

The European dividing line in party politics

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Treaties, divisions, referendums, renegotiations—a repeating pattern

European integration is a cross-cutting political issue that has divided British political parties for over half a century. When Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath sought to take Britain into the then Common Market, he relied on the votes of 69 pro-European rebel Labour MPs to get the European Communities Bill through the House of Commons in 1971—an early sign of the divisive impact membership of the European Union would have on British party politics. Barely a decade after accession, the Labour Party had sought to renegotiate the UK's terms of membership, held a referendum on whether the UK should remain in the Common Market, split in part over the issue and finally fought an election in which it called for withdrawal. Fast forward another three decades and the Labour position was broadly pro-European, while Tory rebels, alongside a party established to oppose membership, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), were advocating withdrawal from the Union. And if withdrawal was not the official Conservative position, Euroscepticism has certainly become prevalent in that party, leading one Conservative parliamentarian to claim: 'The dividing line in the Conservative Party is now in/out.'¹

The impact of British membership of the Union on political parties has been one of division and fragmentation, twin themes which have run through party politics at UK and European level since Britain's accession in 1973. Divisions over 'Europe' have often been visceral, creating internal dissent, inter-party rivalry and occasional rupture. And while Scottish and Welsh nationalists moved from opposition to Europe in the 1970s to support in the twenty-first century, English nationalists were increasingly opposed, as seen in the success of UKIP, which despite its name is strongly focused on England. British membership of the EU has also led to a degree of fragmentation in party politics at the European level, notably on the right of the political spectrum as the European centre-right tried and failed to accommodate the Conservative Party.

This article traces the changing approaches of British political parties towards the EU, showing the extent to which 'Europe' has become a cause of political cleavage, and the impact this has had on the mainstream political parties. It then

¹ Off-the-record interview, 28 June 2012.

assesses the impact of the UK on European-level parties, arguing that the accession of a state that has been at best pragmatic about the European project, at worst downright hostile towards it, has contributed at times to a degree of fragmentation in the European Parliament. The emergence of Eurosceptic parties in several founding member states, not to mention the new members that joined in 2004–2007, ensured that the UK would not be the only sceptical country and that its sceptical parties would potentially have some allies, even if this accorded them little influence. Yet even this shift across the rest of the Union did little to bring the UK into the European mainstream: 40 years after accession, Europe, which had bitterly divided the Labour Party in the 1980s, has become a running sore in both the Conservative Party and the coalition government, while the prospect of a referendum on continuing membership has become ever more real.

Un peu d'histoire

When French President Charles de Gaulle blocked British membership of the Community in 1963 he stressed that ‘the Six’ (that is, the founding member states) were a homogeneous grouping and asserted that the UK would alter the dynamics in an undesirable and, for him, unacceptable way.² The judgement that Britain would reduce the coherence and cohesion of the Community was certainly to prove correct in the sphere of party politics. The founding states had fairly cohesive mainstream party families, comprising Christian Democrats (which were the guiding force behind integration in the early years), Social Democrats and Liberals. Ironically, only de Gaulle himself and the eponymous Gaullist movement in France sat squarely outside this centrist mainstream: a pragmatic rather than a visionary supporter of integration, de Gaulle held attitudes that were perhaps closer to those of the British political class than he or they cared to admit.³ British politicians have rarely had the sort of visionary approach to European integration that typified the founding fathers in the Six. Like de Gaulle, they have tended to view Europe pragmatically, taking positions according to perceived national interest rather than in pursuit of European integration as a goal in its own right.

The eventual accession of the UK along with Ireland and Denmark in 1973, after the departure of de Gaulle from office, immediately altered the party political dynamics within the Community, contributing to fragmentation of the established pattern of party political cooperation at the European level, as both the UK and Denmark were significantly more sceptical about the integration process than their counterparts in the founding states, while all three newcomers had party systems that deviated considerably from the continental mainstream. The UK and Denmark, like other Scandinavian countries, had a Conservative rather

² President de Gaulle, press conference, Jan. 1963, extracts reprinted in Trevor Salmon and Sir William Nicoll, eds, *Building European Union: a documentary history and analysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 87–90. See also David Rennie, *The continent or the open sea: does Britain have a European future?* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2012), p. 1.

³ Parties of the far left and far right all tended to oppose integration, but Communists were never in government, whereas from 1958 to 1981 the Gaullists were the dominant force in French politics, and their attitudes did much to shape the Community.

than a Christian Democrat tradition, while the Irish party system is *sui generis*, determined at the outset by the struggle for independence rather than by the social cleavages that determine party politics elsewhere in Europe.⁴

Accession to the Community was politically divisive in Denmark as well as the UK. However, the Danes managed to avoid deeply damaging intraparty rifts by means of what amounted to an ‘agreement to disagree’, whereby leading figures from national parties were not required to stick to any ‘party line’ in the 1972 referendum on joining the Community. This approach was tried just once in the UK, and was notable only for its lack of success. The 1975 referendum was intended to hold the Labour Party together and to resolve permanently the question of Britain’s membership of the European club. In practice it did neither.⁵ Thus, by 2012 the Conservative Party was assessing whether powers could be repatriated from Brussels and suggesting a renegotiation of the treaties and offering the population a vote on British membership either at the next general election or in a new referendum—all remarkably similar to the Labour stance of the 1970s.⁶ As former Foreign Secretary Geoffrey (now Lord) Howe has put it, there is a ‘tendency, at any given time, for at least one section of our political establishment to challenge some of the basic assumptions of entry’.⁷

The battle lines are drawn: accession and beyond

In contrast to most continental politicians, the British political class was lukewarm about the Common Market from the outset. Edward Heath, who as prime minister would ultimately take Britain in, was an exception, a committed pro-European who put relations with Europe before the ‘special [transatlantic] relationship’. His own Conservative Party was broadly pro-European but without the passion evinced by the Christian Democrats in the Six and not supportive enough to deliver the necessary parliamentary vote for Britain to enter the Community in the early 1970s. The internationalist Liberal Party was strongly supportive of the European project but had so few MPs at the time that its influence was minimal. Providing a foretaste of the way British parties’ attitudes would ebb and flow after accession, the Labour Party, which had sought entry to the Common Market in the 1960s, had resumed a sceptical stance to accession on leaving office in 1970. However, Labour was divided on the issue and its position changed several times during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, while the official Labour stance was not to support accession, Heath secured the passage of the 1972 European Communities Act thanks to the votes of 69 rebel Labour MPs and the abstention of 20 more.⁸

⁴ On the origins of political parties and relationships between social and political cleavages, see Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan, ‘Cleavage structures, party systems and voter alignments’, in Peter Mair, ed., *The West European party system* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 90–149.

⁵ Julie Smith, ‘The 1975 referendum’, *Journal of European Integration History* 5: 1, 1999, pp. 41–56 at p. 56.

⁶ See Rennie, *The continent or the open sea*; Gavin Cordon, ‘People “should have say on EU”, says Hague’, *Independent*, 6 Oct. 2012.

⁷ Rt Hon. Lord Howe of Aberavon, ‘Why Europe matters’, in Maurice Fraser, ed., *Britain in Europe* (London: Systems Strategems, 1998), pp. 177–9 at p. 177.

⁸ See *inter alia* Smith, ‘The 1975 referendum’, p. 47.

The pattern of intraparty division and fragmentation was already set, although over the course of the next 40 years the Labour and Conservative parties would change their respective stances on Europe quite fundamentally, as first Labour and then the Tories adopted sceptical positions.

The 1975 referendum

The Conservatives lost office just 14 months after the UK joined the Common Market, an increasingly divided Labour Party returning to power in a minority administration calling for a renegotiation of the terms of membership to be followed by a parliamentary vote or referendum, as sceptics within the party raised concerns in part over loss of sovereignty, particularly parliamentary sovereignty, and the problems they believed membership of the Common Market meant for the transatlantic relationship.⁹ While leaders of other European states subsequently suggested that the renegotiation was insignificant,¹⁰ it created considerable frustration at the time and damaged the Labour Party's relations with its German counterparts in the SPD for a generation. However, the outcome was sufficient for Prime Minister Harold Wilson to feel able to go to the country on the question: 'Do you think Britain should stay in the European Economic Community (Common Market)?' The answer was 'Yes' and the European question was apparently laid to rest: Britain was in the European Community to stay.¹¹

In practice, however, the referendum had merely papered over the cracks of Labour's divisions on Europe; the danger that Wilson sought to avoid, namely the party splitting, was merely delayed, not averted, and the issue of Britain's continuing membership would go on being debated, gathering pace particularly after the Lisbon Treaty came into effect in 2009.¹² On leaving office in 1979 the party took a turn to the left and away from Europe—a shift given emphasis by the decision of the 'Gang of Four' to establish the breakaway Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. Europe was not the only reason for the Four's departure, along with several other parliamentarians, from the Labour Party—indeed, it seems not to have been even a major reason¹³—but the majority of those involved in the SDP were pro-European and the Europhile ranks of the rump Labour Party were thus much depleted. The upshot was a manifesto for the 1983 general election in which Labour pledged to withdraw from the European Community.

Divisions over Europe were thus temporarily between parties, not within them. While Labour sought exit, the Conservatives, having for the most part campaigned for a 'yes' vote in 1975 and having won a long-running battle over

⁹ Smith, 'The 1975 referendum'.

¹⁰ Hugo Young, *This blessed plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 283.

¹¹ 'The verdict of the Referendum was accepted', asserted David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger in *The 1975 Referendum*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 278.

¹² It was suggested on BBC Radio Four's *The Week in Politics* on Saturday, 26 May 2012, that the opposition recommenced as soon as the day after the referendum.

¹³ Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: the birth, life and death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 10; interviews with John Roper, a founder member of the SDP and later a Liberal Democrat peer, in 1999 and 2012.

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Britain's budgetary contributions,¹⁴ briefly played a constructive and positive role in Europe, pressing for further liberalization via the Single European Act (SEA) in the mid-1980s.¹⁵ Mrs Thatcher's government had expressed a desire to play a positive role in the Community on taking office in 1979,¹⁶ and throughout the 1980s the Conservative Party conference consistently held debates on motions highlighting their credentials as Britain's most pro-European party.¹⁷ For example, there were 44 motions on the EEC in the ballot for debate at the 1980 conference, all broadly supportive of European integration: even the most sceptical merely called for further work on the budget, and many called for further integration.¹⁸ The newly created SDP and its Liberal allies were also committed to integration. Thus voters in the 1984 elections to the European Parliament had the opportunity to vote for one sceptical mainstream party or either of two broadly pro-European parties: a rare occurrence in the UK or indeed elsewhere prior to the 1990s.¹⁹

The SEA and its consequences

The Conservatives' pro-European stance was especially pronounced in 1985–6, as they successfully lobbied for a reduction in barriers to trade in what became known as the '1992 Programme' to complete the internal market. Very much seen as a UK success story which reflected the Thatcherite approach to freeing up markets and economic reform, and one of the key reasons given for staying in the Union in 2012,²⁰ the SEA would paradoxically lead to changes in Europe that contributed to the emergence of a Eurosceptic movement in the Tory ranks from the prime minister down and ensure that by 2012 the dominant view in the Conservative Party was one of scepticism.²¹ The Act, which ceded significant sovereign powers, was ratified without reference to the people through either a referendum or a manifesto commitment, as leading Tories, notably Thatcher herself, believed that parliamentary sovereignty should prevail, having previously argued that referendums were 'a device for demagogues'²²—a stance she may have subsequently come to regret.²³

¹⁴ For a discussion of the British budgetary question, see James Spence's article in this issue, 'A high price to pay? Britain and the European budget', pp. 1237–60.

¹⁵ 'I had one overriding positive goal. This was to create a single Common Market': Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 553.

¹⁶ Off-the-record conversation with former FCO official.

¹⁷ Every agenda for the annual conferences in the 1980s contains a motion regarding 'Europe', invariably stressing the party's credentials as the most pro-European party. I am grateful to Dirk Hazell for information on this point.

¹⁸ Source: agenda for the Conservative Party conference held in Brighton, 7–10 Oct. 1980, pp. 127–31.

¹⁹ The SDP–Liberal Alliance fielded joint candidates in each constituency, hence there were two rather than three pro-European options on the ballot paper.

²⁰ Despite a broadly sceptical approach, Conservative Foreign Secretary William Hague argued that he would support staying in the Union precisely because of the importance of the single market: *Daily Telegraph*, 6 Oct. 2012.

²¹ For a sense of backbench attitudes towards the EU, see Hansard, 24 Oct. 2011, 'National referendum on the European Union', House of Commons debates, cols 46–140.

²² Quoted in Andrew Geddes, *Britain and the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2013), p. 65.

²³ Rennie, *The continent or the open sea*, p. 17. Thatcher herself notes in her memoirs that she did not regret signing the SEA, however: Thatcher, *The Downing Street years*, p. 557.

Aside from the move away from unanimous voting in the Council, the SEA paved the way for Commission President Jacques Delors to press for two further policy developments as logical corollaries to completing the internal market: economic and monetary union (EMU) and social policy. But completing the internal market was as far as Thatcher wanted integration to go,²⁴ and she bitterly opposed both policies, voicing her views in a much-cited speech to the College of Europe in Bruges in 1988.²⁵ This 'Bruges speech' served as the rallying point for an initially small group of Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party who shared Thatcher's concerns about the Community's emerging role, going as it did far beyond the free trade area and internal market that for many was the extent of their European vision, and so the Bruges Group was born. While scepticism increasingly became the dominant Conservative attitude towards Europe, the party would remain divided on the issue as Labour had previously been.

Shifts in attitudes towards Europe occurred in all the main parties over time, as a result of either changes within the Community/Union or changes in *perceptions* of the EU and its purpose, strengths and weaknesses. As the Conservatives lost enthusiasm for Europe in the late 1980s, so the Labour Party gradually shed its reluctance to engage with what it had perceived to be a European capitalist club and became a strong supporter of European integration following Delors's attempts to create 'social' Europe.²⁶ Indeed, Delors's 1988 speech to the Trades Union Congress was one of the factors that seemed most to irk Thatcher.²⁷ By contrast, the moves towards 'social Europe' ensured that the European left as a whole, including the British Labour Party and the trade union movement, would be more in tune with the process of integration than they had been hitherto.²⁸ The unions' changing attitudes towards integration also helped shift the Labour stance, as they recognized their declining position domestically and in light of evidence from the Trades Unions' Research Department that withdrawal would cause job losses.²⁹

In the case of Labour, however, a second factor now rendered Europe more attractive: as the party languished in national elections, it benefited from a classic second-order mid-term effect in elections to the European Parliament.³⁰ Coupled with the effects of the first-past-the-post electoral system, this ensured that Labour was increasingly well (even over-) represented within the European

²⁴ Julie Smith and Geoffrey Edwards, 'British–West German relations 1973–89', in Klaus Larres with Elizabeth Meehan, *Uneasy allies: British–German relations and European integration since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 45–62 at p. 54.

²⁵ Initially intended by the UK permanent representative as an opportunity for Thatcher to set out a positive vision for Europe (notes from an Institute of Directors seminar, 9 Jan. 2004), it quickly became a very different speech, upsetting her European colleagues and serving as a touchstone for sceptics.

²⁶ Labour's initial attitude was not unique: in the 1950s the French Socialists and German Social Democrats had been sceptical for similar reasons. Their stance changed rather earlier than Labour's, however, leaving the UK party rather isolated.

²⁷ Thatcher, *The Downing Street years*, p. 742.

²⁸ See Ben Rosamond, 'The integration of labour?', in David Baker and David Seawright, eds, *Britain for and against Europe: British politics and the question of European integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 130–47 at pp. 134–5.

²⁹ I am grateful to William E. Paterson for this information about the role of the trade unions.

³⁰ See Julie Smith, 'The United Kingdom', in Donatella Viola, ed., *Routledge handbook of European elections* (London: Routledge, forthcoming April 2013).

Parliament, becoming the largest single national delegation in 1994. This situation ensured that Labour exerted an influence at the European level that it could only dream about at home, and as a consequence the pro-Europeans were able to press a more positive case for integration within the party as the relative importance of MEPs increased and they participated actively at all levels of the party.³¹ Thus, the changed direction of integration and electoral success together contributed to Labour becoming the more pro-European of the two main parties.

A move to the sidelines: Maastricht and opting out from the Union

Europe would nonetheless remain a deeply divisive issue in British politics as Euroscepticism became a *leitmotiv* for many in the Conservative Party. While John Major, who became prime minister in 1990 following Mrs Thatcher's departure—which came about in part because of European affairs³²—was not the most Europhile leader the Conservatives had seen, he took a pragmatic stance towards Europe, negotiating opt-outs to what became the Treaty on European Union in 1991. This ensured that for the first time the integration process did not take all member states forward in convoy, leaving the UK outside certain key policies. In a hubristic moment, the outcome was declared to be 'game, set and match' to the UK—not the view that subsequent generations of Tory politicians would hold, yet apt given Major's negotiating stance: 'No federalism. No commitment to the single currency. No Social Chapter. No Community competence on foreign or home affairs or defence. Cooperation in these areas, yes; compulsion, no.'³³ Although Major's demands were met, the Treaty was not ratified ahead of the 1992 general election, which was to bring a cohort of rather more Eurosceptic members to the depleted Tory benches (the majority being just 18).³⁴ Despite the opt-outs, many of the new intake opposed the treaty, which gained parliamentary ratification only after heated disagreements and repeated rebellions in which the whip was withdrawn from several MPs, removing the Tories' working majority. Moreover, just as the Conservatives were becoming divided on the issue of Europe, the sceptics, Thatcher included, began to demand a referendum on the idea of the common currency. The Cabinet rejected the idea, several members objecting on 'constitutional grounds'—the very reason why no referendum had been held on accession or at the time of the SEA.³⁵

Maastricht was to prove a crucial moment in Britain's relations with the Union and, in particular, in the Conservative Party's attitudes towards the EU and their

³¹ This passage draws on discussions with Richard Corbett when he was a Labour MEP.

³² Geoffrey Howe, admittedly not an impartial observer, argued that Thatcher 'invest[ed] most of her remaining political capital in shifting the centre of gravity in her party on this issue. She succeeded in this task, but only at the cost of losing the support of her most senior colleagues, and indeed herself losing power': Howe, 'Why Europe matters', p. 177.

³³ John Major, *The autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 274; see also Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 37.

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of this period, see Anthony Forster, *Euroscepticism in contemporary British politics: opposition to Europe in the British Conservative and Labour parties since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2002), ch. 6; Major, *The autobiography*, chs 12–15.

³⁵ Major, *The autobiography*, p. 275.

coherence. Previously, the Tories had been broadly pro-European, Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech notwithstanding. Henceforth, Eurosceptic rhetoric would be increasingly vocal within the party, in parliament and, more significantly, within the grassroots membership of the local Conservative associations. Europe would be increasingly toxic within the Conservative Party, although withdrawal from the Union never became established party policy as it had been for Labour in the 1980s. Yet if Labour's stance had become more pro-European and pro-Maastricht, the party was not averse to playing party politics over the issue: 20 years after ratification, members of the two main parties were blaming each other for the problems that beset the process.³⁶

If the social and political aspects of integration divided the parties, the legacy of a major economic crisis would divide the Conservatives still further over Europe, weaken Labour cohesion and leave successive chancellors reluctant to risk entry into EMU. Membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism was intended as a stepping stone to membership of EMU, and as such had been viewed askance by Thatcher, but in 1989 her Chancellor, John Major, persuaded her of the merits of entering as a way of curbing inflation.³⁷ On 16 September 1992—Black Wednesday—pressures on the pound saw interest rates soar and the UK promptly left the ERM. The ramifications were profound and enduring. As Major himself put it 20 years later:

It ripped open divisions in the Conservative Party. It hardened battle lines in the bitter debate over Britain's place in Europe. It destroyed tolerance in the party, and laid finally to rest the notion that loyalty was its secret weapon ... There was political blood on the ground and the government's opponents—within and beyond the Conservative Party—took full advantage. Anti-European sentiment was refreshed and reinvigorated.³⁸

A special adviser in the Treasury at the time, a young David Cameron, not instinctively pro-European in any case, was marked by the experience, as was Gordon Brown on the Labour side. Membership of the common currency, always a distant prospect for the UK, was rendered almost inconceivable for successive chancellors.

The baton passes to pro-European New Labour

Politically as well as economically, the UK seemed reluctant to engage positively in Europe. By 1996 the Union was seeking to make further institutional reforms necessitated by the prospect of enlargement to include the emerging democracies in central and eastern Europe, a process the UK actually supported. Frustrated by the actions of a Conservative government that had been blocking EU business in

³⁶ Off-the-record interviews in Brussels, June 2012. See also Forster, *Euroscepticism in contemporary British politics*, pp. 100–102; Richard Corbett, *The Treaty of Maastricht from conception to ratification: a comprehensive reference guide* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 68–9, 73–6.

³⁷ Major, *The autobiography*, p. 138; John Major, 'Britain should seize this chance to strike a new deal with Europe', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 2012.

³⁸ Major, 'Britain should seize this chance'. See also Geddes, *Britain and the European Union*, p. 74.

a dispute over beef,³⁹ the other 14 member states delayed the final negotiations until a change of government in the UK brought in a Labour administration that was expected to be a good deal more Europhile. Certainly the rhetoric of New Labour was more positive—the Conservative peer Geoffrey Howe suggested that this was ‘a Labour government committed to finding a place for our country in the mainstream of European politics’⁴⁰—and the Treaty of Amsterdam was agreed without major problems being raised by the UK. Yet Labour’s Europhile turn did not lead to any major integrationist innovations in the UK, with one exception: Tony Blair signed up to the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty. Thus the social policy that had contributed to Thatcher’s delivering her Bruges speech and to opt-outs under Major was now adopted by the UK in a sign of Labour’s renewed engagement with Europe and of Europe’s shift away from market economics.

By the time the party took office in 1997, Labour also appeared to be in favour of joining the common currency envisaged under the Maastricht Treaty, although, like the other main British parties, it was committed to holding a referendum on the matter.⁴¹ For numerous reasons, this referendum was not held during Labour’s 13 years in office. Tony Blair’s Chancellor, Gordon Brown, devised a set of criteria (the ‘five tests’) that needed to be fulfilled before Britain could join; the media were hostile; and the Prime Minister was unwilling to take a risk on something that might have damaged his credibility, and would have required him to take on the anti-European Murdoch press.⁴² As the Labour politician Giles (now Lord Radice) put it in his *Diaries*, ‘The real obstacle is not economic but political. Tony and Gordon, especially Tony, are “shit-scared” of the Murdoch press. That is the real weakness of this government.’ He later noted of a meeting with Blair: ‘We turn to Europe . . . On British entry, he clearly wants to keep any information campaign low-key for the moment. He doubts whether he can win over Murdoch and the *Sun*, but he will do “what is right” provided he is persuaded of the economic case.’⁴³

In the early years, divisions over Europe were predominantly within, rather than between, parties as a new European cleavage was superimposed on the existing party structures. By the late 1990s, new, single-issue, overtly Eurosceptic parties were beginning to emerge. The first of these was the Referendum Party led by the late Sir James Goldsmith, which won 3 per cent of the popular vote in the 1997 general election on the single issue of a referendum on Europe;⁴⁴ then

³⁹ See Martin Westlake, “‘Mad cows and Englishmen’: the institutional consequences of the BSE crisis”, *Journal of Common Market Studies, Annual Review 1996* 35: 3, 1997, pp. 11–36.

⁴⁰ Howe, ‘Why Europe matters’, p. 177.

⁴¹ Andrew Geddes suggests that Labour’s decision to pledge a referendum was a way to ‘neutralize the issue’: Geddes, *Britain and the European Union*, p. 81.

⁴² In evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown both denied that their policies on the EU and the euro had been directly affected by Murdoch. But their reluctance to move towards a referendum was notable.

⁴³ Giles Radice, *Diaries 1980–2001: from political disaster to election triumph* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), entries for 23 Oct. 1997, p. 400, and 1 May 1998, p. 415, respectively.

⁴⁴ Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell, Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thompson, ‘Euroscepticism and the Referendum Party’, CREST working paper no. 63, Feb. 1998, p. 1, <http://www.crest.ox.ac.uk./papers/p63.pdf>, accessed 11 Oct. 2012.

came the UK Independence Party, which, as the name implies, sought British disengagement from the EU. A knock-on effect was that the Conservatives became increasingly Eurosceptic in their rhetoric in part in order to minimize the political space for UKIP.

Yet by 2001 the electorate did not seem to be particularly concerned about European matters. There was not much to suggest the electorate would have supported entry to the euro, yet neither were they persuaded by the Conservatives' passionate desire to keep Britain out of the euro. Under the leadership of William Hague, the Conservatives chose 'saving the pound' as their main campaign issue in the 2001 general election. This was presented as a countdown, on television and in the print media, with Hague proclaiming each day that there remained 'X days to save the pound'. The campaign failed to mobilize voters: turnout was low and Labour won a landslide victory focusing on a domestic agenda.

The 2001 general election was one of the rare occasions when any of the mainstream UK political parties have focused on European issues during electoral campaigns. Even in the run-up to European Parliament elections, Europe is notable by its absence as parties appear to practise a conspiracy of silence. As the public mood has become ever more Eurosceptic since the Maastricht Treaty, and as the print media have taken an increasingly hostile line, the parties' tacit position seems to be: 'Don't mention the war! . . . sorry, Europe!' They appear to perceive Europe as a 'shield' rather than a 'sword' issue: one on which they might have to defend their position, but not one on which they would rationally opt to take a lead. Even the Liberal Democrats, long seen as the most pro-European of the main parties, have proved reluctant to lead on European matters, in part because pragmatic campaign decisions mean they avoid an issue where their position is not likely to be popular and could lose them votes, but in part because the party, like Labour and the Conservatives, is to some extent divided on Europe.

In the 1950s and 1960s, with just six MPs in the House of Commons, it was easy for the Liberals to adopt a high-minded or idealist policy on the European Community. However, as the party gained more parliamentary seats, its MPs became more concerned about retaining their seats and reviewed their stance. Given the Eurosceptic nature of the British electorate, pro-European policies seemed unlikely to find popular support, especially in some parts of the country such as the north-east and south-west which have been frustrated by the Common Fisheries Policy. Thus, in certain areas, notably the south-west, Liberal Democrat MPs adopted fairly Eurosceptic positions. Indeed, by 2012 UK government officials were stressing how sceptical some Liberal Democrats were—far more so than the Conservative Minister for Europe, David Lidington—despite their respective parties' stated and/or perceived policies on Europe.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Off-the-record discussions with FCO officials during 2012.

From Convention to Constitution: the Lisbon Treaty

The question of British membership of the euro dropped down the British political agenda after the signal failure of the Conservatives' 2001 election campaign. Neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats were willing to take up the challenge of persuading the voters of the merits of membership. This would in turn have required them to be able to convince the media—a task to which they seemed unwilling to devote much political capital, not least in the case of Labour because of internal party differences. The parties were unable to ignore Europe entirely, however. The Treaty of Amsterdam had failed to prepare the Union for enlargement, and while a subsequent treaty (Nice, 2000) made sufficient progress to enable enlargement to occur in 2004 (and 2007), it was clear even before the ink was dry that a further treaty reform would be required. Following an elaborate process to prepare for this reform, in the form of the Convention on the Future of Europe and the subsequent intergovernmental conference,⁴⁶ member states signed the Constitutional Treaty (or Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe) in 2004. This treaty would mark a crucial turning point in the development of the Union and create a further fault-line in British politics over Europe.

In line with the stance previously taken on euro membership, namely that it should be agreed only after a referendum—and in marked contrast to the decisions of successive governments, Labour or Conservative, over the appropriate method for ratifying revisions to the EU treaties—Blair, under pressure from his more sceptical Cabinet colleagues, including Gordon Brown, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, announced that he would hold a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.⁴⁷ French President Jacques Chirac immediately responded that France would also hold a referendum (he subsequently blamed Blair for bouncing him into this decision). Several other states were either constitutionally required to hold referendums on the treaty, or opted to do so, including the Netherlands, which had never before held a referendum. Given the prevalence of Euroscepticism in the UK, pundits as well as the European Commission argued in speculating about this series of referendums that it would be best for the UK vote to be held last in the hope that there would be a positive domino effect, as there had been with the accession referendums in 1995 and again in 2004: that is, that if the most positive states voted first and secured victory for their 'yes' campaigns, this might encourage more sceptical states to do likewise.

Before any serious preparation for the promised British referendum was undertaken, two founder member states, France and then the Netherlands, rejected the treaty by significant majorities. In the absence of any 'Plan B', and mindful that it would not be possible simply to ask France to vote again to 'get the right answer' as had been the case with the smaller, newer members, Denmark and Ireland, over the Maastricht and Nice treaties respectively, the process of integration was

⁴⁶ While the Convention was intended to engage the public and bring in a larger number of national parliamentarians than the traditional method of the intergovernmental conference, it served rather to ensure that one British representative, Gisela Stuart, would become increasingly Eurosceptic.

⁴⁷ Interview with Sir Julian Priestley, Brussels, 18 July 2012.

temporarily halted for a period of 'reflection', as proposed by Britain's Labour Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw. The British referendum on the Constitutional Treaty was off the agenda and there was no longer any need for the pro-Europeans in the ruling Labour Party or elsewhere in the UK to try to prepare the voters for a 'yes' vote. Yet it was already clear from the media coverage of the Convention on the Future of Europe and the Constitutional Treaty that it would have been difficult to win them over to the case for ratification, which in turn would have made it extremely difficult for the government to win the referendum, even on a document that included so many of the UK's preferred policies that the French had dubbed it 'the British'.⁴⁸

When German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as president of the European Council, pressed her colleagues to return to the negotiating table after the 'reflection period', states held rather contrasting views on how to move forward. Two states may have rejected the Constitutional Treaty but 18 more had actually ratified it and were reluctant to go back to their electors again. The result of the negotiations of 2007 was more limited than the Constitutional Treaty, most visibly in the very fact that the new revisions fell short of any pretensions to be a constitution for the Union. Rather, the document that became the Lisbon Treaty was an amendment to the existing treaties, just as the SEA and Maastricht had been. While Ireland was constitutionally bound to hold a referendum on this new treaty, other states were not, and most rapidly back-tracked from the idea. Those countries that had ratified the Constitutional Treaty claimed that the Lisbon Treaty was so similar that it did not require a separate referendum. By contrast, the British Labour government sought to stress the limited nature of this treaty reform, emphasizing that it entailed only minor modifications to the treaties and thus as amendment to the treaties as had occurred many times previously without the need for a referendum.⁴⁹ This claim was rather undermined by the assertion of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who had chaired the Convention which led to the Constitutional Treaty, that the Lisbon Treaty differed little from that document and was a constitution in all but name.⁵⁰

Whatever the merits of the argument regarding the content of the respective treaties, the decision was clear: the Labour Party, now led by Gordon Brown, was determined to ratify the Lisbon Treaty by parliamentary means rather than a referendum, in line with past practice. The Liberal Democrats were divided on the matter: many, particularly those in the House of Lords who had lived through the 1975 referendum, were anxious about throwing the European question open to plebiscite. By contrast, Lib Dem MPs were more willing to countenance the idea of a referendum, albeit one that would focus on Britain's ongoing membership

⁴⁸ Robert Badinter, quoted in Anand Menon, 'Britain and the Convention on the future of Europe', *International Affairs* 79: 5, Sept. 2003, pp. 963–78 at p. 978.

⁴⁹ Geddes, *Britain and the European Union*, p. 99.

⁵⁰ See Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, 'La boîte à outils du traité de Lisbonne', *Le Monde*, 26 Oct. 2007, available at http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/10/26/la-boite-a-outils-du-traite-de-lisbonne-par-valery-giscard-d-estaing_971616_3232.html, accessed on 8 Oct. 2012, and 'The EU Treaty is the same as the Constitution', *The Independent*, 30 Oct. 2007, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/valeacutery-giscard-destaing-the-eu-treaty-is-the-same-as-the-constitution-398286.html>, accessed on 14 Oct. 2012.

of the Union rather than the merits of a particular treaty. The MPs hoped that the 'in or out' question would elicit a positive answer in a way that a vote on a specific treaty reform would not, in part because referendums tend to be used as a way to kick the incumbent government rather than focusing on the merits of the issue at hand, and in part because referendums on treaty reform run into particular problems because they are so technical in nature.⁵¹ Europe thus proved to be divisive even within the historically most pro-European of the main parties.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives continued to demand a referendum on Lisbon even after the necessary legislation had passed through all the stages of parliamentary approval. Unsure of when the general election would be held, they adopted a position that if the treaty had not come into effect before they took office they would seek to reopen the matter and hold a referendum—the clear inference being that they would be campaigning for a 'no' vote should the opportunity arise.⁵² In the event, the treaty came into effect in December 2009 some months before Brown went to the country, so the opportunity for reopening the discussion appeared to have been lost. This, however, did not deter some of the fiercest Eurosceptics from arguing that there should still be a referendum on Lisbon, forcing the party leadership to reject this idea once in government.⁵³

The coalition and Europe

At the time of the 2010 general election, many Conservatives were still wedded to the idea of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Local Conservative associations were increasingly Eurosceptic and expected their MPs to reflect this. Since their strongest challenger to the right was UKIP, this was perhaps unsurprising; after all, the hard-line sceptic party had taken many votes and seats that the Tories could reasonably have expected to fall to them in both the 2004 and 2009 European elections. The vast majority of Conservative candidates thus accepted that in order to be selected they had to reply 'the European Communities Act' to the loaded question in selection interviews: 'Which piece of legislation would you repeal?'⁵⁴ Not all were Eurosceptic, but the balance within the parliamentary party had certainly shifted in that direction. Whereas in 1992 Major had faced a small number of hard-line Eurosceptics, this attitude was the dominant discourse among the 2010 Conservative intake. The issue had essentially become one of degree, not whether members were pro- or anti-European but rather *how* sceptical they were: did they favour withdrawal, renegotiation or more minor attempts to repatriate powers?⁵⁵

⁵¹ Lucia Kubosova, 'UK Liberal leader calls for vote on EU membership', *EU Observer*, 25 Feb. 2008, <http://euobserver.com/843/25717>, accessed 11 Oct. 2012.

⁵² See Geddes, *Britain and the European Union*, p. 99. This stance was in marked contrast to the approach taken by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, when she insisted on the importance of parliamentary sovereignty, but in line with the stance taken by many Tory Eurosceptics from the time of Maastricht onwards.

⁵³ For the debate on the second reading of the EU Bill see Hansard (Commons), 7 Dec. 2010, cols 191–223.

⁵⁴ Off-the-record conversations; see also Rennie, *The continent or the open sea*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ This was especially notable in a backbench debate on 24 Oct. 2011 calling for a referendum on EU membership, during which almost without exception the Conservative contributors each announced: 'I am a Eurosceptic.' See Hansard, 24 Oct. 2011, cols 46–140, 'National referendum on the European Union'.

The Conservatives' shift into deep scepticism about Europe was thrown into particular relief by the fact that the 2010 general election had not given a majority to any party. The Conservatives thus found themselves in a coalition with the more Europhile Liberal Democrats, in a deal intended to last for a full five-year parliamentary term. Europe was inevitably one of the issues that was addressed in the coalition agreement (formally the Programme for Government) negotiated by key figures in the two parties. The agreement paved the way for the European Union Act 2011, which envisaged referendums on treaty reforms that would cede more powers to the EU. Liberal Democrat Europhiles expressed considerable reservations about the new legislation, while the hardest Eurosceptics on the Tory benches raised concerns that the legislation did not go far enough. The coalition was thus divided over Europe, with both partners experiencing a degree of internal division as well.

A guiding assumption underpinning the negotiations and debate on the 2011 Act was that no one was anticipating any treaty reform in the near future. The decade of intergovernmental negotiation and referendums that had been required to secure the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty meant there was little appetite for further reform in any of the member states. However, the party leaders had reckoned without the eurozone crisis, which from late 2010 led politicians across Europe, including the British Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, to argue that a solution would necessitate closer cooperation at the European level.⁵⁶ The upshot was the 'fiscal compact', which Angela Merkel sought to enshrine in the treaty in December 2011. David Cameron vetoed a change to the treaty unless he was given concessions on unrelated matters in return, hoping that would be the end of the matter. However, the other 26 member states were not persuaded that his demands were reasonable and decided to conclude a separate treaty without the UK. Back at home, Cameron's Liberal Democrat deputy, the Europhile former MEP Nick Clegg, was caught unawares. Initially claiming he had agreed the negotiating line he quickly backtracked, very publicly expressing anger at the actions of the Prime Minister on the *Andrew Marr Show*.

Cameron's actions may well have been intended to ensure that the EU did not agree to a treaty reform that would necessitate a referendum in the UK—which would undoubtedly have been lost—but they highlighted yet again the problem that Europe poses for British political parties. And now it was causing divisions not just within his own party but within the wider coalition as well. Speculation that the issue might cause the Liberal Democrats to withdraw from the coalition proved wide of the mark, but the debacle highlighted yet again the contested nature of Britain's relations with Europe. In the case of the Conservatives there was a further incentive to take an increasingly sceptical stance, namely the rise of UKIP, which had come second in the 2009 European Parliament elections, and owed much of its success to its ability to take votes from the Conservatives; by late 2012 the party was claiming that it might even win the EP elections in

⁵⁶ This issue was discussed by Julie Smith on *The World Tonight*, BBC Radio 4, 29 Aug. 2011.

2014.⁵⁷ In addition, there was considerable frustration among Conservatives who felt that the Lib Dems were too influential in government and had taken jobs that would otherwise have gone to Conservative MPs. Yet if domestic factors led the Conservatives to adopt an increasingly hostile stance over Europe, this left them with few allies, not least following Cameron's decision to pull the Conservative MEPs out of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) grouping in the European Parliament, in 2009. The decision was the fulfilment of an electoral pledge made when he stood for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2005—hence for domestic reasons—but would have important repercussions for his premiership in due course, as Angela Merkel in particular placed considerable weight on the EPP as a forum for European-level discussions with fellow leaders of the centre-right.

The impact of British membership on party politics at the EU level

At the time the UK joined the Common Market, party political activity at the European level was largely restricted to cooperation among MEPs, who sat in transnational groups based on political affinity rather than national interest.⁵⁸ Britain's entry had a notable effect on the European Parliament, both in introducing more sceptical members, notably on the Labour side, and by increasing the number of groups, as the Conservatives opted to sit in a new group rather than join the centre-right Christian Democrats in the EPP.

Traditional social and associated political cleavages, as well as ideology, ensured that the Conservatives remained apart from the centre-right mainstream in 1973 and for the two decades that followed. Preferring to create their own conservative grouping, they established the European Democratic Group with two Danish MEPs, rather than join the federalist Christian Democrats, even though Tory MEPs such as Peter Kirk were broadly integrationist in the early years. Thus the Conservatives immediately contributed to a fragmentation of the party system within the EP.⁵⁹ Party fragmentation and internal divisions would characterize the impact of British EC membership on the party groups in the EP, just as they characterized the impact of the Community on the UK.

The Eurosceptics entering the EP stood in marked contrast to the typical MEPs of the 1970s, who sought appointment precisely because they were supportive of integration, thereby ensuring that MEPs were predominantly Europhile and in favour of further integration.⁶⁰ By contrast, the Labour Party, having refused to send representatives to the EP until after the renegotiation and referendum,

⁵⁷ 'Nigel Farage on UKIP–Conservative deal over referendum', BBC News, 21 Sept. 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19676378>, accessed 11 Oct. 2012.

⁵⁸ The European Parliament was officially called the Common Assembly until the Single European Act of 1986, although its members called it the European Parliament from 1962.

⁵⁹ At that time the rules for establishing groups within the EP were not particularly stringent and a group could comprise members from just two member states, in contrast to the situation 40 years on where a group must have members from at least eight member states—a change which would subsequently create problems for the Conservatives.

⁶⁰ Until 1979 MEPs were appointed to the EP from national parliaments rather than directly elected.

subsequently sent a number of Eurosceptics to Strasbourg. These included John Prescott, despatched to the European Parliament in preference to the Europhile John Roper, who would later defect to become a founder member of the SDP, and the former Cabinet minister Barbara Castle, who opted to stand for Labour in direct elections to the EP in 1979 despite her deep reservations about the Community, precisely on the grounds that she preferred to be on the inside fighting. While their attitudes towards the EU would not be unusual four decades on in the UK or indeed in most other EU countries, given the rise of Euroscepticism on both left and right, they were nothing short of exceptional in the 1970s.

Labour initially had problems with its European partners. The European Socialist Party (PES) manifesto for the 1979 elections in particular was marked by footnotes reflecting points on which Labour wished to record its disagreement. Over the years, however, Labour became far more embedded into the PES in parallel with its shift towards a more Europhile position. In the 1994 EP elections, Labour went so far as to adopt the PES manifesto as its own rather than developing a separate national manifesto, as is typically the case in national parties from all countries and party families. Yet despite its pro-European turn, Labour did not always sit comfortably with its PES allies. Tony Blair may have recognized the importance of Europe and begun his premiership with a more constructive attitude towards the EU than any previous Labour leader, but the other centre-left parties, notably the French Socialists (PS), profoundly disagreed with the more market-oriented approach of New Labour. Thus, the PS was unhappy with Labour peer Peter Mandelson as Trade Commissioner, while Blair frequently found it easier to cooperate with heads of government from the centre-right or even right than with his social democrat allies in the PES,⁶¹ although Ed Miliband as Labour leader from 2010 did look to Socialist colleagues.

Of the main parties in the UK, only the Liberals fitted squarely into the European party system, espousing as they did the integrationist perspective of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR), later the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). However, Liberal representation in the EP would be short-lived. Member states were unable to agree on a common electoral system before the introduction of direct elections to the EP in 1979 and each state thus determined its own rules. The vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system adopted by the UK ensured that no Liberal MEPs were returned until 1994 (nor, indeed, were any Greens elected in 1989 when, as the third largest party taking 15 per cent of the popular vote, they won no seats). The electoral system chosen by the UK had a significant impact on the European Parliament as a whole, as the distorting effects of first-past-the-post ensured that first the Tories and later Labour were significantly overrepresented. The first EP elections coincided with a honeymoon period for Mrs Thatcher's Conservative Party, which won 60 seats out of a total 410. This ensured that the Conservatives were an important element

⁶¹ Blair built up a series of bilateral and trilateral relationships with, among others, President Chirac, the Gaullist president of France, and José Maria Aznar and Silvio Berlusconi, respectively the prime ministers of Spain and Italy.

in the EP, although they were rather less influential than they would have been had they sat as part of a large group such as the EPP. In 1994 Labour, benefiting from mid-term hostility towards the Conservatives, won 62 of the UK's 87 seats (out of a total 626).⁶² However, as a full member of the PES and its group in the EP, Labour benefited in terms of posts within the EP, seeing Pauline Green become leader of the PES group as a whole and Ken Collins take the chair of the influential Environment Committee.⁶³ Thus, until 1999 the impact of the UK EP elections could be felt across the whole parliament.

The situation altered somewhat in 1999 with the introduction of a list form of PR for EP elections in the UK, which saw the Greens' first representation, a significant increase in the number of Liberal Democrat MEPs (who had won two seats in 1994) and, for the first time, the election of three MEPs from a list—that of UKIP—whose *raison d'être* was to oppose British membership of the EU. This domestic fragmentation, arising from changes to the electoral system, would ensure that British delegations within the larger EP groups would be less significant than in the past, while paving the way for the Liberal Democrats to play a leading role in the third group, ELDR/ALDE.

The Conservatives remained aloof from the centre-right EPP until 1992, when John Major negotiated a deal whereby Conservative MEPs would sit with the EPP Group in the EP as 'allied members'. Thus they would be part of any calculation of members of committees or other positions in the EP alongside full EPP members, but they would not be bound by the EPP manifesto in any way. This pragmatic deal proved useful in giving the Conservatives a chance to take high office in the EP in a way they could not achieve in the old European Democratic Group—and to do so without loss of their identity. That the EPP was prepared to accept the Tories on this basis can probably best be explained by a strategy adopted by Klaus Welle as the secretary general and his compatriot, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who sought to expand the EPP beyond its traditional Christian Democrat and federalist base.⁶⁴ This expansion took the form of welcoming new members from the emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe, which would become EU members in 2004 and 2007, wooing parties from other party families, and accepting 'allied members' of the group, namely MEPs who did not join the party or necessarily subscribe to its manifesto but were keen to benefit from the advantages of sitting in a larger group in the EP. This strategy was successful in terms of sheer numbers: following the 1999 elections, the EPP group was the largest in the EP. Yet it resulted in a group that was far less ideologically coherent than previously, and rather less federalist in outlook. Despite this watering down of the EPP's federalist ideals, as a candidate for leader of his party David Cameron pledged to pull Tory MEPs out of the EPP group. He made good his promise in

⁶² Statistics given in Richard Corbett, Francis Jacobs and Michael Shackleton, *The European Parliament*, 8th edn (London: John Harper Publishing, 2011), pp. 82, 408.

⁶³ In fact, Collins would serve 15 out of his 20 years in the EP as chair of the Environment Committee.

⁶⁴ This paragraph draws on the author's own conversations with Klaus Welle in the 1990s, discussions with a former student who conducted research on the EPP, and on Graham Watson, *Building a liberal Europe: the ALDE project* (London: John Harper Publishing, 2010).

early 2009, declaring that the Tories would not sit with the EPP after the European elections that year. This gave the domestic opposition considerable scope to criticize his tactics and his new allies in what would become the European Conservative and Reform Group, and caused considerable annoyance in the EPP family. While the Tories said the change would not damage their relations with the EPP, the EPP indicated otherwise.⁶⁵ In particular, Angela Merkel felt that some of Cameron's new allies were not sufficiently democratic,⁶⁶ a criticism that was also made by his opponents at home.

Paradoxically, just as de Gaulle blocked the accession of a state whose approach to European integration fitted well with his own, so Cameron withdrew his party from its relationship with the EPP precisely at a time when its growing heterogeneity and loss of overt federal vocation should have made it more attractive—and when co-decision made it more crucial to have like-minded allies. The Conservatives' entry into the EPP ensured that the group became more diverse; its withdrawal would have knock-on effects for the EPP, for the Conservatives and for the UK's place in Europe.

The relationship with the EPP was not just about sitting with the group in the EP. It entailed a deepening of relations with other centre-right leaders. Cameron's reluctance to engage with his peers had repercussions for the 2011 European Council meeting that resulted in the Cameron 'veto'. Cameron lacked personal contacts of the sort other leaders—Labour and Conservative—had developed within the framework of the transnational parties. By withdrawing from the EPP group, a move criticized as 'autistic' by the then French Europe Minister Pierre Lellouche, not only did the Conservatives lose a forum for discussion and the chance to exchange ideas informally prior to summit meetings; Cameron's unwillingness to attend EPP leaders' meetings made it more difficult for him to establish a relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, potentially a key centre-right ally, for whom EPP membership was significant.⁶⁷ By withdrawing from the EPP he excluded himself from a pre-summit dinner at which crucial matters seem to have been discussed in December 2011.⁶⁸ Like Labour figures before him, Cameron had damaged relations with his German opposite number, this time with considerable ramifications. Europe had again shown its potential to divide British political parties and to leave the UK isolated as party politicians failed to engage in the consensual politics traditionally practised in the Union.

Over the 40 years since British accession, membership of the EU has proved deeply divisive for the two largest British parties, as they have struggled in turn to reconcile their domestic agendas with EU-level policy. The attempt by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson to cover the cracks by 'renegotiating' the terms of membership and holding a referendum was intended to resolve the issue of membership permanently; ultimately it failed. Yet as the integration process

⁶⁵ Off-the-record conversations with EPP officials in 2009.

⁶⁶ I am grateful to William E. Paterson for this insight.

⁶⁷ Merkel refused to meet Cameron bilaterally before he became prime minister: private conversation with an official of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006.

⁶⁸ Off-the-record discussions.

The European dividing line in party politics

deepened, opinion in the UK, encouraged by the print media, became increasingly Eurosceptic, leading to the rise of UKIP and attempts by mainstream parties to adopt more Eurosceptic rhetoric. This situation was most pronounced in the Conservative Party, where the failure to hold a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty fuelled the Eurosceptic flames, which were further fanned by the failure of Labour to offer a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Paradoxically, as the sceptical (or, at their most positive, cautious) attitudes of UK political parties shaped government positions and their interactions with other European leaders, they ensured that the UK could not play the leading role in the EU to which they aspired. They were thus incapable of shaping the agenda as effectively as they would have been able to do had they adopted a more constructive and engaged approach, thereby rendering the EU even less attractive to the sceptical public and press. Further renegotiations and renewed referendums are unlikely to be any more conclusive than Wilson's attempt of 1975.

