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The rise of post-imperial populism: the case of right wing Euroscepticism in Britain

Abstract

Recent approaches to contemporary Euroscepticism have explained it in terms of the politics of opposition and peripherality that is characteristic of competitive party systems. Euroscepticism becomes a central strategy by which non-mainstream parties or factions within mainstream parties attempt to gain political advantage. In the British case, there has been a focus on the influence that Eurosceptic factionalism can have within a first-past-the-post parliamentary system. This paper challenges explanations of British Euroscepticism in terms of the politics of opposition and the workings of the party system. Instead, it is proposed that a structural crisis of British party politics has allowed Euroscepticism to enter the political mainstream. I conceive of Euroscepticism as a distinct and powerful national movement asserting conceptions of Britain's exceptional national identity. This is viewed

as part of a post-imperial crisis that shifts parties, and factions within parties, towards populist forms of legitimation that have weakened possibilities for stable and coherent political leadership over European integration. Consequently, mainstream parties have struggled to protect themselves against the ideological influence of this populist Euroscepticism. This is particularly evident during periods of Eurosceptic mobilisation, and is demonstrated in this paper through the examination of the extensive role played by right wing Eurosceptic forces during the attempt by the Major government to ratify the Maastricht Treaty.

Explaining Euroscepticism: factionalism and opposition?

A considerable amount of research has emerged in recent years exploring party-based Euroscepticism in the EU member-states including new member-states and accession countries (Taggart 1998; Marks and Wilson 2000; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2000; Sitter 2001; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2003; Batory and Sitter 2004; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). A key theme of this literature is that the organisation of party politics within national political systems determines the position of parties on European integration. Building on Taggart's (1998) seminal 'touchstone of dissent' thesis, a broad conceptualisation of Euroscepticism has been adopted that attempts to organise Euroscepticism within a hard-soft dichotomy (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2003).

Hard Euroscepticism can be defined as fundamental opposition to the idea of political and economic integration and expresses itself as 'a principled objection to the current form of integration in the European Union on the grounds that it offends deeply held values, or more likely, is the embodiment of negative values' (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2004). In contrast, soft Euroscepticism 'involves contingent or qualified opposition to European integration' and may express itself in terms of opposition to the specific policies or in terms of the defence of national interest (ibid: 4). As Szczerbiak and Taggart (2003) acknowledge, these represent working definitions that are not without problems¹ but they provide an important basis for broad European comparisons of Eurosceptic parties and movements. Alongside these, case studies of individual countries are important in understanding the qualitative complexities of different national expressions of Euroscepticism.

The high levels of Euroscepticism in a relatively large and influential EU member state has meant that British Euroscepticism has received considerable academic attention (Baker, Gamble and Ludlam 1993, 1994; Aspinwall 2000; Usherwood 2002; Baker, Gamble and Seawright 2002; Forster 2002). Euroscepticism is particularly associated with those British politicians on the right of the Conservative party who became increasingly opposed to the second wave of European integration during the 1980s and 1990s. There is, however, a longer history of Euroscepticism in Britain that can be traced back to the first

British application for membership to the European Community, if not before (Forster 2002). During this history, British Eurosceptics have shared a common hostility towards the European Union, yet they have reflected a range of political opinion. This Euroscepticism is considered to have had a significant impact on British European policy and contributed to its position as the awkward partner within the integration process (George 1998). Specifically, it has contributed to the failure to embed a distinctive cross-party national approach to Europe that has been evident in other member states (Wallace 1995: 50). A key question surrounds the extent to which there is something distinctive and exceptional about British Euroscepticism. While we might argue that all political systems are in some respects exceptional, a central assumption of the comparative literature is that Euroscepticism can be broadly explained in terms of the organisation of competitive party systems that are characteristic of liberal democratic political orders within the European Union. Following on from this, a central finding is that Euroscepticism is the politics of opposition (see Szczepiak and Taggart 2000; Sitter 2001). Szczepiak and Taggart identify two key features of opposition Euroscepticism:

The first is that opposition to the EU brings together 'strange bedfellows' of some very different ideologies. Opposition extends from new politics, old far left politics through regionalism to new populism and neo-fascism in the far right. The second point is that opposition to

the EU seems to be related to the positions of parties in their party systems. It differentiates between parties at the core and those at the periphery in the sense that wholly Eurosceptical parties are at the peripheries of their party systems while parties at the core are generally not Eurosceptical. (2000: 5)

In the British case, recent studies have focused on the factional nature of Euroscepticism within political parties and this has been accounted for in terms of the distinctiveness of British political institutions in structuring opposition (Aspinwall 2000; Usherwood 2002). In those countries characterised by powersharing governments, a range of institutional mechanisms enables the 'Euro-sceptic social voice' to be 'filtered out' (Aspinwall 2000: 433). In comparison, British governments operating in a system of one party rule have to give greater consideration to backbench Eurosceptic opinion than PR systems that tend to produce broad centrist governments. Governments in this situation have been shown to adopt negative positions towards European integration as a consequence of strong opposition within party ranks, particularly when faced with small majorities (ibid: 434-436). A further feature of these institutional dynamics has been the externalisation of Eurosceptic opposition (Usherwood 2002). The fudging of European policy, the failure to manage powerful Eurosceptic factions and a lack of salience across public opinion results in a radical extra-parliamentary Eurosceptic mobilisation that

has major implications for party cohesion. From this perspective, the significance of Euroscepticism is to be found in a specific set of British institutional dynamics that has allowed Eurosceptic factionalism within the main parties to take on a particular significance. These arguments are consistent with analyses of Euroscepticism as the politics of opposition but they also point to the role a distinctive political system can play in determining the relationship of Eurosceptic politics to the mainstream.

Both Aspinwall and Usherwood eschew explanations in terms of ideological factors, however their analyses suggest a crisis of political leadership and party cohesion that clearly has a significant ideological dimension. If we address issues of ideology, and of political culture more broadly, then the focus on Euroscepticism as the politics of factionalism and opposition becomes problematic. For example, Baker, Gamble and Seawright (2002) have shown that Euroscepticism in the Conservative party is fundamentally driven by a powerful hyperglobalist ideology at the very centre of the party. The key elements of this ideology include national economic and political independence within a global free market and it implies a fundamental opposition to European integration. This position was advocated by leading members of the Conservative party from the early 1990s onwards and opened up critical divisions within the party from which it has yet to fully recover. In the British context, to focus on the politics of opposition and the party system detracts

from the extent to which Euroscepticism is intermeshed with the politics of the mainstream. This is clearly evident in Taggart's and Szczerbiak's (2002) most recent attempt to map pan-European Euroscepticism. It is notable that the British Conservative party is the only mainstream European party with the potential capacity to form a government that is placed under the so-called 'soft' Euroscepticism heading. The broader implication of this is that Britain is exceptional in the sense that Euroscepticism has entered into a cartel party i.e. a centre-left or centre-right party that attempts to appeal to broad spectrum of the electorate and alternate in government. Furthermore, we should not allow the focus on the Conservative party to obscure the history of Euroscepticism within Britain's Labour party both inside and outside of office. British Euroscepticism cannot be fully accounted for in terms of the workings of the party system and the politics of opposition and peripherality. A central argument of this paper is that it is in fact a structural crisis within the party system, rather than the system per se, that has allowed Euroscepticism to take a hold in British politics.

The post-imperial restructuring of British politics

Membership of the European Community (EC) became part of an elite driven strategy to transform and modernise a post-imperial British state from the 1960s onwards (Kaiser 1996). However, the attempt to incorporate European integration into post-imperial projects of British renewal has proved to be highly contested. It is necessary to appreciate the extent to which ideological struggles over the meaning of 'Europe' for the British state have been part of a post-imperial hegemonic crisis of the British state (Nairn 1973). From the 1970s onwards, the politics over British membership of the EC became increasingly dualised as the meaning of the British nation became more uncertain. Euroscepticism has articulated a profound and fundamental opposition between Britain and Europe. In particular, ideas of Britishness have been asserted that suggest that British political development is exceptional and antithetical to the continent. A central proposition of this paper is that it is the *populist* manifestation of Euroscepticism in Britain that is significant in explaining its rise and influence.

In an important contribution to understanding the legitimacy problems of European liberal democracies, Mair (2002) has argued that modern politics is increasingly characterised by a separation between constitutional and popular

democracy. Constitutional democracy refers to the institutional requirements for good governance while popular democracy refers to the will of the people. Mair accounts for the emerging separation between these two forms of rule in terms of the declining importance of a key mediating institution: the political party. The traditional populist role of the party was to mobilise electorates and achieve meaningful identification to a political ideology. This role has gone into decline and is indicated by political apathy and disillusionment with party politics. In addition, as representative organs for patterns of interest within society, political parties have found their position usurped by a range of agencies and organisations outside of the party system. Nevertheless, political parties remain essential to the procedures of government. They continue to form governments, control key public appointments and enact legislation. This procedural and institutional role of parties has been maintained while their function in securing wider popular support has become problematic. For Mair, an overt populist politics has emerged as a solution to the legitimisation deficit of modern political parties. In broad terms, in a populist democracy parties are no longer partisan but claim legitimacy on the basis that they represent the mass of the people. Populist democracies are not therefore party systems in a traditional sense because parties transform themselves into or are transcended by mass movements for national appeal.

We can specify an ideal type of populism as discourse and process (Canovan 1999: 3-7; Meny and Surel 2002: 12-13). It is characterised by a direct appeal to the people for legitimacy that emerges out of the pathologies of traditional representative democracy. Canovan comments that populism turns politics into 'a campaign to save the country or to bring about a great renewal' (ibid). It may, therefore, have a characteristic mood that sets it apart from everyday, routine politics. In particular, it appeals to a united people or nation against the existing power structures, which are accused of dividing it. It also involves a specific style of politics that involves simple and direct language, analyses and solutions to problems. It dichotomises complex political debates, not only into right and wrong and good and bad, but also into the nation and the 'other'. These movements can be seen as anti-political and fundamentalist in their pursuit of rigid and exclusive political identities. A final feature is the strength of populism as a political force in contemporary liberal democracies. Populist movements structure the political debate forcing 'more habitual participants into a defensive posture and into changing the way discussion takes place, issues are framed, and constituencies mobilised' (Taggart 2002: 78). Political movements articulating powerful symbolic and cultural causes are central to the shift to populism.

The extent to which populism characterises the political system in Europe and can be identified as a significant political trend remains an empirical question.

However, Mair clearly makes a strong case for viewing Britain as a populist democracy in which the recent politics of New Labour represents a significant attempt to transcend the Westminster system. In fact the disillusionment in Britain with the two party system was already evident by the early 1970s. Nairn argues that since the 1970s 'each party has from the seventies onwards sought *to become the state and the nation*' (2001: 9 emphasis mine). This emerges out of the post-imperial crisis within the British political party system. This crisis was characterised by the declining legitimacy of an established elite, de-alignment and electoral volatility and the intensification of factionalism within the main political parties. These trends were exacerbated, if not caused by, the failure of governments of both political persuasions to halt British economic decline and realise projects of modernisation. Significant problems of governing a post-imperial Britain such as civil war in Northern Ireland and trade union militancy proved intractable. By the 1970s, there was a growing sense of a crisis of hegemony within the British state (Hall 1983; Leys 1983). In a context in which the traditional party system no longer seemed to provide effective government, one solution was to try and build a popular national consensus that could overcome the impasse in the party system. Both Thatcherism and New Labour were constituted as popular movements in opposition to the political parties that they claimed to represent. These powerful movements have aimed to transcend and marginalise the parties from

which they sprang. As Nairn describes it, 'salvaging greatness now came to demand a 'regime', a Revolution, or a 'Project'. (2001: 9)

A dilemma for these movements is that Britain remains primarily a multi-national post-imperial order that lacks any deep or unifying conceptions of ethnic or civic nationhood on which to be draw (McCrone and Kiely 2000). Britishness was primarily an imperial identity inaugurated with the Treaty of Union with Scotland in 1707. In a context of imperial decline, the nation has had to be persistently regenerated and there has been a need for an 'other' against which a 'new' Britain can be redefined. Since the 1970s 'Europe' and, more specifically the project of European integration, has played such a role.

In the issue of British membership of the European Community, politicians on the left and right found a cause that could allow them to appeal directly to the nation and transcend party politics. It offered a unique opportunity to establish bases of popular legitimation for national projects that could not be accommodated within the main political parties. The best examples of this were Enoch Powell and Tony Benn. For Powell, anti-Europeanism was a way to assert a political project centred around a revival of English nationhood. For Benn, it was used to legitimate a project of an independent socialist Britain. Thus, Euroscepticism was a way to appeal to *the people* outside of the mechanisms and institutions of the party system. 'Europe' was constituted

within the British debate as an issue that was fundamental to the nation; it was simply *too important* to be constrained by party loyalty. While Powell and Benn reflected different sides of the political spectrum, they fought together in the No campaign during the referendum on British membership of the European Community in 1975. Both saw in the issue of British membership an opportunity to reconnect with the people and establish movements that could transcend the crisis politics of the party system. This placed Europe at the centre of the crisis of both main political parties. A loose Eurosceptic movement emerged that fundamentally contested British accommodation with the integration process. Consequently, powerful sections of the main political parties mobilised against those pragmatic party elites who maintained the centrality of British membership of the EC to post-imperial economic and geo-political survival.

Euroscepticism emerged as the guardian of powerful national myths and drew on assumptions about British political identity that appeared to further the process of post-imperial decline. From such a perspective, Euroscepticism appears as part of a degenerating approach to international affairs found in the British political culture characterised by 'the centrality of the Westminster parliament' and 'the myth of exceptionalism – a free country confronting an unfree European continent' (Wallace 1991: 29).

For Wallace the only genuine solution is for a new sense of national identity to be crafted from the realities of an interdependent world. The problem, however, is that the 'outmoded' sense of nationhood he refers to has proved to be particularly resilient. Indeed, Euroscepticism can be seen as a distinct movement to defend core principles of Britishness and the British state that have proved resistant to transformation. In particular, right wing Euroscepticism has drawn on ideological strands within Conservatism defined by its opposition to political interdependence in the global economy and interventionist government at the domestic level (see Baker, Gamble and Ludlam 1993). This implies a return to laissez-faire in the world economy and minimal yet strong government on the domestic front. It is the cultural reworking of this ideological strand within Conservative politics that is central to understanding the importance of a right wing Euroscepticism that became so influential from the late 1980s onwards. Right wing Euroscepticism represented something regressive and conservative within the British political culture but its strength lies in its capacity to be populist and appear contemporary and radical. By such means, it has been able to subvert the meaning of European integration within the British context by a revived discourse of British exceptionalism.

A post-imperial crisis in British politics has embedded a *structural susceptibility* to populist politics. The populist manifestation of Euroscepticism

has been a significant expression of this crisis. Membership of the European Community could not be debated without evoking the nation and the people. 'Europe' was re-imagined by Eurosceptic forces as the 'other' of British political identity and interests. It was symbolically constituted as a threat to Britain's exceptional social and political development. By turning Europe into a fundamental political issue, what we find is that it was no longer contained by the party system and the capacity to establish the kind of political consensus on the issue that was evident in other member-states proved impossible. Instead, Euroscepticism intermeshes with mainstream politics furthering the crisis of the British party system and the capacity of governing elites to achieve an effective and stable European policy. This is explored in more detail in the next section by examining the right wing Eurosceptic rebellion against the Major government during the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.

Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and Eurosceptic Mobilisation

The manifestation of British Euroscepticism as populism and the implications of this are explored through a case study of the mobilisation in the Conservative party during the Maastricht crisis of the Major government. The process of Maastricht ratification represented a particular focus for debate about and opposition to the EU (Taggart 1998: 366). It 'brought into sharp relief conceptions and evaluations of the European project that might otherwise have remained unexamined' (ibid). Here, the purpose is to illustrate the distinctive features of a populist Eurosceptic mobilisation and the profound impact it can have on mainstream British politics. There are four features of this mobilisation that stand out. Firstly, it was a profound attack on the governing elite that could not be contained by traditional forms of party discipline. Secondly, the strength of this attack stemmed from the establishment of Euroscepticism as a national movement with mass appeal. This movement was not on the periphery of British politics but was supported by prominent politicians, including cabinet members and ex-cabinet members, and powerful individuals in British public life. Thirdly, the discourse of this movement was characterised by an appeal to the people based upon the cultural and symbolic construction of British exceptionalism. Finally, this mobilisation had a significant and negative impact on the governing elite's European policy.

It helped to secure a dominant Thatcherite approach to the European Union that has involved a re-assertion of British national exceptionalism.

Undermining the government

When John Major replaced Thatcher as a Prime Minister in 1990, he set out to craft a new constructive relationship with European partners. Europe was, therefore, an opportunity to distinguish the Major leadership from that of Margaret Thatcher. In particular, Major was a keen supporter of British membership of the European exchange rate mechanism and this became a central plank of his economic policy. With important concessions negotiated at Maastricht over monetary union and the Social Chapter, the Conservative party united sufficiently to win the 1992 general election and the basis for a constructive European strategy appeared to be in place. In the ratification debate, Major defended a British conception of the Community arguing that 'we can develop as a centralist institution, as some might want, or *we can develop as a free-market, free trade, wider European Community more responsive to its citizens*' (Hansard 213/ 284, 4 November 1992 emphasis mine). Despite setting out what was in many respects a free market Thatcherite strategy towards the Community, Major was still unable to stem the tide of rebellion. The government's European policy began to unravel once Britain was forced out of the ERM and the full integrationist implications of the

Maastricht Treaty became manifest. Against this background, the Major government was exposed to an extensive populist mobilisation of a right wing Eurosceptic movement that directly challenged the legitimacy of the government. Here, I explore the initial rebellion inside the party.

During the course of the Maastricht Treaty ratification a major rebellion emerged in the Conservative party that directly challenged the governing elite. It is possible to identify three objectives the strategy adopted by the Maastricht rebels in their bid to undermine the government (Baker et al 1994: 38). Firstly, they aimed to delay the bill hoping that it would be made invalid by external events such as another no-vote in a second Danish referendum. Eurosceptics were successful in getting a promise from the government that the third reading of the bill would be delayed until after the Danish referendum (Seldon 1998: 342). By the time this took place, there had been 210 hours of debate and over 600 amendments (ibid). Secondly, they campaigned for a referendum as they increasingly believed they had considerable public support. This came to a head on the 21st April 1993 when the rebel Richard Shepherd called on the government to 'trust the people' and that the bill had no mandate as the British people had been denied a choice on Maastricht during the election of 1992 (Wintour, The Guardian April 22 1993). The rebels' referendum amendment was defeated by the government but only with the support of the opposition. The bill then went to the House of Lords where Thatcher led the attack calling

for a referendum and claiming she would never have signed the Treaty (Seldon 1998: 384). Thirdly, the rebels supported Treaty amendments that they considered fatal to the Treaty. The rebels joined with the Labour opposition in supporting the restoration of the Social Chapter believing that Major would not proceed with the bill if the opt-out was not included. Baker et al described the defeat of the government on this issue as the most damaging Commons defeat for a Tory government in the twentieth century (1994: 47). Those rebels who went back to supporting the government only did so after they extracted government statements stating would be no re-entry into the ERM or moves towards joining a single currency (ibid). The government was forced to call a confidence motion on its policy on the Social Chapter and only with the threat of a general election, which the Conservatives looked destined to lose, did the rebels support the government. It was a pyrrhic victory for a government that had to resort to various deals and compromises with opposition parties, bullying of its own MPs and threats to use the Crown's prerogative.

The Maastricht rebellion represented an extraordinary attack on the governing elite from within the ruling party. It was recognised by the government that the rebels were unwhippable and had become a separate organised faction within the party with their own offices, unofficial whips and 'briefing books' (Seldon 1998: 369). In effect, it represented such a profound attack on the governing elite that only the full exploitation of the power at the disposal of the British

executive secured ratification and only then did Major's threat of a general election bring the rebels back on board. In contrast, the rebels' victory was considerable as they had imposed long term constraints on the government's European strategy (ibid: 47).

National mobilisation

The real sociological dilemma for the Major government was not simply that it was faced with factionalism in the parliamentary party and cabinet but that by the July vote the Eurosceptics had in effect become a significant right wing national movement. They drew strength from the extensive extra-parliamentary support that was emerging for their cause. Increasingly, their refusal to accept the government whip suggested that their primary loyalty was to the anti-European cause and not to the Conservative government under John Major.

The extent of Euroscepticism as a national movement had been evident in the sustained attack on the government's attempts to ratify the Maastricht Treaty. They had become organised into a number of cross-cutting alliances and groupings both inside and outside parliament. Indeed, some twenty seven separate groups had been created in the 18 months following the December 1991 Maastricht Council (Forster 2002: 88). In particular, the Fresh Start Group set up after the debate on the Danish referendum provided the

organisational dynamism for opposing the government's European policy and became the dominant parliamentary grouping. Its radical opposition to government legislation and its fundraising activities outside the party dramatically altered the rule of political conduct (ibid; Young 1998: 366). Alongside increased parliamentary organisation and support, Eurosceptics found that they could look to the press, the wider party and public opinion for support. Significant sections of the press continued to provide substantial backing for the cause. The Sunday Telegraph and the Murdoch press all supported the call for a referendum (Baker et al 1994: 46). Support was also evident across all sections of the Conservative party. A survey of 4,000 grassroots Conservative supporters by the Conservative political centre and made public during April 1993 indicated widespread disaffection with the Maastricht bill and significant support for a referendum (Bates, The Guardian 19 April 1993). This trend was confirmed by surveys that showed a significant shift to the right on European issues amongst Conservative supporters between 1991 and 1996 (Turner 2000: 175). Furthermore there was significant financial support for the rebel's Maastricht referendum campaign (Marc) from traditional Tory business fund raising channels and overseas supporters (Baker et al 1994: 46). In terms of public opinion, polls demonstrated that there was widespread support for a referendum alongside growing disillusionment with the process of European integration since the Maastricht summit of 1991 (ibid: 48; Marshall, The Independent 25 July 1993). In this context, the Eurosceptic rebellion in

parliament has to be seen as part of a broader national movement opposing the second wave of European integration. The most vivid expression of this new movement was the founding of the European Foundation in October 1993, headed by Bill Cash. The European Foundation became an important vehicle for Eurosceptic arguments and for mobilising against the Major government. It also introduced the significant figure of James Goldsmith into the European debate. Goldsmith went on to form the Referendum Party and fight the 1997 general election and attracted 811, 827 votes, the best ever showing by a minority party (Carter et al 1998: 483). What was evident, however, during and after the Maastricht rebellion was the extent to which this right wing movement began to re-configure and re-assert a Eurosceptical, Thatcherite project contra the Major government and the European Union.

Appealing to the people: the discourse of right wing Euroscepticism

The most influential alliances and arguments developed by Eurosceptics were on the Thatcherite right of the Conservative party many of whom were or had been at the centre of political power. These included significant Eurosceptics in the Major cabinet (Lilley, Redwood, Portillo and Howard) and vocal ex-ministers from the Thatcher and Major administrations (Tebbitt, Baker, Lamont). The most prominent backbench rebel during the Maastricht crisis, William Cash, was a Thatcherite as were the most prominent of the 1992 intake

of MPs such as Ian Duncan Smith and Bernard Jenkin (Forster 2002: 109). The conflict over Maastricht consolidated a shift to the right by the Conservative party (Berrington and Hague 1998: 54) that was centred around a populist reassertion of a right wing belief in British exceptionalism against which European integration was symbolically constituted as the 'other'.

A key feature of the right wing Eurosceptic discourse during the Maastricht debate was that they presented themselves as the representatives of the people and the guardians of popular sovereignty. The argument was that the people of Europe, and in particular the British people, did not want the kind of Europe that had been envisaged at Maastricht. The freedom of the people was posited against a centralising European state. As the former Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker stated:

The Danish and French referenda have shown vividly in the past six months that there is a movement across Europe which is not anti-Europe but anti-bureaucratic and against a centralised and bossy Europe. That is what I believe the no-votes in France and Denmark were saying and what many people in Britain feel. (Hansard 212/56 24 September 1992)

Although, the Eurosceptics aligned themselves with the people of Europe, they articulated a conception of popular sovereignty that was rooted in a Thatcherite populism of the strong state and the free market. John Butcher claimed that, 'our people have always been in favour of a Europe-wide free trading area. They have never been in favour of the gradual and surreptitious building of a European state' (Hansard 208/838. 3 June 1992).

While this discourse had much in common with the Major government's claim that Maastricht was in line with the British conception of Europe, a distinctive feature of the Eurosceptic position was that the governing elites could no longer be trusted on Europe and had led the British people into a European state against their will. In the early Committee stages of the Maastricht bill, Cash made the point that Heath when Prime Minister had misled parliament and the people in a government White Paper claiming that Britain would retain its essential sovereignty on membership. Cash went on to argue 'that it is the basis on which the process has tended to move, and I believe that the same thing is happening with the present treaty, too. The British people are not being told the truth; they are not being told exactly what is involved' (Hansard 215/214 December 1992). Cash proved a tenacious opponent of the government. He tabled 240 amendments to the bill and voted 47 times against the government when a three-line whip was in place (Young 1998: 395). Crucially, he set out to prove that the treaty was not the decentralising

document that the government claimed. He claimed that 'the bottom line is that the treaty creates a legally binding union within Europe, which is quite different from the treaties that are normally transacted among countries' (Hansard 215/205 1 December 1992).

The fear that Britain was being incorporated into what was for all intents and purposes a European state was compounded by the in balance of power within the European Union. In particular, Cash highlighted concerns over German domination arguing that 'we must contain Germany by a balance of power' (Hansard 215/222 1 December 1992). This echoed Thatcher's comments in May 1992 in which she had argued that Maastricht and its federal agenda augmented German power rather than contained it (Thatcher 1995: 491). A central theme of the Eurosceptic discourse was, therefore, the underlying instability of Europe. Evidently, the folly of the Maastricht Treaty was that it continued the European trend of centralising state building that had created the problems in Europe in the first place. European political modernisation was in essence flawed, fundamentally anti-British and potentially aggressive. With regards to the later, Cash warned the House of Commons of what he saw as some of the less explicit implications of the formation of a European Union:

What is the most important function, or certainly one of the prime functions, of a legal entity of the kind that this European union is to be?

It is the call to arms. That is the direction in which this is going: to a common defence policy. What is the first requirement the first duty to be imposed on citizens? It is that they may be conscripted. (Hansard 215/227 1 December 1992)

From this discussion, it was evident that key aspects of the Eurosceptic discourse were centred around a call for the re-assertion of a distinctive sovereign, independent British state and a free market economy. The second wave of European integration was presented as the antithesis of this project. The parliamentary debate over Maastricht reflected the continued political currency of the arguments made by Thatcher in her Bruges speech. In its claims to represent and defend the will of the people, this discourse was fundamentally populist employing simple messages and emotive language. In this respect, it effectively exposed the problems of legitimacy and democratic accountability that were undoubtedly features of the supranational elitism that was driving the second wave of integration. In particular, the Major government's position was shown to be inherently contradictory and in many respects misleading.

Euroscepticism was a powerful defence of a strong and exceptional British state that was aligned with global capital interests, represented by the likes of Murdoch and Goldsmith. This was what Thatcherism had claimed to be at the

core of British national identities and interests and was fundamentally threatened by European forms of political modernisation. While it appeared to recognise and fear a revived nationalism emerging from the process of European integration, it also seemed to welcome and incite these developments as evidence of the rightness of its nationalist cause. The general implication was that a range of fundamental threats to people's daily lives would only be avoided by maintaining and defending the 'exceptionalness' of Britain from the continent. While the exact influence of Euroscepticism on public opinion is open to debate, by the mid-1990s it was noticeable that public attitudes towards membership of the European Union had moved in a more negative and sceptical direction (Northcott 1995: 330; Hix 2002: 54-55).

The impact of right wing Euroscepticism on British politics

The crisis over Maastricht ratification traumatised the British political system. Alongside ERM withdrawal, it destroyed the credibility of Major government and opened up what have proved to be irreconcilable divisions within the Conservative party. It cannot be characterised as an attack by a marginalised faction within the Conservative party as it was an extensive populist movement supported by many at the centre of British political power. It is a central claim of this paper that the presence of right wing Eurosceptic populism has

successfully structured the mainstream British political debate on Europe and directly impacted on how European policy is framed.

The immediate consequence of the Maastricht rebellion and the extensive nature of Eurosceptic mobilisation that followed from it, was to further push the Major government in a more explicitly aggressive Thatcherite direction and further undermine any constructive engagement with European developments. On a number of issues, most notably over Qualified Majority Voting arrangements after enlargement and on the non-cooperation policy during the beef crisis, the British government were isolated and obstructive. The government increasingly turned issues of Community business into totemic struggles over the preservation of national independence and identity. The hold of a rigid and exclusive European discourse over the Conservative party left the Major government little room for constructive statecraft within the European Union. The Maastricht crisis, therefore, helped to embed an approach to the EU that made significant concessions to right wing Euroscepticism. While it was characterised as outside the mainstream, governing elites did not fundamentally challenge the populist ideology of British exceptionalism that underpinned its arguments. Indeed, the discourse of the Major government shifted on to how European integration was now moving in a British direction (Young 1998: 451).

Major's shift to a harder form of Euroscepticism failed to heal the divisions within the Conservative party as a virulent Euroscepticism had taken hold across key sections of the party and, crucially, amongst grassroots supporters. The consequence of this was to ensure that Eurosceptics came to dominate the leadership of the party. The leaderships of William Hague and Ian Duncan Smith, a prominent backbench Maastricht rebel, ensured the Conservative party moved further in a Eurosceptic direction. This process towards principled opposition to any further British involvement in integration has been consolidated by Michael Howard, one of the main Eurosceptics in the Major cabinet during the Maastricht crisis. Nevertheless such developments on the mainstream right have not halted the rise to prominence of the UK Independence Party, a populist party that defines itself by opposition to the European Union, and successfully secured 12 MEPs in the 2004 European Parliament elections. Ironically, its policy of complete withdrawal from the EU has allowed a Conservative party to present itself as the middle way on Europe, despite campaigning for a fundamental reversal of the *acquis communautaire* and the return of powers to the nation-state.

The hardening of Euroscepticism on the right of British politics could be seen as part of the opposition to a Labour government that first came to power in 1997 with an explicitly pro-European policy agenda. Originally, this policy was part of a project to turn Britain into a modern European social democracy

and was central to the modernisation of the party during the 1990s. However, Labour in power has been increasingly defensive on European integration, particularly evident in the delay in calling a referendum on the single currency and its defensive u-turn on a referendum over the European constitution. They have appeared reluctant to ignite and confront a populist Euroscepticism.

There is evidence that the Labour government has been moving towards a more Eurosceptic position. Britain's relationship to the European Union is increasingly articulated in terms of 'red lines', opt outs and negative negotiating positions pursued in defence of the national interest. Gordon Brown has been notable in his willingness to adopt the language of Euroscepticism. 'Europe' is characterised by Brown as having 'old flawed assumptions' about inexorable moves towards federalism (2003b). The advantages of this strategy for New Labour are clear. It de-radicalises the impact of European integration on the structure of British politics by implying that it can be made consistent with the particularities of British political and economic development. A populist discourse of an Anglo-Europe is presented as the solution to Britain's European dilemma. Behind this is the powerful figure of the British Chancellor:

British values have much to offer, persuading a global Europe that the only way forward is inter-governmental, not federal; mutual recognition not one-size-fits-all central rules; tax competition, not tax

harmonisation, with proper political accountability and subsidiarity, not a superstate. (Brown 2003a)

Brown has adopted the Eurosceptic language and set out a principled opposition to further integration based on British 'values'. The implication is that pragmatic and nationalist arguments will form the basis of government attempts to legitimate the continuation of Britain's European trajectory.

European integration and Britain

The purpose of this paper has been to explain the presence of Euroscepticism at the centre of British politics as a manifestation of post-imperial populism in the British political system. However, the use of the European issue in this way also reflects the changeability and malleability of the integration process itself (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004: 23). The openness surrounding integration and the degree of power that member-states continue to hold on to both in terms of the direction of integration and their role within it ensures that new treaties, and policies have the potential to become live national political issues. The very success of Eurosceptic forces during the Maastricht crisis in Britain was indicative of the contingencies surrounding integration. Eurosceptics were able to exploit these contingencies by for example persistently drawing attention to underlying legitimisation problems across the European Union. Despite the

achievements of monetary union and enlargement, the direction of integration remains uncertain and legitimisation problems persist both in Western Europe and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, the presence of Euroscepticism in mainstream parties in the new accession countries has clearly altered the context in which the dominant British parties now operate. The Labour government has made considerable efforts in wooing new allies and building coalitions, both East and West, in support of an Anglo-European project that could place a principled opposition to any deeper integration process at the heart of the European Union². The extreme UKIP version of hard Euroscepticism may in fact be limited by the capacity of New Labour to retain its own populist credentials and adapt the European issue to both British public opinion and contemporary European developments. However what is no longer credible, if it ever was, is the idea that the British Labour party is a principled pro-integration European social democratic party.

Conclusion

Britain is exceptional because of the extent to which Euroscepticism has entered into and influenced the mainstream political debate. The purpose of this paper has been to explain this development in terms of the inter-relationship between the *structure* of post-imperial British politics and the *practices* of Eurosceptic forces.

A key proposition of this paper was that a post-imperial British crisis shifted the political system towards populist forms of legitimation. A context of uncertainty and change surrounding the meaning and trajectory of the British nation and state has given rise to a form of politics that transcends and transforms the party system. From the 1970s, 'Europe' became a feature of a populist form of politics alongside issues such as crime and immigration. The political currency of Euroscepticism is therefore explained in terms of the *structural susceptibility* of the British post-imperial order to the politics of populism. This structural susceptibility is however only fully evident once we consider the processes by which Eurosceptic forces enter the mainstream of British politics. Firstly, Eurosceptic forces have explicitly targeted governing elites and sections of the established political class. They have tapped into a general disillusionment with mainstream elites and parties and claim to directly represent the 'real' interests of the 'people'. Secondly, in pursuing their cause, Eurosceptics have mobilised as a populist, albeit fragmented, national movement. In so doing they have often placed themselves outside of the traditional party system and above its ideological and partisan divisions in the pursuit of a far more 'fundamental' cause. Finally, they have constructed a nationalist discourse that constitutes 'Europe' as the 'other' of British interests and identities. This is a discourse of fundamental and principled opposition to the integration project. In the case of right-wing Euroscepticism discussed in

relation to Maastricht, this represented a powerful and populist reworking of English Conservative ideology.

The combination of structural susceptibility of the British political system to populism combined with the powerful and influential practices of a Eurosceptic movement has placed comparatively hard forms of Euroscepticism in the mainstream of British politics. The Conservative party is currently opposed to any further integration and puts forward a European policy centred on a revision of the main European treaties. The Labour government has proved reluctant to defend Britain's European trajectory and, at times, displays hostility to further integration. Its European policy is couched in nationalist and globalist terms. The British European debate therefore becomes dominated by conflicting variants of Euroscepticism and, in a reversal to what happens in many other major European countries, it is Europeanism that is marginalised. This creates chronic problems in achieving stable British political leadership on European issues. It implies that accommodating Britain to an emerging system of European multi-level governance is crisis ridden and that British governments' remain an unpredictable force inside the European Union.

¹ As Szczerbiak and Taggart (2003) acknowledge, these are working definitions that are not without problems. Evidently, more complex typologies suggest that the hard/soft distinction is more of a continuum than a dichotomy (see *ibid*: 10).

² An opportunity to pursue this agenda was opened up with the defeat of the European constitution in referenda in France and the Netherlands at a point when the British were about to take up the presidency of the EU.

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