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The People Against Europe: the Eurosceptic Challenge to the UK's Coalition Government

Abstract

This article approaches Euroscepticism as central to a contemporary dynamic of government and opposition. Populist Eurosceptic mobilizations exemplify opposition to depoliticized forms of political rule and demonstrate the tight political coupling of the national and the European. In the case of the United Kingdom, a depoliticized post-imperial governing approach to European integration has proved highly contested. From this perspective, the article examines the recent politics of Europe under the coalition government (from 2010 to 2013) as a period of Eurosceptic mobilization that successfully challenges European policy. What on the surface appears to be a problem of party management for the conservative leadership, is more accurately understood as a broader conflict between government and a populist Eurosceptic opposition. The outcome of this conflict is to further embed hard Euroscepticism within British politics to the point where maintaining governing autonomy on Europe is severely constrained, if not unfeasible.

In the turbulent history of the UK's relationship with the process of European integration, the period 2010 to 2013 may well be viewed as a turning point. For a short period, accommodating to an enlarged, post-Lisbon European Union (EU) appeared to be possible under the newly elected Coalition government. While the Conservative party had hardened its position on the EU in opposition including ruling out Euro membership indefinitely, the Cameron leadership opted for a pragmatic approach to European policy that for the most part played down the issue adopting a 'best not mentioned' strategy (Bale 2006, p. 388). The virulence of Euroscepticism, and the divisiveness of Europe¹ as an issue, was increasingly viewed as a barrier to widening the party's electoral appeal. The decision by the Conservative leadership not to pursue a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty was crucial in this respect as it denied an opportunity for Eurosceptics to mobilise and once again put Europe centre stage. Despite the divisions on the EU, the Coalition appeared to have achieved a working compromise.

Pragmatism, however, was never likely to satisfy those Eurosceptic MPs, which now included many of the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs, for whom Euroscepticism was a matter of political faith. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the context of a fragile governing coalition established during a major crisis for the Eurozone, Europe once again emerged as a significant fault-line in UK politics yet the extent and speed with which this occurred could not have been predicted. Notably, the rise of UKIP brought to the fore a right-wing anti-establishment party resolutely opposed to any compromise with a governing position that continued to support British EU membership. The impact of this Eurosceptic mobilisation was evident when in January 2013 David Cameron outlined his vision of a reformed UK relationship with the EU and conceded the principle of a referendum on membership. While dependent on the Conservative party winning a general election 2015, Cameron signalled a hardening of Euroscepticism on the part of a significant section of the political class and a

¹In this article 'Europe' encompasses the European Union and the processes of European integration. It is consistent with the British Eurosceptic vernacular and its usage was felt to contribute to the setting out of these arguments and positions.

new phase in the UK's relation with, and within, the EU. This was a clear victory for British Eurosceptics.

Recent developments therefore confirm the extent to which Euroscepticism has broad and significant implications for contemporary British politics. The complex but persistent ways in which it impacts on UK political parties, as well the extent to which it manifests in diverse ways across the media and civil society, points to a political phenomenon that is central to the contemporary dynamic of government and opposition. The preliminary aim of this article is to demonstrate that British Euroscepticism is most usefully conceived as a systemic feature of British politics, not reducible to specific actors or ideologies, and increasingly constitutive of the political order. In so doing it is necessary to reconnect British Euroscepticism to the wider and deeper processes and dynamics that underlie political change in European liberal democracies, and the structural tensions in the system of representation. From this perspective, this article argues that contemporary Euroscepticism manifests in the populist opposition to problematic and depoliticised governing positions on Europe. In the case of the UK, an established post-imperial governing approach towards Europe has been contested by Eurosceptic mobilisations that privilege exclusive conceptions of political identity and national sovereignty. This government-opposition dynamic is substantiated through a discussion of the recent European trials and tribulations of the Conservative led Coalition government (2010-2013). While the full implications of recent developments remains to be seen, the argument here demonstrates the effectiveness of a right-wing Eurosceptic movement in determining the political agenda and changing the direction of British European policy.

Systemic Euroscepticism

In their mapping of the configuration of Eurosceptic politics, Alex Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart made their well known distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism (2008a, p. 7-8; 2008b, p. 247-248). They conceive of hard Euroscepticism as principled opposition to the integrationist project, whether opposed to its institutional and constitutional foundations or to its overarching policy agenda. Soft Euroscepticism, meanwhile, is concerned with a more qualified opposition that rejects and criticises specific policies, or gives prominence to national concerns and interests in opposition to integration (2008a p. 7-8). While soft Euroscepticism may include contestation of the EU as an ongoing project of integration, hard Euroscepticism would also include those who may nominally support it but wish to see a

fundamental redrawing of the terms of their country's membership (p. 8). This framework has been used productively to provide a comparative analysis of the different kinds of Euroscepticism within political systems and how it impacts upon party competition (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008a). A notable conclusion from this research has been the extent to which the adoption of a Eurosceptic position by a political party is determined by party competition and electoral strategies. Hence, its association with those who occupy a marginal position within European party systems as it enables them to differentiate themselves from pro-European cartel parties that dominate government (Taggart, 1998 p. 384).

A useful starting point is to consider how British Euroscepticism fits into this framework. In terms of the hard/soft distinction, what is increasingly evident is the sheer range of positions and opinions as well as their fluidity, whether within political parties or public opinion. For instance, recent analyses of the Conservative party have identified a spectrum of Eurosceptic views from outright withdrawal to those who accept the status quo but object to further integration (Lynch and Whitaker, 2012a). In addition, continued support for UK membership of the EU has for some become highly conditional with high profile politicians, such as the former Chancellor Nigel Lawson, undergoing a *volte face* on the issue. Putting this complexity to one side, what has been comparatively distinctive has been the overall prevalence of Euroscepticism within mainstream British party politics, particularly the post-Thatcher Conservative party (Mair, 2000 p. 35; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008a p. 10; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013 p. 14). To explain this authors have turned to the peculiarities of the Westminster model (Aspinwall, 2000; Usherwood, 2002). For instance, the 'First Past The Post' electoral system is seen to intensify party competition making it harder to achieve cross-party consensus on Europe. Moreover, small majorities give considerable power to backbench MPs that increase the likelihood of factionalism, put pressure on the leadership to adopt a harder Eurosceptic position and generally make party management difficult. Additional explanations point to the distinctive ideological orientations of British political parties, most notably the hyperglobalism of the Conservative party which is seen to distinguish it from its European counterparts (Baker, Gamble and Seawright, 2002, p. 421). However, the exceptionalness of British politics can be overstated when we consider the extent to which Euroscepticism has now entered into the politics of government-opposition across, and within, the European Union (Mudde, 2012; Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2013, Usherwood and Startin 2013). As Simon Usherwood and Nick Startin (2013, p. 2) have persuasively argued, Euroscepticism has become such a persistent and embedded phenomenon at both the national

and European levels that it requires a fundamental shift in our terms of reference. Current developments therefore underline the importance of viewing British Euroscepticism from *within* a wider Eurosceptic dynamic rather than as an outlier case.

The extensiveness of contemporary Euroscepticism has been matched by the academic response, which has seen the establishment of the area as a distinct field of study within mainstream political science. Cas Mudde (2012) has summarised current approaches and compared and contrasted the two dominant ‘Schools’ of research: Sussex and North Carolina². Notwithstanding the differences between the two Schools, Mudde’s article illustrates the extent to which the study of Euroscepticism has become focused on methodological issues and, implicitly, prioritises conceptual frameworks that stress political agency, albeit within certain institutional constraints. From the perspective of this article, such approaches understate the extent to which there are systemic incompatibilities underlying political motivations and behaviours and that Euroscepticism is a critical feature of European politics. The aim therefore is to address the issue of British Euroscepticism from the perspective of both structure and agency.

In viewing Euroscepticism from the perspective of structural integration, the work of Peter Mair (2000; 2006; 2007; 2009) has a particular resonance as it locates it within a profound shift in the nature of government and opposition in liberal democracies that is increasingly characterised by institutional contradictions. According to Mair, two systemic facets of modern mass democracy have become disaggregated in both theory and practice: that is constitutional government by elites *for* ‘the People’ and popular participation *by* ‘the People’ in a competitive party system (2006, p. 29). At the centre of this has been the declining significance of the political party and the erosion of its democratic role and authority. While the causes of this are multiple and complex, Mair summarises these trends as a process of mutual withdrawal as citizens retreat into private life and *ad-hoc* forms of representation while elites look to define themselves primarily in relation to public office (2006, p. 33). Fundamental to the latter is depoliticisation: a deeply problematic yet ever more present mode of political rule in European liberal democracies and particularly associated with the EU. In the process of European integration, the traditional role of the political party concerned with

² The Sussex School stems from the work of Paul Taggart and Alex Szczerbiak while the North Carolina School is associated with Lisbet Hooghe, Gary Marks and Leonard Ray. If the Sussex School has focused on detailed national case studies and definitional refinements, the North Carolina School has stressed broad ideological positions and their connection to parties and public opinion across Europe. Initially, the latter highlighted a left/right socio-economic divide on European integration but this was soon eclipsed by a focus on political identities and their GAL (green/alternative/libertarian) versus TAN (traditionalism/authority/nationalism) classification (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 16).

ensuring that ‘the People’ are able to influence and participate in government has been particularly truncated: ‘a matter for governing politicians and their bureaucracies; it is not something that requires active engagement of, or consultation with, the electorate at large’ (2000, p. 28-29). On this view Europeanisation has depoliticised national politics along two interrelated lines: first, it limits the capacity of governments to engage in autonomous policy making as key decisions are increasingly taken at the European level; second, because European issues are for the most part kept out of national politics, citizens are disengaged from the day to day business of transnational politics. Hence, a *permissive consensus* was seen to exist in Europe characterised by insulated elites engaged in negotiations and decision-making that was considered to be of low salience for the general public and of little direct relevance to national political competition (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

There is therefore a systemic tension or contradiction between the demands of representative democracy to generate legitimation and the institutional forms that have historically carried out this function. This is particularly marked at the EU level where programmes of political reform have proved inadequate in addressing the so-called democratic deficit. Moreover, as EU policy contestation has not become normalised within national polities, anti-system opposition becomes more likely: ‘to be critical of the policies promulgated by Brussels is therefore to be critical of the polity’ (Mair 2007, p. 7). In this sense, there is a close link between Euroscepticism and a more generalised scepticism about modern politics and ‘to mobilize against the government in this sense is also to mobilize against Europe, since Europe is, par excellence, the business of government’ (Mair 2009, p. 16). On this argument Euroscepticism is not only indicative of wider developments but increasingly exemplifies them as Europe becomes so central to the business of contemporary governments. Of particular significance is Mair’s contention that populism characterises the new opposition to depoliticised government as political representatives divide between those who claim to offer responsible government for ‘the People’ and those who claim to be directly responsive to the will of ‘the People’ (2009, p. 17). Populism has emerged as a broad based yet distinctive ideology, not reducible to left or right, that constitutes an homogeneous sovereign people in opposition to elites and ‘others’ who pose a fundamental threat to the rights, beliefs and values of ‘the People’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). While populists may only play a limited role in government, they are successful in making political identity a fundamental public issue. In this context, the ‘permissive consensus’ on European integration is replaced

by a 'constraining dissensus' in which constructions of exclusive political identities become the determining factor (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; 2007; 2009). However, while populist Euroscepticism may in one sense politicise integration, this is paradoxical as its constructions of 'the People' and 'othering' of the EU closes down political dialogue, and further distances citizens from the everyday policy agendas of European institutions.

It is therefore from the perspective of the competing institutional dynamics of political rule by and for 'the People', conceived in terms of the tension between depoliticisation and populism, that Euroscepticism exhibits systemic properties. Moreover, rather than treating state strategic objectives and domestic politics as separate arenas of analysis, it places centre stage the conflict between them and the struggles for reconciliation that ensue (Rosamond and Wincott 2006, 5). Of particular importance in this respect is the complex interpenetration of the domestic with the European that has become evident as the two are ever more tightly coupled (Hooghe and Marks, 2009 p. 14). The UK's trajectory exhibits an intense form of Eurosceptic politics produced by the interaction between integration, state strategies and domestic politics that demonstrates the importance of interrogating national variations. This systemic dynamic of depoliticisation and populism takes on a particular meaning when explored in relation to the deeply embedded orientations of the British state.

The UK and Europe: governing for 'the People'

In the case of the UK, it is important to recognise how accommodation to Europe has occurred within existing traditions of depoliticised rule structurally embedded within governing institutions. Buller (2000) has identified depoliticisation with underlying assumptions concerning the problems and methods for governing the UK that are distinguishable from, albeit interconnected with, party ideologies and government policies. The defining feature of this *governing code* has been the pursuit of autonomy which simply meant maintaining freedom from societal forces in order to have the authority to carry out effective and competent government. Implicit within this basic definition is the historical complexity of British modern government characterised by multi-territorial political and economic interests and pressures. In this context, being able to autonomously exercise executive power is considered to be the essence of British political authority. There are two areas which stand out and demonstrate how this code operates as an institutionalised norm.

First, the ideology of parliamentary sovereignty has acted to de-legitimise alternative expressions of interests while fusing executive and legislative power through the doctrine of the Crown-in-Parliament. Second, a strict separation between the political and the economic developed during the 19th and 20th century whereby politicians agreed not to intervene or constrain the freedom of business and finance to pursue their private economic interests (Buller and Flinders, 2005, p. 532). Central to this has been the maintenance of an open economy by the institutions of high finance. Hence the governing code has sort to construe the national interest in terms of the external disciplines of the market hence limiting domestic expectations and insulating governments from societal pressures.

Overall, the British governing code has asserted a depoliticised approach to politics that is ideologically legitimated in terms of its effectiveness for ‘the People’ rather than its participation by ‘the People’. While membership of the European Economic Community was often seen to represent a radical departure for the UK, it was in fact consistent with a conservative approach to government. In this regard, the perceived economic benefits have been particularly associated with its role in exposing the domestic economy to external disciplines. While this has at times led British governments to Europeanise monetary policy, it is more evident in the consistent belief that a highly integrated, competitive European market acts as a force for socio-economic good. In the run up to membership, what was emphasised in the official documents were the advantages of the dynamic effects on the economy that would offset any negative consequences (Haack, 1972, p.143). The economic case for membership was increasingly expressed in terms of a competitiveness discourse which claimed that exposure to the pressures of new markets would help modernise the UK economy. Furthermore the strategic benefits for finance were already clearly evident with London, according to *The Economist*, emerging as the ‘financial growth pole of Europe’ (cited in Nairn, 1973, p. 28). At the point at which attempts to impose domestic reforms on the British economy had proved impossible, Europe entered as an external alternative to programmes of national modernisation that had proved chronically unsuccessful. Thereafter, the single market was integral to a national neo-liberal approach to transnational economic governance; an important external constraint on governments forcing them to engage in policy competition to create environments favourable to mobile capital. Notwithstanding the significant tensions over the Europeanisation of monetary policy, Europe’s political economy had become an established element of the UK governing code.

The incorporation of Europe into economic governance was compatible with shifting ideas of governing autonomy. In a post-imperial context, in which the UK's influence and role in the world was in chronic decline, established conceptions of governing autonomy had to be reformed to accommodate the reality of interdependence (Buller, 2006, p. 398-399). Pro-European elites were at the forefront of a post-imperial reformulation of traditional conceptions of sovereignty, as a constitutional property articulating national power and independence, and proposed that sovereignty should be viewed pragmatically as a state's capacity to exert its influence (*inter alia* Howe, 1990). It therefore follows that the UK's influence is most effectively realised in cooperation with other states within a European institutional framework. Nevertheless this was also aligned with the governing code: the national interest remains at its core and the British constitution provides elites with the flexibility to exercise autonomy and exert power in foreign affairs. This emphasis on governing autonomy also implies that UK governments exercise influence against other states and European institutions in order to realise the British interest. This was given an ideological renovation by New Labour elites who sought to construct a *third way* vision of Britain in Europe. They made the case for the EU on the basis that it was essential for progressive governing in the context of globalisation. Yet, somewhat paradoxically it was also 'a practical question of realpolitik' (Blair, 2011, p. 533); an arena for the pursuit of traditional British national interests. An established UK governing position therefore lends itself to a soft Euroscepticism: a predominantly state-centric Europe must be maintained so that distinctive British objectives can be perceived to be autonomously expressed and achieved. In the case of New Labour, while engaged and committed to the EU, it was also presented as 'out-dated', too bureaucratic and requiring modernisation in line with the British model. Through alliance building and some notable policy successes, Labour elites at times proved able to combine their governing strategy with European integration. All the same, reflecting deep continuities in the governing code, this seemed to depend on 'using Europe as a means by which Britain could act out its pre-ordained leadership role on the world stage' (Daddow, 2011, p. 36).

The governing approach towards Europe should be viewed as analytically separate from any particular party position whilst it may often be aligned with, and legitimated in terms of, party ideologies and values. It has drawn upon a British elite conception of democracy that the executive can and should act in the interests of the people and not be constrained by popular democracy. Nevertheless it is crucially dependent on maintaining the perception that executive autonomy can, and is, being exercised and the national interest realised. This has

proved problematic for both external and internal reasons. First, European integration represents a very different constraint on British elites than other international organisations, as decision making processes are highly complex, unpredictable and include direct legal incursions into national sovereignty. Hence unambiguous policy outcomes that reflect the influence and interests of specific national elites are often difficult to identify. Second, stable conceptions of the British national interest have proved notoriously difficult to achieve in the post-imperial context. It is evident in the declining levels of popular support for mainstream parties and a corresponding rise in the UK of movements and parties that draw upon opposing conceptions of ‘the People’, particularly evident in the rise of separatist nationalisms and devolved polities. In the example of Euroscepticism, this has increasingly taken the form of a populist renaissance in expressions of Anglo-British nationalism in which the English dimension has particularly come to the fore (Wellings, 2012).

While the strategic and economic importance of Europe was an established position across political elites, this was not underpinned by any deeper and wider popular bases of support. In a context of economic crisis and disillusionment with the main parties, significant divisions on the issue had emerged within parliament by the early 1970s. In the debates on membership, Labour MPs seized on public opinion polls that showed increased anti-Europeanism in order to launch a populist defence of ‘the People’ in opposition to the policy of the ‘British establishment’ (Lazer, 1976). In the defence of national sovereignty, leading figures in the Labour party such as Tony Benn and Peter Shore aligned with a small but significant minority of Conservatives led by Enoch Powell. The extraordinary decision by the Wilson government to endorse the populist instrument of a referendum on Europe was a significant concession to this emergent Euroscepticism. It established the principle that Europe was an issue of fundamental national importance that could not be legitimated by the normal mechanisms of the party and electoral system. As a national and populist cause, Europe was viewed as an issue that could speak directly to ‘the People’, as it allowed politicians to express and heighten core values and beliefs in opposition to the ‘otherness’ of Europe and the failures of governing elites. The divisions that erupted in the Labour party over Europe in the 1970s found their parallel in the intensity of the rebellion in the Conservative party during and after the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Euroscepticism became fundamental to protecting the Thatcher legacy yet it was also resolutely populist in its expression with accusations of elite betrayal over Europe, campaigns for a referendum and defence of ‘the People’.

Populist Eurosceptic mobilisations have become an established response to the underlying crises of legitimacy faced by both British mainstream parties. These have occurred when the weaknesses in the British governing position on Europe has been particularly exposed, such as the struggle for membership on acceptable terms and the failure of Conservative governments to halt or influence the drive for Economic and Monetary Union. The dominant response from governing elites to the Eurosceptic challenge has been to treat it as an issue of party management, to marginalise Eurosceptic opponents and to accommodate to a Eurosceptic populism by their defence of the national interest and by extolling the virtues of British leadership in Europe. The key point here is that elites have not sought to establish a strong popular base for Britain's European trajectory but to neutralise the issue within domestic political agendas and to maintain it as a depoliticised element of state strategy. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of Tony Blair who, despite being a self declared pro-European, proved reluctant to make a positive case for Britain's integration into the European Union and to challenge an increasingly entrenched Eurosceptic political culture (Daddow, 2011).

A persistent feature of the British political landscape has been a Eurosceptic movement, albeit fragmented, that mobilises within and beyond parliament on the basis of popular sovereignty and exclusive conceptions of national identity. As such the trajectory of governing positions on Europe occur *in relation* to this opposition and is rendered contingent by chronic contestation, or the threat of contestation. Notably the governing code is increasingly compromised by having to endorse the populist principle of 'the People' as the criterion against which European policy is ultimately judged. In fact, it is possible to argue that in the case of the UK, a constraining dissensus on Europe has been present since the early 1970s. From such a perspective, governing autonomy on Europe requires intense political agency; it must be actively managed and achieved, rather than reproduced as a set of embedded practices and institutionalised norms, and is increasingly punctuated by critical moments and episodes.

The Coalition government and the Eurosceptic challenge

Eurosceptic mobilisations have occurred at particular times when the domestic and European political agendas appear to be closely intertwined and in such a way that governing positions

and strategies are rendered uncertain. In the period between 2010-2013, a constellation of forces created the opportunities for a significant Eurosceptic challenge to the UK's Coalition government's European strategy. A failure of the Conservative party to win a clear victory in the 2010 election weakened the Cameron leadership, leaving many Conservatives disillusioned and critical of the leadership's attempt to moderate the party's Thatcherite trajectory. Meanwhile, the crisis in the Eurozone alongside the pro-integrationist response of European leaders, confirmed to British Eurosceptics that the UK should decouple itself from a project that was, in their view, now a proven economic and political failure. Nevertheless, Eurosceptic mobilisations have not always successfully exploited opportunities and periods of heightened Euroscepticism have been contained by political leaders. What became evident during the current wave was the extent to which this was not the case. The speed and effectiveness of this mobilisation quickly impacted on the governing position, shifting it in a harder Eurosceptic direction.

A central plank of the Conservative party's Eurosceptic policy agenda, the 2010 European Union bill, became the basis for the first Eurosceptic rebellion under the Coalition even though its objective was to demonstrate that the Tory leadership shared 'the rank and file's concern over the salami-slicing of Britain's sovereignty' (*The Telegraph* 2nd January 2011). During the bill's passage the veteran Eurosceptic, Bill Cash, was Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee despite David Cameron's attempt to block the appointment. Cash oversaw a forensic examination of the bill that thoroughly critiqued its claims to 'lock' governments into a referendum on future Treaty changes, and argued that its reaffirmation of parliamentary sovereignty was an insufficient protection against the dominance of European law and its enforcement by 'judicial activism'. In this attack, Cash demonstrated the ability of Eurosceptics to mount sophisticated challenges to government policy. As Forster points out the 'watershed' moment in this respect was Maastricht since when Eurosceptic groupings developed a significantly improved 'capacity to provide autonomous analysis of policy-making, decisions and Treaty outcomes' (2002, 28). Indeed, it was in the wake of the Maastricht debates that Cash founded the European Foundation in order to develop more robust evidence and arguments in the support of the Eurosceptic cause. In general the UK has witnessed a proliferation of Eurosceptic think tanks and policy groups. Some are directly linked to leading Eurosceptics in Westminster such as the influential Bruges Group, while others operate independently such as the research based organisation Open Europe. Although it is predominantly a Conservative initiative, the Fresh Start Project was established in 2011

to work across party lines and with civil society organisations to push forward the case for the repatriation of powers stating that ‘our citizens want more control over their own lives’³. While many of these groupings are dominated by Eurosceptic Conservative MPs and politicians, their ‘political party-ness’ is often obscured by being defined as cross-party and includes involvement of non party political figures, as well as figures from marginal parties (Usherwood, 2002, p. 223). Moreover, their partial externalisation to party is strategically important as they must at times be prepared to openly criticise and mobilise against the leadership because of the fundamental nature of the European issue. While they are neither continuously nor necessarily openly hostile, often looking to influence rather than undermine their leaders, their support is conditional and the European issue defines their relationship with government, even when they themselves may be members of that government.

Cash’s amendments to the EU bill were defeated but saw 27 Conservative backbench MPs rebel against the government, with bitter accusations of bullying by Cameron over the issue. The 2011 EU Act was an initial sign that the Conservative leadership was struggling to manage hard Eurosceptics. Conversely it proved to many Eurosceptics that the leadership could not be trusted on the issue. Hence the potential for Europe to become such a fundamental cause for Eurosceptics that party loyalty could not be guaranteed was already in evidence during the first year of the Coalition government. That populism was central to these developments was demonstrated in October 2011 when the Eurosceptic backbencher David Nuttall secured a Commons vote on a referendum on European membership. This followed the People’s Pledge campaign that achieved 100,000 signatories on the government’s e-petition site and therefore the issue was given parliamentary time under this new initiative in public engagement. While the vote would not have affected government policy directly, a three line whip was imposed on Conservative MPs in a failed attempt to reassert party discipline on Europe. In the end, 81 Conservative MPs defied the whip thus making it the largest rebellion ever by Conservatives on Europe. In defying the party leadership, Eurosceptics claimed legitimacy because ‘the *vast* majority of the British people want a vote in a referendum’ evidenced by petitions and opinion polls (Nuttall, *Hansard*, Vol. 534, col. 46). By June of 2012 a letter to David Cameron from John Baron MP was signed by over 100 Conservative MPs calling for a referendum after the next general election (Baron, 2012). In the autumn reports began to circulate of at least eight Conservative Cabinet

³ www.eufreshstart.org

Ministers who said they would vote for the UK to leave the EU in a referendum (*The New Statesman*, 14th October 2012)⁴.

The referendum campaign was indicative of the extent to which Euroscepticism has been firmly established as a broad-based movement that could not be contained within the parliamentary arena. In this regard Fitzgibbon (2013) has demonstrated how civil society organisations have become experts in mobilising publics on European issues, exploiting political opportunities and directly representing ‘the People’ on Europe. These actors position themselves outside of the political system, distrustful of its ability to represent their case, and have been at their most effective in their campaigns for a referendum (Fitzgibbon, 2013, p. 115). In this they have had the support of the Eurosceptic press which, during the period in question, stepped up the pressure for a redrawing of the UK’s relationship with the EU, supporting calls for a referendum (*The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*). In the case of *The Daily Express* this was linked to a high profile populist campaign to ‘get the UK out of the EU’. Clearly, such developments point to an issue that is difficult for political elites to control as it reaches beyond the normal mechanisms of party management.

Meanwhile, the UK Independence Party operates within the party system yet it is defined by its populist opposition to the mainstream parties and their elites, which are presented as undifferentiated (LibLabCon) because of their continued support, no matter how qualified, for EU membership. Hence UKIP exploits its outsider status appealing directly to voters disillusioned with the mainstream parties (Lynch and Whitaker, 2012b). UKIP is able to offer a purer Eurosceptic alternative to the Conservative party which is seen to be tainted by the compromises of government. Its rise, already evident in the winning of 12 seats in the 2004 European election, was confirmed by by-elections in 2012 and the extraordinary local elections results of 2013 in which it captured 139 seats and a quarter of the vote. A crucial factor in broadening its appeal is that it is no longer viewed as a single issue party as it positions itself to the right of the Conservative leadership on issues such as immigration and same sex-marriage. Whether UKIP will continue to be a force on the British political scene remains to be seen. Undoubtedly it has contributed significantly to a right-wing ideological agenda that is fundamentally established in opposition to the European project, inferring from

⁴ Following Cameron’s speech, Cabinet Ministers Phillip Hammond and Michael Gove both told the media they would vote to leave if a referendum was imminent.

opinion poll results and anecdotally evidencing the deeply felt concerns and anxieties of ‘the British People’ about Europe.

Euroscepticism increasingly operates as an *underpinning populist ideology* as core political constructs that are in reality indeterminate and contestable are rendered exclusive and essential. It is this hard ideological Euroscepticism that has entered the UK political mainstream. Moreover, despite employing an exclusory discourse, Eurosceptics cannot be dismissed as out of touch, narrow nationalists, or ‘little Englanders’, as placing opposition to the EU at the forefront their arguments and rhetoric has a particular contemporary resonance that broadens their appeal. As such, they remain open to transnational alliances, identifying with other nationally-based Eurosceptic movements. Of particular importance is the transatlantic dimension of British Euroscepticism evident in its development in parallel with, if not close proximity to, the populist right in the US. In this regard we can point to Former Defence Secretary Liam Fox who helped to establish close links between UK politicians and American neo-conservatives through his Atlantic Bridge organisation. Fox has been particularly vocal in his attacks on the EU which he has described as ‘a voraciously centralising entity - bureaucratic, expensive and wasteful – that is increasingly indifferent to if not contemptuous of ordinary Europeans’ (Fox, 2012). He echoes the ‘new sovereigntism’ of influential academics and politicians in the US who have argued that emergent forms of global governance are illegitimate, undemocratic and contravene the principle of popular sovereignty (Ruggie, 2005; Goodhart and Taninchev, 2011). It is seen to have resulted in the ceding of power to unelected bodies, the erosion of the capacity of the state to represent the interests of ‘the People’ and normative commitments enshrined in international law, particularly human rights, that lack any national constitutional basis (Goodhart and Taninchev, 2011: 1047). Such arguments are central to a constitutional British Euroscepticism:

Sovereignty is about giving ultimate power to the people’s democratic representatives in Parliament, not to the courts and not to international bodies such as the European Union. (Cash, *Hansard*, Vol. 521, Col. 179)

The EU thus represents a dangerous expression of global governance and is to be countered by a defence of national sovereignty, rooted in the democratic will of ‘the People’. These themes resonate across national boundaries, enabling Eurosceptics to counter accusations of

racism and xenophobia and qualifying their nationalism, evident in Fox's reference to 'ordinary Europeans'. Accusations of isolationism are further contradicted by a commitment to globalisation and to new economic opportunities outside of Europe. An over-regulated and crisis-ridden EU is presented as a barrier to realising the UK's global economic potential. At a point when further European integration is on the agenda, such arguments therefore establish a fundamental ideological dividing line within the politics of globalisation. On this view, a more qualified defence of sovereignty, primarily concerned with securing the national interest within the existing European institutional arrangement, looks weak.

The mobilisation of a hard right wing Euroscepticism between 2010-13 represents one of the most profound challenges to a government's European policy that has been witnessed in the UK. The next section not only demonstrates how it undermines the Coalition's approach to Europe but also the established governing code of the British state.

Europe must change for Britain to stay the same

By 2011, Conservative Eurosceptics' attention was particularly focused upon the government approach towards the Eurozone crisis, which was initially expressed in opposition to British contributions to bailout funds. In the run up to the opening negotiations for the Fiscal Compact, Eurosceptic pressure forced Cameron to declare that any new treaty would not involve any major transfer of power to the EU and therefore would not be subject to a referendum despite claims to the contrary from Eurosceptics. The government entered negotiations having to win sufficient concessions that it could demonstrate the limited impact of any developments on the UK. Cameron declared that he would not sign a new treaty unless a protocol was included that re-asserted national control over further European fiscal competency and financial regulation, and provided protections to the interests of the City of London. Although presented as safeguarding the single market, the UK was viewed as seeking special arrangements. When these were rejected and Cameron vetoed a new EU treaty, the UK emerged from the negotiations isolated despite having earlier pressed its European partners to pursue further integration in the face of the crisis in the Eurozone.

The prominent role played by the Treasury in the preparation for the negotiations confirmed that the interests of finance were at the forefront of the UK's approach to the summit (Stephens, 2011). However it was the combination of the defence of finance with that of

sovereignty that defined the British position. The government did not demand ‘opt outs’ but the right to maintain its veto in relation to those areas affecting financial services, because of its claim to vital national interests in this area. This was considered unreasonable and at odds with negotiations that centred on a surrender of sovereignty on economic policy in the pursuit of regional macroeconomic stability (Van Rompuy, 2012). When its demands were not met, the British government vetoed the final agreement. However this did not prevent treaty negotiations from going ahead, albeit nominally outside of the European Union, and thereby excluded the UK from further negotiations. It was therefore a decision that marginalised UK influence in which an overt expression of sovereignty was viewed as consistent with the defence of economic interests. This was questionable, not least by many in the City who saw in the government’s position an explicit loss of influence as a Senior Credit Executive at Norddeutsche Landesbank pointed out: ‘the City can only maintain its ascendancy in financial services if the UK is a committed member of the European Union’ (*The Financial Times*, 11th December 2011). In vetoing, the UK government therefore chose to pursue a narrow conception of the national interest over an issue that seemed to merit a more flexible approach. Nevertheless, a political act that proved so divisive in Europe was initially met with jubilation on the part of Eurosceptics at home and brought Cameron some respite from his European troubles. It was, however, short-lived when the limitations of the veto became fully apparent and a new intergovernmental Treaty would go ahead using EU institutions without the UK’s involvement.

As the calls for a referendum intensified, Cameron announced that there would be a ‘national audit’ reviewing the balance of EU competences ‘to spell out in more detail the parts of our European engagement we want and those that we want to end’ (*The Telegraph* 30th June 2012). While the review was presented by William Hague (2012) as a ‘serious British contribution to the public debate across Europe about how the EU can be reformed, modernised and improved’, it clearly raised the issue of the legitimacy of the EU’s role in relation to the UK and the possibility of a repatriation of powers. In so doing, Hague referred directly to the disillusionment of ‘the People’ with Europe and their experience of integration as ‘a one way process, a great machine that sucks up decision-making from national parliaments to the European level until everything is decided by the EU’. The leadership therefore responded to the Eurosceptic challenge by shifting in a more Eurosceptic direction and intensifying its own populist rhetoric. By the end of 2012 Eurosceptics and Cameron

were at an impasse on the referendum issue to the extent to which it looked set to split the party and potentially derail the Coalition government.

In a long awaited speech on the 23rd January 2013 Cameron finally set out his position on the future of the UK's role in Europe. He argued that a renegotiated relationship could be agreed as part of a new European settlement that was necessary as the EU was being transformed by the crisis in the Eurozone. This would be a flexible and open Europe that would keep the UK in the EU but out of the fiscal compact and would include a repatriation of powers to Westminster. The 2015 Conservative Manifesto would therefore ask for a mandate to pursue a new European settlement that would be presented to the British people in a referendum by 2017.

Cameron's speech was an attempt to regain the political initiative by asserting a revised governing position on Europe. In so doing, he presented a classic defence of British exceptionalism in its essentialist assertions concerning national identity:

We have the character of an island nation – independent, forthright and passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel. And because of this sensibility, we come to the European Union with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional.

This British 'national character', defined by its openness, independence and pragmatism, was the starting point for outlining a distinctly British vision of a 'flexible, adaptable and open European Union'. This 'flexible union' was to have the single market as its central focus, overseen by 'free member-states who share treaties and institutions and pursue together the ideal cooperation'. Hence it was this British vision he claimed could underpin a new European settlement and, notably, challenge the fundamental principle of integration, 'ever close union among the people's of Europe'. In the end it was only national parliaments that could command democratic authority. European institutions were over-extended, beyond what was legitimate and consequently powers had to be returned. In challenging both the constitutional and popular bases of the European Union Cameron aligned himself with a harder Euroscepticism. The speech could be read as an attempt to find a way of securing some remnants of governing autonomy within the EU in a context of further integration and growing Euroscepticism. However it also confirmed that the nation continues to be at stake in

the UK's relationship with the EU, and hence at risk in any reform process. The argument that a UK, presented in quite fundamental respects as antithetical to the European project, can still be accommodated within it looks questionable. Either the EU will have to change substantially to address British concerns, or the compromises the UK will have to make will leave Cameron open to Eurosceptic attacks that the substance of the relationship has not changed. Moreover with the outcome to be decided by referendum, the opportunities for a Conservative leadership to control the political agenda (and the Conservative party for that matter) will be constrained. This leaves open the possibility of a leadership challenge to Cameron from a candidate standing on a platform of British EU exit.

The British post-imperial governing code on Europe consistently judged the risks of marginalisation to be greater than the consequences of continued engagement. This is no longer the case and by their actions the Coalition government, have in the face of pressure from Eurosceptics, signalled the beginning of the end of an established strategy of the British state. The position of the Labour party in this regard is important. The crisis in the Eurozone had put an end to any lingering support for UK membership of the single currency and the dominance of allies of Gordon Brown at the top of the party meant a firm commitment to his brand of 'Euro-realism'. Douglas Alexander (2011), Shadow Foreign Secretary, echoed this view in a major speech on Britain and Europe when he called for 'pragmatism and not dogmatism' in European negotiations and 'a hard-headed view of Britain's national interest'. Meanwhile, the Labour Leader, Ed Miliband (2012) went on to argue for 'One Nation in Europe' repeating the economic case for membership while criticising pro-Europeans for having 'turned a blind eye' to the EU's failings. Labour have defended a traditional soft Eurosceptic governing position yet have increasingly accommodated to the Cameron position. First, while opposed to the IN/OUT referendum it has refused to rule out the possibility altogether and, second, it has acknowledged that in the context of further integration in the Eurozone the UK's relationship with the EU will have to change. The strength of Euroscepticism across British politics seems to offer little space for the Labour leadership to do much more than defend British membership, albeit with an implicit acceptance of declining influence in a multi-speed Europe. Yet without a referendum commitment its claims to represent the British people on the issue will be severely challenged.

In summary, political leaders can be seen to be adjusting to the mainstreaming of hard Eurosceptic within British politics and in so doing the tacit elite acceptance of the UK's

ongoing and progressive accommodation with European integration has comprehensively unravelled.

Conclusion

The Eurosceptic mobilisation between 2010-13 discussed in this article emerged in direct opposition to the UK Coalition government and demonstrated a distinctive British dynamic to the broader politics of Euroscepticism. Euroscepticism is expressive of systemic contradictions about how ‘the People’ are ruled to the point where it has become constitutive of a contemporary European government-opposition dynamic that stretches beyond the party system to include civil society and publics. Nevertheless, the trajectory of this dynamic is still nationally determined and a populist politicisation of the European issue will be dependent on a number of contextual factors. Its intensity within the UK stems from an elite approach to Europe that reduced it to a matter of depoliticised executive control. The approach of party leaders has been to manage and close down the issue only confronting questions of legitimation when forced to. Eurosceptic challenges have been countered by marginalising opponents, asserting the congruence between Europe and traditional national interests and reprising the possibility of an Anglo dominated Europe. This most recent wave of mobilisation illustrated the increasing sophistication of both the arguments and actions of Eurosceptics; challenging assumptions of the national interest and exposing the realities of being part of a complex system of European multi-level governance. Even well established arguments concerning the economic benefits of the UK’s membership of the European Union are disputed. The Coalition government’s approach has been reactive illustrating the underlying weaknesses of the governing approach to Europe. On the one hand, this politicises the UK’s relationship with Europe in ways that have not been seen since the 1975 referendum. On the other hand, the debate is conducted in essentialist and exclusory terms, which misrepresents the diverse and increasingly transnational interests and identities of citizens within the UK. In their accommodation to this hard Euroscepticism, British elites become complicit with the reproduction of the European Union’s crisis of democratic legitimation.

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