grew, opinion polls gave up to 10% of the votes to UKIP, possibly enough to once again deprive the Conservative party of a majority in the next general election (Curtice 2012).

The changing views and continuing discord illustrate the lack of what David Allen called in 2005 'a lasting permissive consensus for the policies towards the EU' on the British political scene (Allen 2005 : 127). Today the landscape is both similar and different. Europe is once again a difficult issue for the Coalition government and arguably for Labour too. The main difference with the previous decades is that the Conservative party, almost uniquely in Europe for a mainstream centre-right party, has become much more radically eurosceptic. What used to be a minority view has become the norm and the europhile wing of the party has dwindled to less than half-a-dozen MPs. As a result, the traditional distinction between 'hard' eurosceptics who want to leave the EU and 'soft' eurosceptics who are unhappy with some aspects of European policies is no longer sufficient to describe the current state of the party (Szscerbiak & Taggart 2008).

In our on-going research, David Baker and I suggest we add a third category between the fundamentalists (hard eurosceptics) and pragmatists (soft eurosceptics), which we call the 'radical renegociators' (Baker & Schnapper 2013). Their view is that Britain's position in the EU needs to be fundamentally altered to focus on the single market and international trade policies, leaving the eurozone to integrate further should its members wish to. They insist on a repatriation of powers to the national level, with a view to transform the EU into an à la carte union. The Conservative parliamentary group after the 2010 general election is composed of a majority of MPs favourable to such repatriation, with a sizable minority of between 80 and 100 MPs in favour of withdrawal. A further sub-division among the renegociators can be made between those who think that withdrawal from the EU if a more favourable settlement cannot be reached would be the best

solution and those who do not (*The Economist*, 19 January 2013). In the context of the crisis in the eurozone, these renewed divisions have led once again to a disruptive pressure being exercised on the leader, David Cameron, himself a radical renegociator eurosceptic, as well as tensions with the Liberal Democrats in the coalition government. After two negative votes in Parliament in 2011 and 2012 (on an immediate referendum and on the EU budget) Cameron has finally decided on a policy largely designed to unify his party and bolster his leadership while not jeopardising British membership in the short term, expressed in a speech delivered in London on 23 January 2013. In this he pledged to undertake negociations with European partners to improve competitiveness and flexibility in the EU. This would include a repatriation of some EU policies to the UK (he mentioned social affairs, crime and the environment) to be then approved by the British people in a referendum half-way through the next Parliament (Cameron 2013). Hailed by the eurosceptics, and from this point of view politically successful, this speech bought time for the party leader but could well backfire rapidly, if the other member states refuse to play the game of renegociations or if Cameron only obtains cosmetic changes insufficient to please his backbenchers as seems likely.

The Labour party finds itself in a different situation today. It is much less divided than in the past and has reduced the ideological gap with its sister parties in continental Europe, which limits the extent of the disruption (Featherstone 1999). After ten years of strong engagement in Europe under Tony Blair, though with mixed results (Smith 2005), the party under Gordon Brown then Ed Miliband has reverted to a lukewarm Europhile position, where pro-European declarations are mingled with a more critical appraisal of the EU's achievements and failures in a context of economic crisis and negative public opinion.

The rhetoric of Douglas Alexander, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, is critical of the euro, of the EU budget, advocating, like the government, an extension of the single market to energy and the digital and also wanting more powers for national parliaments. This is in part due to the crisis in the eurozone and the negative reactions of British media and public opinion to what is often described in the British press as the failure of the single currency project. Recently Alexander argued in favour of a flexible or multi-speed (as opposed to à la carte like Cameron) Europe, rather similar to what it already is (Alexander 2013). Ed Miliband has so far resisted powerful pressures from the eurosceptic elements in the media and Conservative propaganda to promise a referendum after the next general election, although he will probably come under some pressure from some of his backbenchers and members of his shadow Cabinet to match Cameron's pledge as the next election approaches. Thus the main difference between the two party leadership's stance towards the EU, lies less in their definition of British interests than in their attitude towards dealing with Brussels and rhetoric towards the EU.

3. Differentiated Europeanisation

The Europeanisation of British parties is therefore more differentiated now than it was in 1973. Labour has become more Europeanised in its ideology and structure than the Conservative party. In 1979 the party had refused to sign the EC Socialist parties' manifesto. With its gradual conversion to European integration in the 1990s partly as a response to Thatcherian neo-liberal economics and Jacques Delors's embrace of European social policy, Labour has been ideologically and socially drawn towards mainstream European social democratic parties, especially in the European Parliament

where it plays an active role in the Socialist group – even if Blair's 'Third Way' did not always chime with the vision of continental socialists. The introduction of the minimum wage, independence to the Bank of England or the Human Rights Act voted to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights in English law under the Blair governments testify to the rapprochement between Labour and the continent. Labour MEPs are linked to decision making in the party through the election of the party leader and representation in the National Executive Committee. Coordination between the national and European branches is thus ensured. The influence that MEPs are able to exercise should nevertheless be qualified since there is also a distinct lack of interest for what the European Parliament does in national party politics with national politicians still considering it as largely irrelevant in spite of the notable increase in its powers in the last twenty years (Carter & Ladrech 2007).

In contrast, the Europeanisation of the Conservative party seems to have failed completely on both counts. In terms of organisation, there has been less adaptation to Europe than Labour in the sense that few people work on European matters at party headquarters and the input of MEPs into policy making is limited (Carter & Ladrech 2007 : 65-66). More importantly, the party is now one of the very few mainstream centre-right eurosceptic parties in the EU. John Major had taken Conservative members of the European Parliament (MEPs) into the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group in 1992, though with an associate status. In 2005 David Cameron, then candidate for the leadership of the party, promised he would remove MEPs from the EPP group and create a new, eurosceptic one because the EPP was too 'federalist' – which he did after the 2009 European elections, creating the obscure European Conservatives and Reformists group with a handful of small parties, mostly from the Czech Republic and Poland. As a result of purely domestic considerations, Cameron does not attend the EPP leaders' meetings before the European Councils, missing opportunities to shape the European agenda and influence partners whilst claiming to defend British interests in Europe. Such counter-productive behaviour is a conspicuous result of the ideological drift to the right in Conservative party politics caused by the European issue and the fact that the fundamentalist eurosceptic elements are largely dictating party policy on this issue.

4. Why such a gap?

The continuing failure to Europeanise party politics in Britain has been explained by a number of factors. Historians have stressed the gap between the political and economic situation in which Britain found itself in 1945 and that of its continental neighbours in order to explain the distinct lack of enthusiasm for European integration (George 1998, Young 1998). The self-perception by political elites was that of a great power with global ambitions and a special relationship with the USA which did not require any economic, let alone political, entanglement in Europe. The decision to apply for membership in 1961 was a result of recognition of relative economic decline rather than a positive project for the future development of the British state. In this view, British perceptions of European integration have never recovered from this inauspicious start and the current economic crisis centred on the Eurozone removes the only convincing argument in favour of integration in the past, namely the benefits it was to bring to the UK economy through mutual growth and development.

Another line of argument points to the specific features of the British political system in shaping the political debate about Europe. Aspinwall in particular stressed the importance of the First-Past-the-

Post electoral system, which eliminates small parties from parliamentary representation and forces big ones to encompass a variety of views within their ranks. Eurosceptic views, instead of being pushed to the fringes of the political system as in many other member states, have to be accommodated within the 'broad church' of mainstream parties (Aspinwall 2004). This has not been entirely successful, as the emergence of UKIP shows, but remains broadly true today.

A more constructivist view, which I share, points to the legacy of nation-building in the UK, where Britishness was constructed around the notions of parliamentary sovereignty and free trade and in opposition to the continent (Colley 1992, Gifford 2008). The construction of British identity took place through identifying Europe as 'the other', which remains a prevalent feeling among the population and British elites today. The political dimension of the European project is then seen as undermining the nation by fatally weakening the direct link between voters and their representatives – eroding the ancient sovereignty of the British people and their ability to govern themselves. Today issues of democratic legitimacy, seen as lacking in the process of European integration, and unnecessary regulation preventing the British economy from enjoying the supposed benefits of international trade, resonate with public opinion and have become central to Conservative populist discourse (Mannin 2010 : 162).

In comparison with other member states, the British – and especially the English – have remained largely immune to feelings of sharing a European identity. Whereas a sizable proportion of, say, French people define themselves as both French and European, the proportion of British people defining themselves as British and European has remained consistently small (Eurobarometer 2011, Ichijo 2003). Europe remains the other, and rules and regulations emanating from Brussels are therefore considered as an imposition. In other words, 'affective support' for integration, as defined by Lindberg and Scheingold, and the socialization predicted by Inglehart in the same book have remained extremely limited in Britain (Lindberg & Scheingold 1970). Attitudes are slightly different in Scotland, where Europe has been more popular since the 1990s, although the difference has sometimes been exaggerated. This seems to confirm Ben Wellings' hypothesis that euroscepticism has become the main dimension of contemporary English nationalism, with its source both in a historical narrative about Britain and the Empire and more recently in Thatcher's neo-liberal individualism (Wellings 2012).

The dominant narrative in the British media and in the political debate in general remains one where the EU represents a threat to British parliamentary sovereignty and economic identity, defined in hyperglobalist and open seas terms (Baker *et* al 2002, Daddow 2012). Pro-Europeans have only feebly attempted to fight this negative perception and often resorted to eurosceptic keywords even when they were trying to make a positive case for Europe. Matthew Broad and Oliver Daddow have shown how the Labour discourse since the 1960s has been constantly defensive, about what European integration should not be, rather than articulating a positive vision of a British future in the Union. They identify some permanent features of Labour discourse from Hugh Gaitskell to Gordon Brown, including the rejection of federalism coupled with the defence of British national interests, the use of 'red lines' or conditions for British engagement and insistence on the separateness between Britain, an outward-looking trading nation, and an inward-looking and sometimes protectionist Europe (Broad & Daddow 2010). The same is true of the Liberal Democrats, who having been the most pro-European mainstream party in the UK for decades, removed the federal reference from their manifesto in 1997 – well before they entered a coalition with the

Conservatives, itself a significant sign that pro-Europeanism comes second to British concerns (Schnapper 2010). As the financial and economic crisis developed, they also ruled out adopting the euro, which they had advocated in the past (Clegg 2012). As a consequence of this it has become extremely difficult to air a positive discourse about Europe in the UK today, especially with a print media overwhelmingly eurosceptic in varying degrees, joined by Murdoch's Sky TV promoted brand of euroscepticism.

Conclusion

The gap between successful Europeanisation and eurosceptic discourse, already identified in the 1990s, has widened since, especially in the Conservative party. As the political discourses in all European member states are often based on a utilitarian view of Europe, the worsening economic context caused by the Eurozone crisis explains to some extent the increasingly negative view of the EU held by UK public opinion and conveyed by some political parties and the press. If Europe is only about improving the national economies and promoting growth, its popularity will inevitably suffer in times of economic crisis (as happens in domestic politics to governments in power under such conditions). Eurobarometer surveys have shown a clear correlation, in all member states, between support for the EU and the state of the economy (Mahler et al. 1995). The sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone has reinforced this trend as the EU has come to be seen by many as directly responsible for the economic difficulties.

But the immediate effect of the current economic climate has reinforced pre-existing longer-term trends, including a political culture in which Europe is framed as the other, alien to British traditions and identity (unlike the USA), whether it is on the issue of loss of parliamentary sovereignty or free trade and protecting City of London. This tradition has not been modified in the recent decades by political actors, who have made no sustained effort to change public attitudes to European integration, often pandering to eurosceptic opinion in parliament, the media and sections of the electorate as the easiest path – a costly intellectual laziness.

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