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Dorey, Peter

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Article

## Towards Exit from the EU: The Conservative Party’s Increasing Euroscepticism since the 1980s

Peter Dorey

Department of Politics and International Relations, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3AX, UK;  
E-Mail: dorey@cardiff.ac.uk

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### Abstract

Since the 1980s, Britain’s Conservative Party has become increasingly critical of the European Union, and of the country’s membership of it. So contentious and controversial has this issue become that it was a significant factor in the downfall of three consecutive Conservative Prime Ministers, all of whom found it increasingly difficult to manage their Party in Parliament, and thereby maintain any semblance of Party unity. Initially, during the 1980s and 1990s, the intra-Party divisions were between Europhiles (pro-Europeans) and Eurosceptics, but this demarcation was subsequently superseded by a division between soft Eurosceptics and hard Eurosceptics. The development and deepening of these intra-Party divisions are attributable to a plethora of endogenous and exogenous factors, the combined and cumulative effect of which ultimately led to the ‘Brexit’ vote in the June 2016 referendum.

### Keywords

Brexit; Conservative Party; David Cameron; Euroscepticism; Thatcher; Thatcherism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The Conservative Party once enjoyed a reputation for public unity, rejection of ideology, pragmatic adaptability, deference towards its leaders, governmental competence, and a remarkable ability to win electoral support from a wide cross-section of British society. All of these attributes contributed towards its renowned reputation for ‘statecraft’ (Bulpitt, 1986) and unrivalled electoral success: ‘the natural party of government’.

However, since the 1980s, the Conservative Party has been characterised by increasing disagreements and divisions over Britain’s relationship with—indeed, membership of—initially the European Community (EC), and then the European Union (EU). During the last four decades, the Conservative Party has experienced a transition whereby the former division between pro- and anti-Europeans has been superseded by a demarcation between ‘soft’ Eurosceptics and ‘hard’ Eurosceptics. Al-

though the ‘hard’ Eurosceptics have not actually constituted a majority of the Party’s MPs, they have exercised considerable influence, partly by virtue of the vehemence of their views and how vocal they have been in expressing them. They have also been increasingly proactive in agenda-setting, by assertively framing the debates within the Conservative Party (and *inter alia*, the media) and highlighting key issues of concern concerning Britain’s relationship with the EU.

As a consequence, the Conservative Party leadership, particularly John Major and David Cameron, has often appeared defensive or reactive, and vulnerable to criticism that it should have been more robust in protecting and promoting Britain’s economic and political interests. Indeed, it sometimes appeared as if Major and Cameron were following their Party, rather than leading it. In explaining the Conservative Party’s increased Euroscepticism since the 1980s, we will note the role of exogenous and endogenous factors. Some of these reflect de-

velopments and changes in the EC/EU, and the manner in which these have impacted on domestic politics, while other factors pertain to changes within the Conservative Party itself, coupled with the perceived electoral threat posed by the rise of a populist anti-EU party (United Kingdom Independence Party, UKIP). However, these factors have been inextricably interlinked, mutually reinforcing, and cumulative in their consequences.

## 2. Developments during the 1980s and 1990s under Margaret Thatcher and John Major

During the 1980s and 1990s, key developments in the EC/EU increasingly clashed with the ideological orientation and internal politics of the Conservative Party. These encouraged and then exacerbated growing divisions among Conservative politicians, and fuelled an inexorable shift towards Euroscepticism. Such was growth of intra-party disagreement over Britain's relationship with the changing EC/EU during the 1980s and 1990s, that the premierships of both Margaret Thatcher, and her successor, John Major, were terminated partly as a consequence of these deepening disagreements and the ensuing collapse of Conservative Party unity. European integration fuelled Conservative disintegration.

### 2.1. Margaret Thatcher's Premiership

It was during Margaret Thatcher's premiership in the 1980s that Britain's relationship with the (then) EC became increasingly conflictual, and thus fuelled deepening divisions within the Conservative Party itself. This was largely (but not wholly) prompted by the impact of various EC policies and proposals on British politics and political economy, especially the neo-liberal 'project' of the Thatcher Governments which aimed to establish (or re-establish) a free-market economy in Britain (see, for example: Evans, 2013, p. 3; Gamble, 1986; Green, 2006, Chapter 2; Hay & Farrall, 2014, p. 9; Letwin, 1992, Chapter 5). Although Thatcher herself had campaigned for continued British membership of the EC in the 1975 referendum, she subsequently experienced three particular problems pertaining to EC developments and policies during the 1980s, and these cumulatively fostered her increasing—and increasingly outspoken—Euroscepticism. This, in turn, encouraged several other Conservatives to adopt an increasingly anti-European stance.

The first such clash concerned Britain's contribution to the EC Budget, to which each member state contributed one per cent of its 'indirect' tax receipts. The newly-elected (1979) Conservative government had increased indirect taxes (on consumption or purchases—VAT) from 8% to 15%, in order off-set cuts in income tax (on earnings). As a result, the increase in Treasury revenues accruing from VAT meant that Britain's budgetary contributions were higher than those of most other member-states. Thatcher thus embarked on a campaign

to get 'our money back', which eventually resulted in Britain being awarded a substantial annual rebate following a summit at Fontainebleau in June 1984 (for details, see George, 1998, Chapter 5; Young, 2000, pp. 130–137).

Two years later, the Single European Act (SEA) heralded the move towards a single European market, entailing the removal of border controls and customs duties on intra-EC trade, and facilitating the free movement of goods, capital and labour (workers) between member-states. The SEA was wholly commensurate with Thatcher's enthusiastic commitment to economic liberalism, free trade and flows of capital (her government having previously abolished Exchange controls): Thatcherites 'were wholeheartedly in favour of the provisions relating to the Single Market....An open market in Europe was what we had always wanted' (Ridley, 1991, p. 143).

However, the SEA also invoked reform of EC decision-making, by extending the range of issues and policies which would be determined by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). This effectively reduced the scope for individual member-states and their governments to veto proposals which they judged to be inimical to their economic or political interests. Due to Britain's particular concept of sovereignty—discussed below—this was a controversial development, and fuelled concerns in the Conservative Party about the increasingly political and supra-national character on the EC/EU. At the time however, 'the importance which Thatcherites attached to the promotion of the single market' was such that the non-economic implications of the SEA were discretely disregarded (Letwin, 1992, p. 284). Or as Geddes (2013, p. 70) observes: 'The British government compromised on some issues, such as increased use of QMV, in order to secure more prized single market objectives'. However, it has been suggested that, in her eagerness to establish the single market at European level, Thatcher might 'have underestimated the expansionist elements of the SEA because she so firmly believed that her free market agenda had been victorious' (Gifford, 2008, p. 95).

What further fuelled this nascent Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party was the emergence, in the second half of the 1980s, of a 'social Europe' agenda, whereby the transition to a single market and free trade would be matched by a corresponding increase in employment protection and rights for workers whose conditions or security of employment might be significantly weakened by greater economic liberalisation, competition and deregulation. Thatcher was wholly in favour of economic freedom, but strongly opposed to employment protection and workers' rights vis-à-vis their employers; these were totally incompatible with her neo-liberal commitment to 'labour market flexibility' and 'management's right to manage'. This antipathy was evident in her (in)famous 1988 Bruges speech, when she attacked 'those who see European unity as a vehicle for spreading socialism', and warned that: 'We haven't worked all these years to free Britain from paralysis of socialism only to see it creep

through the back door of central control and bureaucracy in Brussels' (Thatcher, 1988).

By this time, Thatcher had become deeply concerned at the direction in which the EC was seemingly being steered, and at the role being played by key institutions in facilitating this: 'I had witnessed a profound shift in how European policy was conducted—and therefore in the kind of Europe that was taking shape. A Franco-German bloc with its own agenda had re-emerged to set the direction of the Community'. This development, she claimed, was being facilitated both by the European Commission, 'which had always had a yen for centralised power', and Britain's own Foreign Office which 'was almost imperceptibly moving to compromise' with the key policy actors shaping the future of the EC (Thatcher, 1993, pp. 558–559; see also, Ridley, 1990).

This last point also highlighted another aspect of growing Conservative Euroscepticism from the mid-1980s onwards, namely a suspicion that the Foreign Office itself was too conciliatory and cordial, and thus insufficiently robust in defending British interests in EC/EU diplomacy. In fact, as far back as 1981, one of Thatcher's foreign policy advisers wrote in his diary 'the PM [Prime Minister] suspicious of Foreign Office advice' (Urban, 1996, p. 28, diary entry for 28 January 1981), while a senior Ministerial colleague who was ideologically and politically close to Thatcher, Norman Tebbit, has been quoted as claiming 'the Ministry of Agriculture looks after the interests of farmers, the Foreign Office looks after the interests of foreigners' (as cited in Jenkins, 1989, p. 285).

The pro-European stance of the Foreign Office ensured that Thatcher's Bruges speech caused considerable consternation within it, at the very highest levels (Dickie, 1992, p. 293). An initial draft of the speech had been strongly criticised by the then Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe, who identified several 'plain and fundamental errors', thus necessitating several redrafts before Thatcher delivered it (Wall, 1988). Yet even the final draft was apparently 'amended inside Number 10 [Downing Street] before it was delivered', thereby increasing the consternation of the Foreign Office (Wall, 2008, p. 78). Howe himself subsequently confessed to being 'deeply dismayed by the Bruges speech', and lamented that: 'Its impact, at home as much as abroad, far exceeded my initial fears' (Howe, 1994, p. 538).

As her Euroscepticism significantly (and publicly) increased, Thatcher began losing the support of some of previously close Cabinet colleagues, and this was to prove disastrous for her premiership. In October 1989, her Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, resigned, largely due to serious disagreement with Thatcher (and her Economic Adviser, Alan Walters) over whether Britain should join the EC's Exchange Rate Mechanism; Lawson was in favour (albeit opposed to economic and monetary union and a single currency), but Thatcher was strongly opposed (Lawson, 1992, pp. 923–926, Chapter 76).

The following year saw the fatal resignation of Thatcher's former Chancellor and Foreign Secretary, Ge-

offrey Howe. His exasperation at her increasingly strident anti-Europeanism was compounded by her clear impatience and lack of civility towards Howe personally, sometimes criticising and belittling him in the presence of other people (Howe, 1994, pp. 186, 646–647). As one of Howe's Cabinet colleagues explained, after a decade of loyal and competent service, first as Chancellor and then as Foreign Secretary: 'The scorn with which she later treated him not only offended him, it was proof of her failing political judgement' (Hurd, 2003, p. 400). In his resignation speech to the House of Commons, the usually mild-mannered Howe strongly denounced Thatcher's increasingly hostile stance towards Europe, and ridiculed:

the nightmare image sometimes conjured up by...[Thatcher] who seems sometimes to look out upon a continent that is positively teeming with ill-intentioned people scheming, in her words, to 'extinguish democracy', to 'dissolve our national identities', and to lead us 'through the back-door into a federal Europe.' (Hansard, 1990)

Not only were such fears unjustified, Howe argued, they were damaging Britain's economic and business interests, while also reducing the country's political influence and credibility in Europe.

It was Howe's resignation speech—one of the most remarkable parliamentary speeches ever, both in content and impact—which precipitated the leadership challenge that resulted in Thatcher's own resignation. At this time, there remained many prominent or senior pro-Europeans in the Conservative Party (for example, Kenneth Clarke, Michael Heseltine, Douglas Hurd, and Chris Patten), and they fully shared Howe's anxiety and revulsion over Thatcher's increasingly strident anti-Europeanism, and the sometimes undiplomatic language with which she expressed it.

## 2.2. John Major's Ill-Fated Premiership

Whereas Thatcher's premiership was partly terminated because several senior Conservatives found her anti-European stance unacceptable, her successor, John Major, found his premiership constantly undermined by Conservatives who did not consider him to be anti-European enough. Furthermore, there was always a suspicion that some of the Eurosceptics who constantly undermined Major did so partly to wreak revenge on behalf of Thatcher, who many of them revered, and believed had been stabbed-in-the-back by cowardly or unpatriotic colleagues. Certainly, Thatcher herself never publicly admonished these Eurosceptics, or urged them to refrain from constantly criticising Major over European issues. On the contrary, she continued to make speeches and other public comments which were highly critical of what was, by 1992, the EU, and these naturally emboldened other Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party.

Consequently, Major found himself presiding over increasingly deep and acrimonious divisions between pro-Europeans, and the increasingly vocal Eurosceptics. The latter included Cabinet colleagues such as Michael Howard, Peter Lilley, Michael Portillo and John Redwood, as well as backbenchers who acquired prominence in the 1990s precisely for their vehement Euroscepticism, such as Bill Cash and Teddy Taylor.

The problems of intra-party management which Major endured were greatly exacerbated by the fact that following the 1992 general election, the Conservative Government was re-elected with a parliamentary majority of just 21 seats (compared to 101 seats in 1987). Furthermore, this was steadily reduced during the next five years, due to defections (to other parties) by a few Left-leaning pro-European Conservative MPs, and almost inevitable by-election defeats. This narrow and dwindling parliamentary majority served to enhance the relative power of the increasingly confident and cohesive Eurosceptic Conservative MPs and Ministers. In this political context, Major constantly struggled to impose his authority on the rebellious Eurosceptics, especially as they soon became acutely aware of their growing strength in the parliamentary Conservative Party.

Geoffrey Howe attributed part of the growing vehemence and confidence of such Conservatives to Thatcher's 1988 Bruges Speech: using the analogy of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, he noted that 'where Margaret had drawn the first bucket of Euroscepticism from the well, others were only too ready to follow', while 'Margaret herself began to return, again and again, to the well that she had re-opened' (Howe, 1994, p. 538). The result was a cumulative, almost contagious, Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party, and this had grown inexorably ever since. Certainly, many of the most vehemently anti-European Conservatives today are 'Thatcherites' ideologically (and proud to be such), and are convinced that most of the Party's electoral problems since 1997 have been due to it diluting or abandoning Thatcherism, rather than persevering with it.

However, what greatly compounded Major's problems vis-à-vis the Party's anti-Europeans was the 1992 (Maastricht) Treaty of the EU (Seldon, 1997, pp. 368–371). This provided Conservative Eurosceptics with a new target against which to mobilise, and further 'evidence' of Brussels' seemingly megalomaniac determination to subjugate Britain to a United States of Europe, while also seeking to impose Socialism by stealth via the 'social Europe' agenda. According to a prominent Conservative Eurosceptic, John Redwood, the Maastricht and (1997) Lisbon Treaties 'represented a major step on the way to a single country'. Indeed, he suggested that anyone reading them for the first time 'would conclude that the intention is none other than the establishment of a new country called Europe' (Redwood, 1999, pp. 29, 33).

Although Major finally succeeded—after a bitter struggle with sections of the parliamentary Conservative Party—in securing parliamentary ratification of the

Maastricht Treaty (see Alderman, 1993; Baker, Gamble, & Ludlam, 1993; Baker, Gamble, & Ludlam, 1994; Gorman, 1993; Wincott, Buller, & Hay, 1999), this merely exacerbated the hostility and rebelliousness of many Conservative Eurosceptics. Many of them felt that they had effectively been bullied and blackmailed, by the Party's whips, into voting for the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty.

Thereafter, Major found it impossible to re-establish his authority, and as a consequence, he contested the 1997 general election leading a Conservative Party which was deeply and very publicly divided over Britain's relationship with the Europe. Although Europe itself was not a major electoral issue in 1997, the divisions in the Conservative Party, and Major's consequent inability to provide any semblance of unity or authoritative leadership, proved electorally fatal, and allowed New Labour (led by the avowedly pro-European—and seemingly charismatic—Tony Blair) to win a landslide victory; Labour's largest ever, in fact.

### 3. The Conservatives' Wilderness Years, 1997–2005

Between the 1997 election meltdown, and the election of David Cameron as Conservative leader in 2005, the Party was led by William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard respectively. All three were renowned Eurosceptics, especially Iain Duncan Smith, who had been a prominent 'Maastricht rebel' in 1993. When Hague and Duncan Smith were elected (Howard was 'elected' unopposed), the candidate they defeated was Kenneth Clarke. The latter was widely acknowledged to be popular outside of the Conservative Party, by virtue of his down-to-earth, plain-speaking, jazz-loving, and often cheerfully irreverent persona, but to many Conservatives, Clarke's strong pro-European stance was, by this time, tantamount to heresy, and thus rendered him, in the eyes of many Conservative MPs, unacceptable as a Party leader.

To a considerable extent, therefore, the support which Hague and Duncan Smith attracted in the 1997 and 2001 leadership contests was attributable to an 'ABC—Anyone But Clarke' *ethos* among Conservative Eurosceptics, even though he would probably have been more electorally popular than Hague or Duncan Smith. Certainly, by this time, Duncan Smith's enduring reputation as a 'Maastricht rebel' in the early 1990s had become 'a virtue rather than a vice', and most of his parliamentary support in the 2001 Conservative leadership contest came from the Eurosceptic Right of the Party (Lynch, 2003, p. 161).

That the Conservatives continued to become more Eurosceptic under Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard was not solely due to their own Euroscepticism, important though this undoubtedly was. Also of immense importance were continued developments in the EU itself, and the increasing 'Thatcherisation' of the Conservative Party long after Margaret Thatcher herself had resigned (this last point is discussed more fully later in this article).

In terms of developments in the EU itself, the 1997–2005 period witnessed the Amsterdam and Nice Treaties, the introduction of the single European currency (the culmination of Economic and Monetary Union), proposals for a European Rapid Reaction Force (quickly denounced as an EU army by some Conservative Eurosceptics, who feared this would undermine NATO, and jeopardise Britain’s perceived ‘special relationship’ with the United States), and the next phase of enlargement, as former East European states acquired EU membership. To its critics, the EU was assiduously extending its jurisdiction and powers; administratively, diplomatically, economically, geographically, and militarily.

These developments provided Conservative Eurosceptics with a wider range of targets against which to direct their increasing criticisms of the EU and its trajectory. Furthermore, it enabled them to argue that the EU was acquiring some of the key characteristics and attributes of a sovereign nation-state. As such, increasingly dire warnings were issued about the development of a European Super-State with its own currency, army and foreign policies. Such an entity, it was feared, would subsume and supersede individual member-states, and thus destroy national autonomy and parliamentary sovereignty.

Hague, Duncan Smith, and Howard each commenced their leadership of the Conservative Party arguing that it needed to modernise, not least by becoming more socially liberal and less morally judgemental—at the Party’s 2002 annual conference, Theresa May told delegates that the Conservatives were widely viewed as ‘the nasty party’—but given the ideological backgrounds and stance of these three leaders, such claims rarely sounded genuine or heart-felt. Indeed, under each leader, when the initial softer, more conciliatory stance failed to yield any significant improvement in the Conservative Party’s public popularity (as illustrated by continued low opinion poll ratings), it was jettisoned in favour of a return to a much more Thatcherite stance.

For example, Bale notes how, under Hague’s leadership, when the advocacy of modernisation and social liberalism failed to deliver any discernible increase in the Conservatives’ popularity, the irresistible temptation was ‘to exploit the few issues on which the Party already enjoyed leads—immigration and asylum [seekers], law and order, and the Euro (if not Europe as a whole)’. As such, many of Hague’s advisers and leadership team were convinced that ‘the sooner the Party got off Labour’s territory and back onto what they saw as a more profitable populist track, the better...the Tory leader agreed’. Similarly, Bale notes that in spite of his modernisation rhetoric, Duncan Smith ‘represented not a transcendence of Thatcherism, but a desire to resume where it had left off’ (Bale, 2010, pp. 122, 123, 147).

By the early 2000s, Thatcherism had become the Conservative Party’s default position and comfort-zone, both reflecting, and reinforced by, the changing ideological character and composition of the Party in the House of

Commons, as discussed below. Of course, the swift shift back to a Thatcherite stance rather implied that the advocacy of ‘modernisation’ and social liberalism had only ever been superficial and cosmetic. According to this perspective, a major reason for the Conservatives’ heavy electoral defeats in 1997 and 2001 was not that the Party was too Thatcherite, but that it was no longer Thatcherite enough. The modernising and socially liberal rhetoric (however superficial) had alienated core supporters, but failed to attract new, non-Thatcherite, voters.

#### **4. David Cameron’s Premiership and Pressure for a Referendum on Britain’s EU Membership**

When he was elected as Conservative leader in December 2005, David Cameron tried to minimise the EU as a policy issue in the Conservative Party, precisely because he was acutely aware of its intrinsic divisiveness. He thus urged Conservatives to ‘stop banging on about Europe’, along with other emotive issues like immigration. This was part of his initial attempt at ‘de-toxifying’ the Conservative Party’s image, by placing much less emphasis on traditional Conservative (or Thatcherite) themes such as crime, immigration, public sector inefficiency and welfare dependency. Instead, he boldly promoted more ‘progressive’ issues such as environmentalism, eradicating poverty, same-sex relationships, social justice, and work-life balance (Bale, 2010, Chapter 7; Dorey, 2007; Dorey, Garnett, & Denham, 2011, Chapters 3–4; Hayton, 2016).

In effect, Cameron was attempting precisely what his three predecessors had initially done—promoting a post-Thatcherite agenda and identity for the Conservative Party. Yet while Cameron himself seemed genuinely committed to this strategy (much more so than Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard), the preponderance of Thatcherites and Eurosceptics in the parliamentary Conservative Party meant that he constantly struggled to impose his authority on some of his more recalcitrant backbench MPs.

Certainly, continued developments in the EU itself, coupled with a further increase in the scale and strength of Euroscepticism among Conservative MPs (Heppell, Crines, & Jeffery, 2017), ensured that Cameron could not avoid the issue of Europe. During the first half (2005–2010) of Cameron’s leadership, the most contentious issue pertaining to the EU concerned the Lisbon Treaty, which he initially insisted should be subject to a referendum prior to ratification. However, in November 2009, by which time other member states had ratified the Lisbon Treaty, Cameron announced the abandonment of the Conservatives’ referendum pledge. His rationale was that: ‘We cannot hold a referendum and magically make...the Lisbon treaty...disappear, any more than we could hold a referendum to stop the sun rising in the morning’ (BBC, 2009).

While Cameron’s stance was constitutionally correct and politically realistic, it nonetheless alarmed and angered Conservative Eurosceptics, many of whom began

doubting (if they had not doubted before) the seriousness and strength of Cameron's determination to resist further European integration, and the concomitant diminution of parliamentary sovereignty. In order to assuage such anxieties, Cameron advanced a new Conservative policy on the EU, one which insisted that the Lisbon Treaty was a line drawn in the sand, so that no further ceding of sovereignty would be permitted unless clearly approved by the British people. Thus did the Conservatives' 2010 manifesto pledge that 'in future, the British people must have their say on any transfer of powers to the European Union...any proposed future treaty that transferred areas of power, or competences, would be subject to a referendum' (The Conservative Party, 2010, p. 113), a pledge enshrined in the 2011 European Act.

However, this pledge was insufficient to prevent repeated demands, often articulated via legislative amendments, parliamentary motions, and Private Members' Bills, from sundry Conservative Eurosceptics for a referendum anyway, without waiting for any further initiatives or Treaties from the EU (for examples of such demands, see: Hansard, 2010 [Volume 520, speeches by Douglas Carswell, column 201; Bill Cash, column 224; John Redwood, column 194], 2011 [Volume 534, speech by David Nuttall, column 46], 2012 [Volume 551, speech by Douglas Carswell, column 1256]).<sup>1</sup>

Cameron eventually conceded to these demands in January 2013, via a speech at the London office of Bloomberg media company, in which he announced that a referendum would be held in the next [post-2015] Parliament. As with the referendum on EC membership pledged by the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the mid-1970s, Cameron's promise of such a plebiscite was not motivated by a sudden desire for direct democracy, but by the urgent need to manage the issue inside the Conservative Party: 'It was obvious that David had taken [the decision] mainly for reasons of party management', in the context of 'the constant backdrop of Right-wing nationalist Conservative backbenchers agitating on Eurosceptic causes', although he also envisaged that it might neutralise the electoral threat of UKIP (Clarke, 2016, p. 473).

What was widely overlooked, however, was the generally positive tone of the referendum speech; Cameron apparently came not to bury the EU, but to praise it. With the caveat that the EU should be viewed as a means to an end (namely economic growth, greater prosperity, and the defence of democracy and liberty) rather than an end in itself, Cameron insisted that:

I never want us to pull up the drawbridge and retreat from the world. I am not a British isolationist. I don't just want a better deal for Britain. I want a better deal for Europe too....I want the European Union to be a success. And I want a relationship between Britain and the EU that keeps us in it. (Cameron, 2013)

Indeed, it has since been described as 'one of the most pro-EU speeches given by a British prime for some time' (Seldon & Snowden, 2015, p. 266).

Certainly, Cameron hoped that by the time this referendum was held, he would have successfully renegotiated the terms and conditions of Britain's membership of the EU, and reclaimed various powers from Brussels. On this basis, he would then urge people to vote in favour of continued British membership of the EU. This seemed a plausible strategy at the time, because various opinion polls showed that while many people would vote for Britain to leave the EU if presented with a simple 'Leave/Remain' binary choice, many of them would instead vote 'Remain' if Cameron could secure a 'better deal' for Britain; it was not Britain's membership of the EU *per se* that many British people were opposed to, but the actual terms and conditions of that membership—or so it seemed at the time.

This was confirmed by a summer 2012 poll, conducted by YouGov, which showed that if a referendum was held after successful [albeit not defined] renegotiation of Britain's relationship with the EU, and David Cameron then recommended that Britain should remain a member of the EU under the revised terms, then 42% would vote to remain, while 34% would still vote to Leave the EU. There were, though, 19% of respondents who were undecided at this time (perhaps wanting to wait-and-see precisely what renegotiation would entail), while 5% claimed that they would not vote (YouGov, 2012, p. 4). Nonetheless, the 42%–34% ratio might well have convinced Cameron that much of the British public was open to persuasion, and that he personally had the requisite authority and charisma to persuade them.

Yet when, a few months later, Cameron did announce a post-2015 referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union, the response from many of his political colleagues and commentators was generally unfavourable. Some of his closest and usually most supportive colleagues doubted the political or tactical efficacy of such a pledge. Certainly, his Chancellor, George Osborne, 'did not just think a referendum was a bad idea, he thought it was a disastrous idea', partly because it would only present the electorate with a stark In/Out, all-or-nothing choice, and partly because he envisaged the 'major risk that several uncontrollable forces would combine in a referendum campaign' such as anti-government sentiment, and political opportunism from opponents, 'and then you lose' (Shipman, 2016, pp. 3, 4; see also Portillo, 2016; Seldon & Snowden, 2015, p. 547). Yet given his political seniority and closeness to Cameron, he studiously refrained from expressing his reservations publicly. Nor was Osborne alone among senior Conservative colleagues in harbouring 'serious reservations about this sudden genuflection towards his own Eurosceptic backbenchers' (Clegg, 2016, p. 206).

Less reticent in expressing his doubts was a former Conservative Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, who was ap-

<sup>1</sup> These can all be accessed online via: <https://hansard.parliament.uk>

palled at 'the irresponsibility of this gamble...this foolish and extremely risky decision'. Clarke was emphatic that a referendum was not 'a useful way of taking decisions on hugely complex political and diplomatic issues' which were reduced to 'a vote on a broad-brush simple question which obscures a myriad of sub-issues within it about the role of Britain in the world'. To present voters with a simple binary 'Yes/No' choice on such issues was, Clarke argued, 'reckless beyond belief', and the former Conservative Chancellor expressed these grave doubts to Cameron directly, face-to-face (Clarke, 2016, pp. 472, 473).

Further strong criticism emanated from Cameron's former speech-writer, Ian Birrell, who described the pledge as 'padding wrapped around a stick of political dynamite'. He suggested that: 'Mr. Cameron has been forced to concede possibly the biggest gamble of his prime ministerial career', adding ominously that: 'This is not throwing a slab of red meat to the Right—it is giving them the keys to the abattoir' (Birrell, 2013).

Also highly critical of the decision was the Deputy Prime Minister in the Coalition Government, the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg. He describes it as 'a wilful elevation of an internal party problem to the level of a national plebiscite'. Clegg confesses that he 'could not see the logic of asking millions of our fellow citizens a question just because a single political party, under increasing pressure from UKIP, was unable to make its mind up for itself'. Ultimately, Clegg describes it as 'a decision born of political weakness' (Clegg, 2016, p. 206; see also Laws, 2017, p. 245).

Even a former Conservative Cabinet Minister and prominent Eurosceptic in the 1990s (and now a prominent TV presenter and media commentator), Michael Portillo, argued that, while he had personally voted for Britain to leave the EU, the referendum should never have been conducted. He deemed it to have been a monumental error of judgement and miscalculation by David Cameron, 'the greatest blunder ever made by a British prime minister', one which neither quelled Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party nor reversed the rise of UKIP. Portillo argued that 'if he [Cameron] seriously thought that leaving the EU would be calamitous for Britain, there is no defence for taking that national risk in an attempt to manage his party or to improve its chances of election'. Portillo suggests, though, that Cameron 'did not expect to win a [parliamentary] majority in 2015, and therefore did not anticipate having to redeem the pledge' (Portillo, 2016).

The implication was that the 2015 election would produce another Hung Parliament, and thus a new coalition with the Liberal Democrats, whereupon the latter would insist on the referendum pledge being abandoned as a pre-condition of any political deal with the Conservatives; in such a scenario, Cameron could blame the Liberal Democrats for his failure to fulfil the referendum pledge. When the Conservatives won a surprise victory in the 2015 general election, albeit with a narrow ma-

jority, Cameron was effectively obliged to proceed with the promised referendum. However, a prominent academic expert on Conservative politics has subsequently rejected this interpretation, insisting that 'there is no truth whatsoever in the idea that he was assuming his pledge to hold a vote could be dropped in negotiations for the renewal of the coalition with the Lib Dems' (Bale, 2016, p. 436).

Meanwhile, few, if any, Conservative Eurosceptics were pacified by Cameron's belated referendum pledge, not least because of their continued sense of betrayal over the abandonment of the previously promised Lisbon Treaty referendum; they simply did not trust Cameron to deliver on this latest pledge. Yet even if he did, they strongly suspected that he would greatly exaggerate any success accrued from his renegotiation over the terms and conditions of Britain's membership, and thereby persuade enough British people to vote to remain in the EU on the basis of merely cosmetic changes (Heppell, 2014, p. 160).

However, the implacable scepticism and clear lack of respect which many Conservative Eurosceptics felt towards Cameron was also attributable to long-term and more fundamental ideological, sociological and behavioural changes in the Conservative Party itself. These changes not only strongly shaped intra-Party attitudes towards the EU, but also the increasingly assertive manner with which many Conservative MPs responded to the Party leadership on this issue.

## 5. The Changing Character of the Conservative Party

In addition to developments in the EU itself (as noted above), and their impact on domestic politics and political economy, there were three inter-related or mutually reinforcing factors which further fuelled growing Conservative hostility towards the EU from the 1980s onwards: the changing ideological character and social composition of the parliamentary Conservative Party; behavioural changes among Conservative MPs; a change in the nature of Euroscepticism within it. All of these factors made effective Party management virtually impossible for ostensibly conciliatory or pragmatic leaders like Major and Cameron, and grievously damaged the Party's former reputation for cohesion, leadership loyalty and unity.

### 5.1. *The Thatcherite Transformation of the Conservative Party*

Since the 1980s, the Conservative Party has become steadily more Thatcherite in its ideological orientation and strategic policy objectives. Thatcherism has been characterised as the pursuit of a free economy and a strong State (Gamble, 1988), for it enshrined a dual commitment to neo-liberalism (free markets, deregulation, private enterprise, competition, wealth creation, profit maximisation, labour market flexibility, and tax cuts) in the economic realm—'rolling back the State'—but the



restoration of authority and discipline in the political and social spheres. The latter dimension of Thatcherism entailed a stronger and more punitive role for the State against those who were deemed to obstruct 'the market' or constitute a threat to parliamentary democracy and the rule of law (invariably Left-wing organisations and social movements). Thatcherism also entailed a strengthening of Britain's perceived 'special relationship' with the United States, this comprised of close diplomatic, military and political links, and ideological affinity, as well as a shared language.

Thatcherism thus had important consequences for the Conservative Party's approach towards the EC/EU, for while the move towards the single market (*pace* the 1986 SEA) was largely commensurate with the Thatcherite commitment to the liberalisation of trade and the promotion of economic competition, the parallel advocacy of a 'social dimension' was anathema to Thatcherites. So too was the extension of QMV, which was deemed a major threat to parliamentary sovereignty (discussed below) and national autonomy.

Intuitively, it might be assumed that Margaret Thatcher's November 1990 resignation would be followed by a weakening of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party, but precisely the opposite occurred. Since Thatcher's downfall, the parliamentary Party has steadily become *more*, not *less*, Thatcherite, due to the ideological stance of new Conservative MPs. Indeed, many of these seem to have been adopted as Conservative candidates largely because of their Thatcherite credentials. As such, the Conservative Party (in the House of Commons) has steadily become more Thatcherite than it was when Thatcher was leader. Crucially, many of these Thatcherites have been among the most vehement and vocal Eurosceptics in the post-1990 parliamentary Conservative Party.

Bale notes the extent to which 'the parliamentary party that returned to Westminster after the [1997] election was more uniformly Thatcherite and Eurosceptic than the one that had left it' when the campaign began, to the extent that 140 of the 165 Conservative MPs elected in 1997 were Eurosceptics (Bale, 2010, pp. 68, 79). This ideological trajectory continued in/after the 2001 general election, whereupon the intake of Conservative MPs served 'to push the Conservatives even further down this road towards the Right, rather than returning towards the centre ground of Westminster politics' (Norris & Lovenduski, 2004, p. 94).

Meanwhile, writing in 2003, Lynch observed that: 'The Conservative parliamentary party has become significantly more Eurosceptic over the last decade', either as pro-European Conservative MPs retired or resigned, and were replaced by Eurosceptic candidates and MPs, or because some Conservative parliamentarians 'have hardened their position on Europe, becoming more sceptical' in response to integrationist developments in the EU itself (Lynch, 2003, pp. 154, 155).

The growth of Conservative Euroscepticism has been starkly illustrated by Bale (2010, p. 136), who notes that whereas 58% of the Party's MPs had been Eurosceptics in the 1992–1997 Parliament, this tally had increased to a remarkable 90% following the 2001 general election. Similarly, whereas the proportion of Conservative MPs who could be categorised ideologically as Thatcherites stood at a mere 19% in the late 1980s, according to Norton (1990, p. 52), Bale suggests that this figure had increased to 73% in 2001 (Bale, 2010, p. 136).

As a consequence, whereas Thatcherites were actually a minority of the parliamentary Conservative Party when Thatcher herself was Prime Minister, they have since become the overwhelming majority, certainly in terms of their ideological commitment to free-market economics and Euroscepticism. Indeed, it no longer makes sense to refer to Thatcherites as being on the Right of the Conservative Party, because the Right-ward shift of the Party in the last three decades means that Thatcherism is now the mainstream or modal point in the parliamentary Party.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.2. Behavioural Changes Among Conservative MPs

This ideological transformation in the Conservative Party has been accompanied by a corresponding change in the attitude and conduct of many Conservative MPs towards their Party leaders and policies, particularly since Thatcher's downfall. This has manifested itself in an increased willingness among Conservative MPs to vote *against* their own Party in the House of Commons when they strongly disagree with the stance or policy adopted by the leadership. Admittedly, scholars like Philip Norton have traced the origins of contemporary 'dissent' by Conservative MPs to the apparently autocratic and alienating leadership of Edward Heath in the early 1970s (Norton, 1978, Chapter 9), and Thatcher herself occasionally experienced major rebellions by backbench Conservatives (most notably that which defeated the 1986 Shops Bill to legalise Sunday trading).

Nonetheless, it has been since the early 1990s onwards that backbench dissent in the parliamentary Conservative Party has significantly increased, either in terms of the frequency of such rebellions or/and the size of them. As Norton (1996, p. 137) has noted: 'Once the genie of back-bench independence...had been let out of the bottle, there was no way of putting it back....The change of the early 1970s has been maintained'.

Needless to say, many of these have backbench rebellions involved Conservative MPs defying their Party leadership in parliamentary votes on EU-related issues. According to Ludlam: 'The proportion of [Conservative] backbenchers willing to engage in repeated rebellion over Europe grew to unprecedented levels under Major', exacerbated by the 'right-wing alarm over Thatcher's sacking that undermined appeals to party unity and loyalty' (Ludlam, 1996, p. 119).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to one of the referees for making this particular point.

As we noted earlier, John Major encountered serious difficulties due to divisions among Conservative MPs (and some prominent Cabinet Ministers) over Europe, with the parliamentary ratification of the Maastricht Treaty crystallising these intra-party disagreements and fuelling leadership defiance. Twenty years later, David Cameron also endured serious backbench dissent and defiance over his stance on Britain's relationship towards the EU, but this time, it was the issue of a referendum on continued membership which provided the main focus for Conservative rebels, as noted above (see also Cowley, 2013; Cowley & Stuart, 2013; D'Ancona, 2013, Chapter 13, Dorey & Garnett, 2016, pp. 230–236; Lynch & Whitaker, 2016, Chapter 6; Seldon & Snowdon, 2015, Chapter 21).

For such Conservative Eurosceptics, the Party's official policy, as enshrined in the 2011 European Act, was inadequate because it would allow Ministers themselves to decide whether future changes or proposed transfers of power were of sufficient scale or scope to justify a referendum (Hazell, 2012, pp. 165–166). In short, many Conservative Eurosceptics simply did not trust Cameron to 'deliver' on such a pledge. After all, while Cameron had insisted that the Lisbon Treaty constituted 'a line in the sand', everyone knows that such lines are washed away by the next incoming tide, thus rendering them ephemeral. It was largely in response to such pressure that Cameron finally pledged an 'In/Out' referendum, and in so doing, illustrated both the manner in which backbench deference towards their Party leaders has declined, and the consequent extent to which backbenchers can sometimes influence their Party's policies, rather than obediently or passively following their leader.

### 5.3. *The Conservative/Thatcherite Notion of Sovereignty*

Much of the growing Conservative hostility towards the EC/EU has been articulated via a nationalistic discourse concerning sovereignty, and particularly parliamentary sovereignty. For many Conservatives, but particularly for Thatcherites, sovereignty means that Parliament should either be the only, or the highest, political institution with the authority and power to enact laws applying to the British people (Lynch, 1999, pp. 80–81). The House of Commons (inside Parliament) is directly elected by the British people in free-and-fair elections every five years, and is thus deemed to be both representative of and accountable to 'the people'. Consequently, it is deemed unacceptable and undemocratic for another institution, above and beyond the nation-state, to be empowered to devise policies and 'laws' (EU Directives) which are applicable to Britain, and which take precedence over domestic laws enacted by Parliament.

In effect, this Hobbesian perspective views true sovereignty to be indivisible, and thus wholly incompatible with the notion of 'pooled' (shared) sovereignty accepted by many other EU member states—some of

whom are accustomed to power-sharing as a consequence of coalition governments accruing from their electoral systems based on variants of proportional representation. The Thatcherite/Eurosceptic notion of sovereignty also strongly underpins the Party's hostility towards supranationalism (as symbolised by the EU in general, and both the European Commission, and the European Court of Justice, in particular), because it means that an external, international, organisation and its constituent institutions exercise authority and jurisdiction over Britain, yet these bodies are neither elected by, nor accountable to, the British people. A prominent Conservative Eurosceptic, Norman Tebbit, once argued that the EC/EU 'is a force generated from outside our shores and...by people not of our nationality. That it so say, it is a foreign force', and as a consequence, British people have increasingly 'suffered from laws made outside our shores by foreigners' (Tebbit, 1991, pp. 64–65).

From this perspective, every new Treaty which imbues the Commission with more authority, extends the range of EU decisions to be determined by QMV, or/and expands the range of policies to be 'Europeanised', further diminishes Britain's cherished parliamentary sovereignty, and prompts further warnings about Britain being subjugated to a dystopian 'European Super-State'. Consequently, for many Conservatives, and especially the Thatcherites, international issues and problems which require joint policy-making by several nation-states should be addressed via inter-governmentalism, not supranationalism.

One other aspect of the Conservative/Thatcherite notion of sovereignty which needs to be emphasised is the manner in which it also constitutes an integral component of the British Right's nationalist discourse. Not only does this entail the social construction and an ideological narrative about what it means to be British, in terms of culture, history, values and other shared characteristics—what Benedict Anderson (1983) termed 'imagined communities'—it also entails identifying an alien, external, 'Other', which is deemed to constitute a threat to the sovereign nation-state.

In this respect, Thatcherites have not merely constructed an (often quasi-mythical) image of what Britain is or ought to be—often based on a nostalgic or romantic vision of a supposed Golden Age which apparently existed several decades ago—but purported to identify who or what poses a threat to Britain and its people: these threats can either be internal (such as Communist/Marxist subversion, militant/Left-wing trade unions, etc.), or external. Until its spectacular collapse in 1990, the Soviet Union fulfilled the role of the external Other, but since then, the EU has unwittingly fulfilled this role; the ideologically-defined threat to British independence and sovereignty, albeit via 'soft' power rather than military prowess.

The identification of the 'Other' provides Conservatives with a valuable means of fostering a sense of national unity which transcends, and diverts attention

away from, other socio-economic divisions within British society—especially the inequalities of wealth, power and privilege which the Conservatives are committed to defending and legitimising.

#### 5.4. *The Changing Nature of Conservative Euroscepticism*

By the time David Cameron had become Conservative Party leader at the end of 2005, the previous intra-party divisions over the EC/EU between pro-Europeans (or ‘Europhiles’) and Eurosceptics, had been superseded by a division between ‘soft’ (or pragmatic) Eurosceptics and ‘hard’ Eurosceptics (Lynch, 2015); only seven Conservative MPs elected in 2010 were pro-Europeans<sup>3</sup>, a mere 2.3% of the parliamentary Party (Heppell, 2013, p. 349, Table 4). According to Taggart and Szczerbiack (2008, p. 8), ‘soft’ Euroscepticism ‘is where there is not principled objection to European integration or EU membership’, but where there are concerns about particular policy issues, and hence a ‘qualified opposition to the EU, or...a sense that the ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory’.

As such, ‘soft’ Eurosceptics tend to favour continued EU membership, albeit on looser or more flexible terms, probably following a renegotiation of the conditions of membership and possibly the reclaiming of particular powers. This was certainly David Cameron’s stance, and one shared by many of his Conservative colleagues in the Cabinet, such as Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and then Home Secretary Theresa May—who is now Prime Minister following Cameron’s post-referendum resignation.

By contrast, ‘hard’ Eurosceptics share ‘a principled opposition towards the EU and European integration’ and therefore ‘think that their countries should withdraw from membership’ (Taggart & Szczerbiack, 2008, p. 7). As such, hard Eurosceptics tend to view their country’s membership of the EU as non-negotiable, because they are fundamentally opposed to European integration; negotiation entails compromise, and will thus still entail at least some betrayal and loss of sovereignty, regardless of any corresponding concessions gained or granted by Britain’s EU partners. Consequently, nothing short of complete and irrevocable withdrawal from the EU will suffice for ‘hard’ Eurosceptics.

Although the majority of Conservative MPs during Cameron’s leadership were actually ‘soft’ Eurosceptics, the ‘hard’-Eurosceptics nonetheless comprised 35.4% of backbench Conservative MPs, and thus a significant minority of the parliamentary Party (Heppell, 2013, p. 347, Table 3). Crucially, these ‘hard’ Eurosceptics were much more vocal and well-organised than the ‘soft’ Eurosceptics, and also willing to defy the Conservative leadership and official Party policy on the issue of Europe. In so doing, they tend to view themselves as true patriots, plac-

ing the national interest over and above party or partisan interest.

#### 6. The Rise of the UKIP

In parts of the UK, increasing Euroscepticism has been reflected, and then reinforced, by the growing electoral support enjoyed by UKIP led, until 2016, by the charismatic Nigel Farage. Initially, UKIP was seen as a single-issue party on the fringes of British politics, but during the last decade, UKIP has both exploited growing anti-EU sentiment in Britain, and considerably exacerbated it too (see Ford & Goodwin, 2014, for a study of the rise of UKIP and Right-wing populism in Britain).

What has also increased support for UKIP in recent years has been increasing concern over immigration, particularly migrants from the East European states which joined the EU in 2004. This concern was inevitably exacerbated by the 2008 global financial crash, and the consequent increases in unemployment and welfare expenditure. Predictably, EU (and especially East European) migrants were variously blamed for ‘taking jobs’ from British workers, and thus fuelling unemployment among the indigenous work-force, particularly as migrant workers were deemed to be willing to work for low(er) wages, which therefore made them more attractive to British employers.

On the other hand, migrant workers were also blamed for fuelling social security expenditure, the rationale being that large numbers of East European migrants were moving to the UK solely to claim ‘generous’ welfare benefits. Similarly, migrants were variously accused of placing an additional strain on Britain’s public services and infrastructure—hospitals, housing, schools, transport, etc.—in an era of austerity and consequent cuts in funding and service provision.

It was in this context that UKIP skilfully linked Britain’s EU membership with concern over the free movement of labour, and insisted that the country would only be able to halt (and reverse) EU migration into Britain by leaving the EU altogether. Such withdrawal, UKIP argued, would enable Britain to regain control of its own borders, and make its own decisions about who was allowed to enter the country, for what purpose, and for how long. This prognosis enabled UKIP to enhance its political credibility and increase its electoral appeal.

It also allowed UKIP to emphasise a point which subsequently became a major feature of those who supported ‘Brexit’ in the 2015 referendum, namely that many people and politicians who favoured continued EU membership were part of a metropolitan or liberal elite who were out-of-touch with, and thus did not genuinely represent, ordinary British people. This populist narrative argued that the ‘liberal elite’ was patronising and contemptuous towards citizens who were anxious about the impact of EU migrants on their communi-

<sup>3</sup> Heppell defines ‘pro-European’ as being someone who firmly believed that ‘further European integration, with an implicit ‘pooling’ of sovereignty, was essential to renewed British influence on the world stage’ (Heppell, 2013, p. 343; see also Crowson, 2007, pp. 105–126; Garry, 1995, p. 172).

ties. Instead of acknowledging their concerns, the ‘liberal elite’ allegedly condemned them for not embracing multi-culturalism, and denounced them for being racist and xenophobic. In this context, UKIP garnered increasing electoral support and higher opinion poll ratings by portraying itself as being ‘out there’ on the side of ordinary British people against the political Establishment.

Much of UKIP’s growing electoral support seemed to emanate from former Conservative supporters who believed that, under David Cameron’s leadership, the Party was not offering a sufficiently robust policy towards the EU, partly because of his own soft Eurosceptic stance, and partly because of the constraints apparently imposed by his pro-EU Liberal Democrat coalition partners. The concern was *not* that UKIP would actually win many seats from the Conservatives but that, under Britain’s simple-plurality electoral system (where candidates only need to attain the largest number of votes in a constituency, not a majority, to be elected), a UKIP candidate might attract just enough votes from the Conservative candidate to deprive them of victory. This was a particular risk in ‘marginal’ constituencies where only a relatively small number of votes separated the first- and second-placed candidate.

This electoral threat had become evident in the 2010 general election, when there were 21 constituencies in which the Conservative candidate was narrowly pushed into second place (behind the Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate), primarily as a consequence of the number of votes won by the UKIP candidate, many of whom, had previously voted Conservative. In some of these constituencies, UKIP only needed to attract a few hundred votes from former Conservative supporters to deprive the Conservative candidate of victory, and thereby enable a Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate to win the seat instead (see Dorey, 2010, p. 432, Table 10).

Further evidence of the extent to which UKIP was attracting increasing support from ex-Conservative voters was gleaned from annual surveys conducted by YouGov (one of the UK’s leading opinion poll companies) for the British Election Survey, and reproduced in an online blog about the radical Right in Britain. The key data from these surveys is presented in Table 1, which illustrates that whereas 16% of UKIP supporters in 2008 had previously voted Conservative, this figure had doubled by 2011, and then increased further, to 37% in 2012. While this meant that a majority of UKIP supporters had previously voted for other parties, or abstained, it still meant that well over a third of UKIP’s 2012 has previously voted Con-

servative, and the scale of the annual increase in Conservative ‘switchers’ was naturally a cause of considerable concern for many Conservative MPs. Naturally, this increased the pressure on Cameron to adopt a tougher stance on the EU issue, hence his pledge to hold a referendum on continued British membership.

## 7. Conclusion: The Long Road to Leaving

In the June 2016 Referendum, there was a 52%–48% vote in favour of Britain leaving the EU, the turn-out having been 72.2%. This was the culmination of several decades of growing Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party, which was itself a product of the changing ideological stance and membership of the parliamentary Party. Having previously been dominated, at senior levels, by pro-European One Nation Conservatives until the 1970s, the Party has since undergone a significant transformation in its ideological stance, both with regard to domestic policies and, indeed, the role of government, and in its attitude towards Europe.

Initially, in the 1980s and 1990s, there remained several prominent and high-ranking pro-European (or Europhile) Conservatives, but these were increasingly challenged, and gradually superseded, by Eurosceptics, with the Maastricht Treaty providing a *cause celebre* around which they could mobilise and hone their critique of the emerging European Union.

However, by the time David Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010, the divisions in the Conservative Party were no longer between Europhiles and Eurosceptics, but between ‘soft’ Eurosceptics and ‘hard’ Eurosceptics, and although the latter were numerically a minority in the parliamentary Conservative Party, they were more cohesive and confident, and more willing to criticise the leadership not being sufficiently resolute and robust in its stance towards the EU. This shift towards overall Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party, and the development of a ‘hard’ Euroscepticism, reflects both the post-1990 ‘Thatcherisation’ of the Conservative Party, and growing concern at developments within, or emanating from, the EU, such as new Treaties and post-2004 East European migrant workers respectively.

These also fuelled the rise of populist anti-EU parties like UKIP, which, in turn, emboldened some Conservative Eurosceptics to demand a tougher stance by the Party leadership, lest further electoral support was lost to UKIP. Meanwhile, in August–September 2014, two Conservative MPs actually defected to UKIP (Douglas Carswell and

**Table 1.** How UKIP supporters voted in the previous general election. Source: Ford (2012, adapted from annual polls by YouGov and the British Election Survey).

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Con	22	12	20	25	16	21	22	32	37
Lab	34	14	17	16	24	27	13	5	3
Lib D	6	5	6	6	6	8	14	1	13

Mark Reckless), raising concerns that more Conservative parliamentarians might follow them, although none actually did so.

Much of the success of ‘hard’ Eurosceptics in campaigning for Britain’s withdrawal from the EU derives from their ability (or willingness) to simplify the issues via short but pithy slogans—‘taking back control’, ‘controlling our borders’, etc.—and appealing to people’s emotions or gut-instincts in denouncing EU bureaucracy and immigration. By contrast, pro-Europeans and ‘soft-Eurosceptics’ erroneously assumed that the case for Britain remaining in the EU could convincingly be made by appealing to ‘facts’, logic, reason, and economic data, yet this approach lacked the simplicity and visceral appeal of anti-European (sometimes xenophobic) arguments and sentiments (Bale, 2016, p. 440; Oliver, 2016, pp. 10–11). Ultimately, the pro-EU/Remain case was often too abstract, esoteric or intangible.

Furthermore, many of those who campaigned to ‘Remain’ in the 2016 Referendum were widely associated with the ‘liberal elite’ (even Conservatives like Cameron, who lived in the previously fashionable and bohemian Notting Hill district of West London) and the out-of-touch inhabitants of the ‘Westminster bubble’. As a consequence, they lacked the requisite credibility or trust to persuade enough people of the case for continued British membership of the EU.

In this context, many of the factors which led to Britain’s ‘Leave’ vote can be characterised as a populist backlash by the ‘left-behind’ (particularly sections of the working-class, and the elderly) who felt that they had not benefited from globalisation, but had been betrayed, ignored or viewed with contempt by the ‘liberal elite’ and ‘politically-correct’. For such citizens, the EU referendum seemed to offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to wreak revenge on ‘globalists’ and the ‘liberal elite’—a populist revolt of the masses (Shipman, 2016, p. 580).

The Conservative Party’s triumphalist ‘hard’ Eurosceptics are now endeavouring to ensure that Theresa May, who succeeded Cameron as Party leader and Prime Minister, does not betray those who voted to Leave by diluting or backtracking on Brexit. The rhetoric now is that May’s Conservative Government will pursue a ‘hard Brexit’, rather than the fudging and finessing that a ‘soft Brexit’ would entail.

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#### About the Author



**Peter Dorey** is Professor of British Politics at Cardiff University, UK. In 2014, he was Visiting Professor of Politics at Bordeaux University. He is the author of over 100 articles, chapters and books on British politics, many of them about Conservative politics. His 2011 book *British Conservatism: The Politics and Philosophy of Inequality* won a 'best book' prize from the UK's Political Studies Association.