

Chapter 4: United Kingdom

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Introduction

The United Kingdom's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 would have a profound impact on the country's politics as well as its economy. The unprecedented nationwide referendum of 1975 confirmed parliament's contentious decision to join four years earlier, with a decisive two thirds of voters endorsing 'the Common Market'. This was the culmination of a concerted British campaign that had been undeterred by the French President De Gaulle twice vetoing previous UK attempts to join the EEC during the 1960s. The decisive margin of the 1975 vote initially stymied further debate over the issue, although the main opposition party did briefly advocate withdrawal from the EEC in the early 1980s. The UK's inaugural European parliamentary campaigns were dominated by primarily domestic considerations and gave the electorate an opportunity to register their discontent with the government at Westminster (Heath et al, 1999). The results of the first four elections held between 1979 and 1994 track the gradual move of voters away from the Conservatives and towards Labour, though the former persisted in renewing their mandate to run the country three times during this period.

The Tories' landslide victory in the inaugural European Parliamentary elections of 1979 came within weeks of Margaret Thatcher's first entrance into Downing Street. The next triumph on this scale followed with Labour's win in 1994 in an outcome that presaged the party's national triumph three years later. And although the results of the two intervening European elections were closer, they also mirrored each other with the Conservatives and Labour winning by a similarly modest margin in 1984 and 1989 respectively (Figure 4.01). From 1999 onwards subsequent electoral outcomes proved different because the UK had been obliged to adopt a more proportional system of voting in place of its traditional majoritarian method. The change favoured smaller parties such as the Greens who had previously been denied European parliamentary representation despite attracting meaningful electoral support. Formed in 1993, the pro-withdrawal United Kingdom Independence Party also benefitted from the revised voting system introduced. Somewhat paradoxically, the elections to a parliament whose existence it strenuously opposed would provide this party with the ideal platform from which to espouse its cause.

Future leader Nigel Farage was among three UK Independence Party (UKIP) MEPs returned in a modest but nonetheless significant breakthrough for his party. The party's support grew in successive European elections and helped bring the issue of EU membership to the forefront of British politics (Figure 4.02). This was in an era when the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were pursuing an avowedly integrationist agenda—albeit one that did not embrace the case for UK adoption of the single currency. The prospect of Britain joining the Euro at the turn of the millennium provided the Conservative opposition with a strong theme to rally around; however, the party remained divided between those who wanted to leave the EU and those who sought to stay and reform the partnership. UKIP capitalised upon the fractures within the Conservative party by offering a stridently unambiguous voice on the issue of Britain's involvement in Europe. In the elections held between 2004 and 2014, Farage and his colleagues played a decisive role in ensuring Brussels was perceived as a growing threat to national sovereignty. By the end of this period UKIP was winning the most European parliamentary seats, further pressurising the Conservative government to hold a referendum on British membership of the EU. Fatefully, this would happen in 2016.

Awkward Partner: Thatcher's Britain, 1979-1994

The inaugural 1979 election was treated with relative indifference by both the media and the public, with limited coverage and low turnout at the polls (Blumler, 1979). Voter fatigue might have been a factor given the recency of the General Election that had brought Margaret Thatcher to power, combined with widespread uncertainty about what the European Parliament could and would do. Anticipating this problem, the EEC had spent £600,000 on advertising in various UK national newspapers to explain the role and functions of the Community and its institutions (Image 4.01). Turnout was still disappointing despite public awareness of the impending election growing from an estimated 13% of the population at the start of this promotional initiative to 56% in a follow-up study (Butler and Marquand, 1981). Subsequent voter participation remained modest with barely a third exercising their democratic right in 1984. Later elections fared little better, with voter turnout fluctuating between 35-38% except for in 1999 when the figure plummeted to 24% (Figure

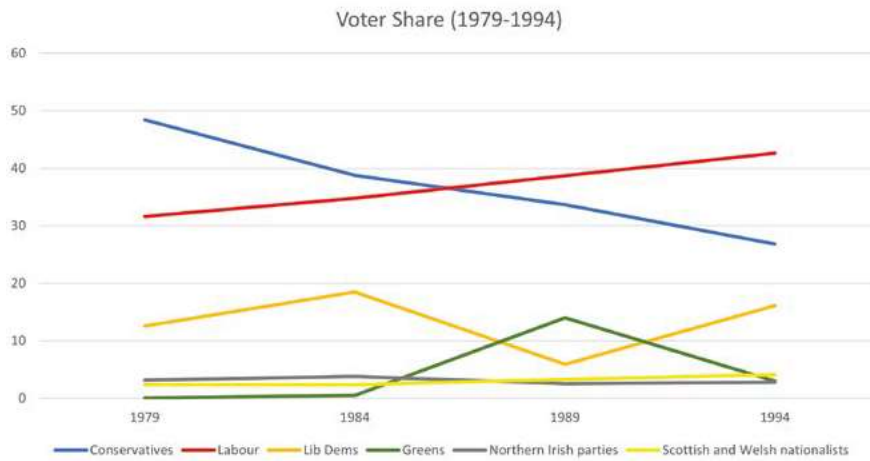


Figure 4.01: main party vote shares in UK European Parliamentary Elections 1979-1994. Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>

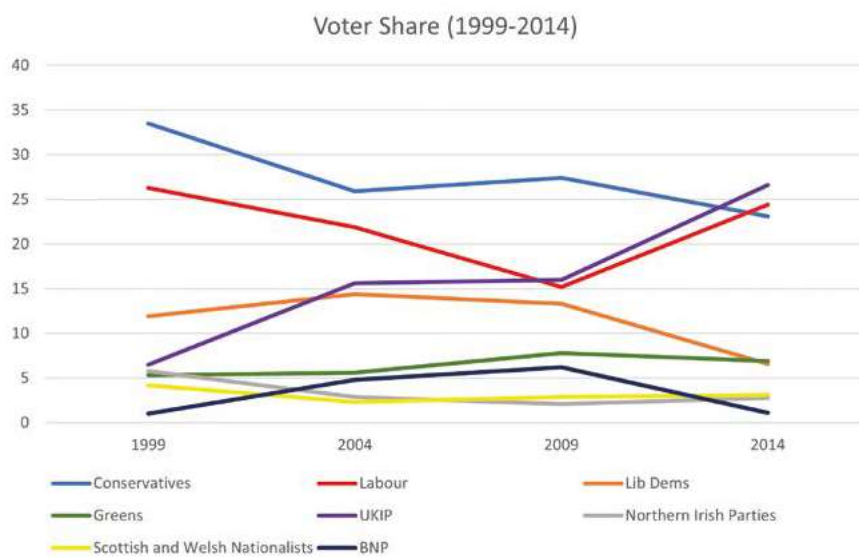


Figure 4.02: main party vote shares in UK European Parliamentary Elections 1999-2014. Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>

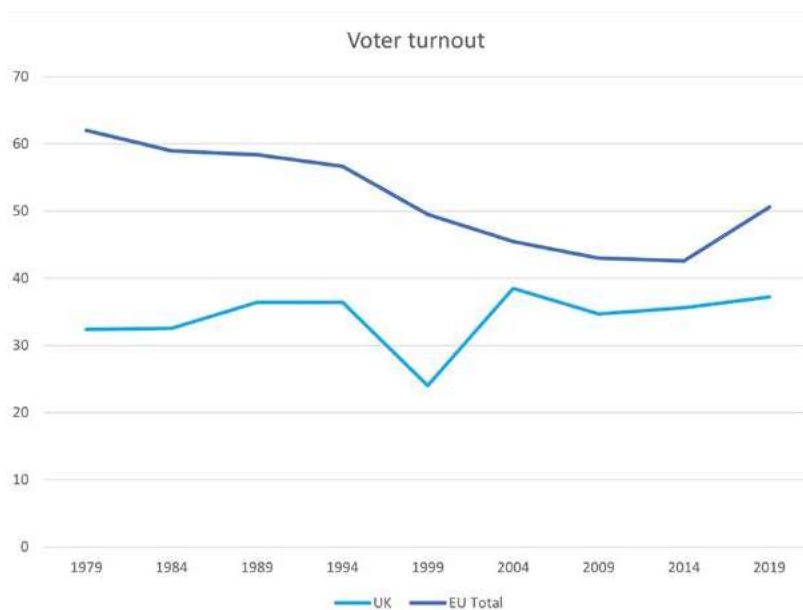


Figure 4.03: Voter turnout In European Parliamentary Elections from 1979 to 2019 in the United Kingdom. Source: www.europarl.europa.eu

4.03). UK turnout has been persistently low by continental standards with the European election 'regarded as the nadir of voter interest in Great Britain' (Barbrook, 1986: 1086).

Public indifference towards European elections has been explained by them being 'second order' affairs in contrast to the far more consequential so-called 'first order' votes for national governments (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). The 1984 campaign appeared to support this interpretation given they witnessed only a modest increase in turnout after another contest dominated by largely domestic concerns (Butler and Jowett, 1985). This happened despite the more concerted electioneering of rival

parties—admittedly efforts that were routinely ignored by the television news media (Siune et al., 1984). The press was similarly indifferent with no major title publishing a lead story during the campaign. Among the best-selling popular newspapers only seventeen election related news items appeared in the fortnight leading up to polling day (Butler and Jowett, 1985).

The Conservatives' 1979 slogan 'Don't hope for a better deal in Europe- vote for one' reflected the new government's determination to pursue a 'Britain-first' approach dedicated to reducing the UK's financial contribution to the EEC. Margaret Thatcher subsequently secured a rebate and her desire to



Image 4.01: European Commission funded newspaper advertisement 'What you need to know before you have your say in the European Elections'. 1979 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1979: 20.

provide 'a strong voice in Europe' formed the party's 1984 pitch (Image 4.02) in a campaign that recognised apathy among supporters could damage the Conservatives' chances in the way it had Labour's in 1979 (Linton, 1984).

By 1989 Thatcher had been premier for a decade and Conservative differences over European policy had become increasingly public. Although her government had previously encouraged closer

economic engagement by supporting the 1986 Single European Act, the Prime Minister had warned against further political union in her influential Bruges Speech of 1988 (Bogdanor, 1989). During this period the UK was characterised as an 'awkward partner' keen to benefit from membership but also against the kind of integration that other leading states felt essential to the future success of their joint enterprise (George, 1990). While Thatcher was

expressing frustration with European colleagues, she received criticism from Europhiles in her party including her immediate predecessor as leader, Edward Heath—the architect of the UK’s entry into the EEC. A leading pro-Conservative newspaper warned ‘Tory disarray’ could lead to defeat: ‘it really is time that the Tories got their act together and found a common approach towards Europe, especially with the elections to the European Parliament coming in July’ (*Daily Mail*, 1989: 6). But Heath was increasingly resolute in his position, and accused Thatcher of ‘patronising, self-serving hypocrisy’ and ‘distorting the truth’ during the campaign (Clarke, 1989). Despite party advertising warning of the ‘socialist’ threat from Labour, the Conservatives succumbed to defeat in a nationwide election for the first time in fifteen years (Image 4.03).

If 1989 marked a setback for the Conservatives, 1994 proved to be a complete rout. In between these elections Thatcher’s successor John Major convincingly won the 1992 General Election but, within months, his authority was seriously undermined by the dramatic events of ‘Black Wednesday’. This single day in autumn 1992 saw the UK forced out of the European Exchange Mechanism having devalued sterling to prevent further damage to the British economy. The Conservatives’ 1994 campaign tried to revive the familiar notion that Labour was wedded to socialism and link this to the development of an overbearing federalist EU superstate. In contrast, the government pledged to resist this kind of integration while articulating a vision of an EU based on free trade in which members retained sovereignty through powers of veto (Butler and Westlake, 1995). But Major’s efforts were insufficient to prevent his party suffering a major loss of support and defeat by Labour.

Labour’s defeat in the 1979 General Election led to significant internal recriminations that overshadowed preparations for the European campaign only weeks later. The debate intensified and caused a major split in 1981 that resulted in the creation of the rival Social Democratic Party, partly in response to Labour’s adoption of a policy in favour of UK withdrawal from the EEC. 1984 was the first major electoral test for Neil Kinnock, the leader who took over following the party’s landslide defeat by the Conservatives the previous year. Labour chose to focus its campaign on domestic issues including rising unemployment and the state of the NHS rather than European concerns. While Kinnock lost his first national election as leader in 1987, he argued the result underlined the need for Labour to further overhaul its programme. Having already abandoned the commitment to withdraw Britain from the EEC, the party now positively embraced ‘Social Europe’, Commission President Jacques Delors’ plan for tack-



Image 4.02: Conservative Party political poster ‘NOT VOTING TOMORROW IS THE SAME AS GIVING YOUR VOTE TO LABOUR’. 1984 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: Conservative Party Trust.



Image 4.03: Conservative Party newspaper advertisement ‘HOW RIGHT YOU WERE, MR KINNOCK. IT WAS £600 MILLION’. 1989 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: *Daily Mail*, 13 June 1989: 11.

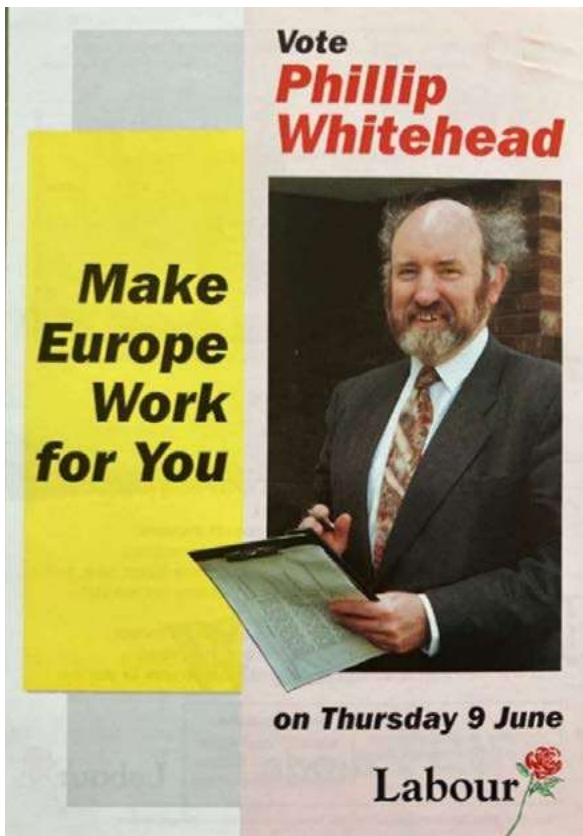


Image 4.04: Labour political party leaflet 'Make Europe work for you'. 1994 European Parliamentary elections. Source: People's History Museum.

ling unemployment and preventing environmental degradation through greater collaboration between member states.

Labour's policy shift came during a period when British public opinion had become more favourable towards the European Community (Currice, 1989). Turnout in the 1989 election nevertheless remained the lowest of any member state after a campaign in which Kinnock had focused on domestic concerns. The Labour leader stressed that voting presented an ideal opportunity to the electorate to offer their verdict on an increasingly unpopular government (Image 4.03). Kinnock's party won the election and added to growing pressure on Margaret Thatcher that led to her dramatic departure from office in late 1990. Although Labour lost the subsequent national election in 1992, the party swiftly recovered to convincingly win the 1994 EU campaign. Although Labour urged the public to 'Make Europe Work for You' (Image 4.04) it once again promoted the European election as a referendum on the Conservatives' domestic failures (Butler and Westlake, 1995). The wisdom of the strategy was reflected in polling indicating that voters were motivated by 'national' rather than 'European' considerations (McLean et al., 1996).

The Liberals, the UK's third electoral force, have traditionally positioned themselves between their two larger rivals on most major issues with the exceptions of Europe and electoral reform. The party has long campaigned to overhaul the UK's majoritarian voting system having been particularly ill-served by it. These electoral arrangements meant they and their successors were unable to secure representation in the European parliament prior to 1994. And while Liberals efforts in 1979 were understandably overshadowed by the Conservatives' recent accession to government, the party subsequently established a close and initially formidable relationship with the Social Democratic Party. Collectively known as the Alliance, their partnership won more than a sixth of the total vote in the 1984 election campaigning on the most pro-EEC platform which extended to supporting British entry into the European monetary system. Despite their resolve, the Liberal/SDP campaign was constrained by rivalries as well as a lack of financial resources (Butler and Jowett, 1985).

The Alliance was relaunched as the Liberal Democrats just prior to the 1989 European campaign but they struggled to make an impact. Although the party continued to style itself as more pro-EU than their principal opponents, the 1994 election slogan 'Unlocking Britain's Potential: Making Europe Work for Us' could have conceivably come from either major rival (Nugent, 1995). The theme created internal tensions with former leader David Steel encouraging his successor Charles Kennedy to adopt a more



Image 4.05: still taken from 'Slime Child' from the Green Party Election Broadcast. 1989 European Parliamentary elections. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

avowedly Europhile position. Kennedy and his party were nevertheless able to celebrate winning their first MEPs. Aside from the Liberal Democrats, their two larger rivals and those from Northern Ireland, the only other UK party to secure European representation were the Scottish Nationalists. During the 1975 referendum the Scottish National Party (SNP) had campaigned against membership of the EEC but radically changed their position to the extent that by the later 1980s Scotland's 'independence in Europe' became a familiar slogan and representation of how central the EU had become to their identity. And despite fluctuating domestic electoral fortunes, Winnie Ewing became the party's sole MEP in 1979 and a high-profile advocate for their cause over her twenty-year European parliamentary career (Bochel and Denver, 1985).

One of the most dramatic European-related electoral developments in British politics came with the rapid rise of the Green Party in 1989. In 1984, the Ecologists had received a thirtieth of the support that its now rebranded successors achieved in a remarkable advance that saw the Greens secure third place overall. Despite backing from a sixth of voters, the Greens failed to win any seats. But this spectacular performance underlined the extent to which less established parties could make advances through European elections (Curtice, 1989). The Green surge capitalised on a changing public mood.

In a memorable Party Election Broadcast entitled 'Slime-Child', the party used several school-aged actors to illustrate the varied harms being done to the environment. The film featured children explaining the environmental threats to Britain while simultaneously being covered by various noxious looking liquids (Image 4.05). The video was applauded for having broken 'new ground in television advertising' (Travis, 1989: 5).

In press adverts, the Greens identified assorted threats to public health emanating from the use of nitrate fertilisers, nuclear waste, and the discharge of raw sewage (Image 4.06). The campaign also questioned the sincerity of rival politicians' pro-environmental credentials because as one supporter put it: 'there is a great deal of difference between putting on a Green hat for an election and wearing one all the time'. Success like this meant the party attracted greater scrutiny: their electoral surge in 1989 proved fleeting and they were once again polling in single figures by the end of the following year (Pattie et al., 1991).

The Era of Blair... and UKIP: Debate and Discord, 1999-2014

Following Labour's triumph in the 1994 European elections, the party returned to government with a landslide victory in 1997. Tony Blair's popularity was reflected in the party's 1999 EU campaign slogan

**To stop the flow of raw sewage,
use your ballot paper**

On Thursday June 15, everyone from Land's End to John O'Groats will have the chance to vote Green in the European elections. Why should you?

All the other parties are making lots of Green noises. So why not stick with them and hope for the best?

Because there is a great deal of difference between putting on a Green hat for an election and wearing one all the time.

Sadly the growth oriented politics of '1992' have nothing to do with people. If you really want clean water, uncontaminated food, a sea you can swim in and a future for your children, you're going to have to vote for it.

Otherwise the concept of pollution will simply be perfumed or dug in someone else's backgarden in Portugal or Greece - and before you can say 'Neil Kinnock! Margaret Thatcher will be hosting another environmental conference assuring us all that real progress is being made and that lead free petrol is going to save the world. It isn't.

The hard truth is that unless action is taken immediately to reduce the flow of carbon dioxide, to end the use of nitrates, and to clean up our environment no-one will be making much of a living in the not too distant future.

WE ARE CAMPAIGNING ON 5 MAIN ISSUES.

ONE. It is unacceptable that mothers in certain parts of the country should be advised against giving tap water to their babies because it is so contaminated. We believe that those responsible for polluting our water supply should pay to clean it up. All pollution must be tackled at the source.

TWO. The use of nitrate fertilisers has to be curbed immediately. Not only are these nitrates irrevocably damaging to the soil, the residue is leeching into our rivers, poisoning the water. We'll positively encourage organic farming and will regulate the use of the agricultural chemicals which have so devastated our natural world.

THREE. The seas around Britain are treated like a dustbin. The dumping of raw sewage, nuclear waste, and the burning of toxic waste at sea, is not only short-sighted, but is literally creating marine deserts. It has to stop.

FOUR. As it stands the European Parliament is little more than a rubber stamp for the policies and the ideas of the European Commission. You can't vote for European Commissioners, they're appointed by the government. This is obviously wrong - not to mention undemocratic. The Green Party would like to see a real

European Community - a Confederation of Regions, working together across national boundaries, not set against each other in economic competition.

FIVE. We see '1992' simply as a charter for more growth. It's not about people, it's about profits. So what you'll end up with is more rubbish and yet more pollution. The devastating consequences of the 'Greenhouse Effect' are happening around us.

An expansionist economic programme is only going to make its effects happen more quickly.

The policies of more and more are simply not compatible with the health of our environment. We need positive measures to conserve resources and energy.

Our planet literally cannot take any more. If it is forced to, then we all end up with less.

DON'T LET YOUR WORLD TURN GREY. VOTE GREEN.

I would like to receive further information on the Green Party
I wish to contribute to the Green Party 1992 (GBP) £100
Changes to be made payable to 'The Green Party Election Fund'

Name: _____ Party: _____
Address: _____
Postcode: _____
Phone: _____
Signed: _____ (Print name in block letters)

THE GREEN PARTY
100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000

Image 4.06: Green Party press advertisement during the 1989 European Parliamentary elections. Source: *The Times*, 12 June 1989: 2.

'Leadership in Europe' and an election broadcast in which various personalities and voters applauded the Prime Minister for his work. The Labour efforts were nonetheless described as 'lacklustre', 'lacking direction', and 'pathetic' by media commentators and candidates, reflecting a sense that Labour had ceded the initiative to their increasingly Eurosceptical Conservative rivals (Butler and Westlake, 2000). By the 2004 elections Blair was less of a presence in Labour's campaign following a marked decline in his popularity in the aftermath of his controversial support for the Iraq war. The party's slogan 'Britain is working—don't let the Tories wreck it again' reflected its strategic focus on domestic issues rather than European-related policies. Labour did, however, concede the case for holding a referendum over the possible ratification of the European constitution as part of an attempt to counter the Conservatives' sceptical narrative.

Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister in 2007. His time in office was soon dominated by the fallout from the global economic crisis (Hayton, 2010). Brown's government also suffered from the 'tidal wave of public fury' provoked by a major expenses scandal involving numerous British politicians that broke just prior to the 2009 European elections (Winnett and Rayner, 2009:173). Labour's strategy acknowledged the crises engulfing the country and sought to reassure the public by presenting the Prime Minister as a hard-working and energetic leader. Brown's economic expertise was reflected in a campaign that stressed better cooperation with

European partners would provide greater security and help to tackle the credit crunch. But the lurid expenses scandal dominated the news agenda and overshadowed an election in which disillusioned citizens either didn't vote or turned to previously marginal electoral alternatives (Mathers, 2010). Labour, the incumbent government, came third in a UK wide poll for the first time in over ninety years, portending their General Election defeat the following year.

Ed Miliband succeeded Gordon Brown as Labour leader and adopted a similar, personalised approach to the 2014 European campaign. Miliband's efforts were undermined by minor gaffes, including a notable image of him eating a bacon sandwich, which would gain notoriety when it was recycled to ridicule him in the following year's national elections (Jones, 2015). In anticipation of the latter campaign, the Conservatives had already committed themselves to holding an 'in/out' referendum should they be re-elected to govern. Labour stopped short of making the same pledge but promised that no additional transfer of power to Brussels would happen without a plebiscite. Although the party made some electoral progress in 2014 and outperformed the Conservatives, the success of UKIP underlined the growing potency of Euroscepticism. Some Labour figures began to argue the case for matching the Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to hold a referendum on EU membership to diffuse the issue (Grice, 2014).

In opposing the Blair and Brown governments, the Conservatives made questioning further European integration a policy priority. Leader



Image 4.07: Conservative Party poster 'There is a Labour Policy on a European Referendum', 2004 European Parliamentary Elections. Source: Conservative Party Trust.

AN IN-OUT REFERENDUM ON EUROPE

LABOUR AND THE LIB DEMS WON'T.
UKIP CAN'T. WE WILL IN 2017.

 **Vote Conservative today**



Image 4.08: Conservative Party advert 'An In-Out Referendum on Europe'. 2014 European Parliamentary Election. Source: European Election Monitoring Center

William Hague styled himself as a 'Euro-realist' rather than 'sceptic' when opposing the UK joining the single currency while supporting continuing EU membership. Adopting a 'docudrama'-style approach, a 1999 Conservative European election broadcast featured actors playing a couple called Debbie and Chris discussing the implications of joining the Euro in their bedroom (Butler and Westlake, 2005). The film acknowledged Blair's popularity, with the woman gently mocking her partner for previously supporting 'your mate, Tony' before they both agree that the single currency was a bad idea. While Hague's opposition to the Euro upset some pro-EU Conservatives, the stance defined his leadership and appeared to resonate with voters, if judged by the party's modest recovery and success in coming first in the 1999 European elections. The campaign was also notable for the way consideration of actual EU policies, rather than just domestic issues, began to inform substantive electoral debate.

By the time of the 2004 campaign, the Conservatives had lost another General Election but had become even more emboldened in their Euroscepticism under new leader Michael Howard. The party mocked the Labour government's apparent equivocation on allowing a referendum on the forthcoming European constitution (Lusoli and Ward, 2005). They did so mindful of declining public trust in the Prime Minister and featured Blair's image in adverts that urged voters 'Don't get mad, get even' (Image 4.07). During the campaign, Howard celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Margaret Thatcher becoming Prime Minister and praised her tenacity in

securing a British rebate from the EEC while restating his support for her 'vision for Britain' as a sovereign country distinct from the UK's EU partners. The Tory leader committed his party to withdrawing from the Common Fisheries Policy and, more generally, the embrace of a 'multi-track' approach by which member states could decide whether and how to further integrate themselves with others. Although Howard failed to win the national election the following year, 2004 saw the party once again top the poll having promoted an avowedly sceptical attitude towards the EU.

Howard's successor David Cameron became leader in 2005 after having pledged to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the major centre-right parliamentary grouping, the European Peoples Party. Cameron had made this specific promise to underline his sceptical credentials and reassure colleagues who were increasingly vocal in their criticisms of what they perceived to be Brussels' erosion of British sovereignty. 2009 saw the party slightly increase its vote in European elections before Cameron became the first Conservative since John Major to become Prime Minister the following year. During his premiership, Cameron continued to respond to the increasing potency of Euroscepticism, most notably when he made his fateful pledge to hold a plebiscite on continuing British membership of the EU. Party advertising in the European elections of 2014 stated this 'in/out referendum' would be held by 2017 at the latest (Image 4.08). An accompanying campaign broadcast made the more generic promise that the Conservatives would 'make Europe work for Britain.'

Ominously for Cameron, who was facing re-election the following year, he and his party dropped to third place. Even the Conservative promise of a UK referendum on EU membership failed to stem the defection of many sceptical voters to the UKIP cause (Kellner, 2014).

Once dismissed as ‘cranks and gadflies’ by David Cameron, UKIP would go on to fundamentally reshape British politics and thereby underline the significance of the EU Parliament and its elections as platforms from which to campaign. Ironically, as has already been noted, the very same European institutions that gave the party a voice were the very same ones they believed the UK must escape if the country was to maintain itself as a politically and economically independent free trading nation. For UKIP the EU represented an existential threat to the ‘British way of life’ (Light and Young, 2009). In 1999 three MEPs including Nigel Farage were returned for the first time, the party having benefitted from the adoption of a more proportional regional list system of voting. 2004 saw support for UKIP increase with former Westminster politician turned television presenter Robert Kilroy-Silk among those who secured parliamentary seats (Happold, 2004). In a campaign video, Kilroy-Silk blamed ‘politicians in London’ for opening ‘our doors to a potential 73 million migrants from Eastern Europe, *that’s 73 million*’, a move he claimed had been endorsed by every British MEP save his UKIP colleagues.

Kilroy-Silk had parted company with UKIP long before the 2009 European elections, but this failed to undermine support for the now formidable Eurosceptic force. Nigel Farage promoted his party’s strong anti-immigration stance, even using wartime imagery of Winston Churchill to reinforce this message (Image 4.09). UKIP also began advocating libertarian positions on taxation and identity cards that were not primarily about the EU (Whittaker and Lynch, 2011). Farage also launched trenchant attacks on a British political establishment he accused of being out of touch as well as corrupt following the hugely damaging Westminster expenses scandal in 2009. It proved the ideal springboard for the party to claim second place in that year’s EP poll, but this impressive result was not replicated in the 2010 General Election.

Nigel Farage generated a large amount of media interest prior to and during a 2014 European campaign that culminated with both major parties being displaced by another, UKIP, in a nationwide election for the first time ever. Farage’s campaign criticised immigration policy in a poster showing an escalator embedded in Dover’s iconic white cliffs, captioned ‘No Border, No Control’ The EU has opened our borders to 4,000 people per week



Image 4.09: UKIP leaflet, ‘Say No to the EU and Mass Immigration’ during the European Parliamentary Elections 2009. Source: Bodleian Archives.



Image 4.10: UKIP webcard 'No Border. No Control'. European Parliamentary elections 2014. Source: European Elections Monitoring Center.

(Image 4.10). Significantly the advert also incorporated the slogan 'Take Back Control of Our Country', that would become a central catchphrase of the debate in the EU referendum two years later. In this, UKIP provided the messaging that would be successfully appropriated by Boris Johnson to help deliver victory for Leave campaigners. The party's first place in the 2014 European elections was a historic feat and underlined the extent to which British politics was now in flux. Despite Foreign Secretary Hague's claims that the victory reflected a 'protest vote', it alarmed the major parties ahead of the 2015 General Election. UKIP won an eighth of that vote having drawn support from voters impressed by its scepticism and who wanted to upend a status quo at Westminster that now included the Liberal Democrats who were junior partners in government (Evans and Mellon, 2016).

Although UKIP and Liberal Democrat policies on Europe were diametrically opposed, they shared a commitment to electoral reform. Both parties were also the main beneficiaries of the 1999 change to the electoral system with the LibDems substantially increasing their number of MEPs despite a reduced vote share. The party maintained third place in 2004 but ceded this to UKIP in 2009 before experiencing a rapid decline in fortunes following their leader Nick Clegg's decision to join the Cameron government as Deputy Prime Minister. Several other colleagues took ministerial portfolios as part of the 2010 deal to form the Coalition. This experience proved costly from an electoral perspective with the LibDems losing all but one of their eleven MEPs in 2014. The spectacular collapse of the party's support was linked to their endorsement of unpopular gov-

ernment policies, some of which contradicted their own positions. The crisis that ensued after their taking office meant the LibDems were less well placed to defend and promote the EU in this critical period.

The misfortunes of the Liberal Democrats meant the news attention they attracted was increasingly unfavourable. The party also had to compete with rivals, including the insurgent UKIP, to influence the media agenda. The LibDems also faced growing criticism and a challenge for their votes from other pro-EU parties who had similarly benefitted from the electoral system introduced for the 1999 campaign. The European sympathies of the SNP and Greens proved no barrier to their winning MEPs and their fortunes further improved following the implementation of the Blair government's devolution programme around the turn of the millennium. Both parties first formed a working arrangement in 2007 and would subsequently go on to dominate Scottish Parliamentary business as their vote in the Holyrood elections increased. Their partnership endured and was strengthened due to their shared commitment to Scotland not only leaving the UK but remaining part of the EU.

While pro-European politicians periodically worked together in the pursuit of common goals, anti-EU Conservatives tended to be more wary of collaborating with UKIP despite their shared outlook and objectives. These politicians regarded themselves as mainstream and therefore took great care to distance themselves from the third and most extreme Eurosceptic party to gain MEPs. The British National Party (BNP) had emerged as the UK's most successful far right electoral force having won representation at local government level from the early 1990s

onwards. The party had always been fiercely anti-EU and the European elections provided an ideal opportunity to campaign against Brussels and multiculturalism, amongst other things. In 2009, leader Nick Griffin became one of the BNP's two MEPs, although the party's success proved fleeting, imploding amid internal recriminations well before the 2014 campaign in which it lost both seats (Hayton, 2010).

Conclusion

The European parliamentary elections were initially not taken seriously by British politicians, journalists and, critically, the electorate at large. Things began to change as the European Economic Community transitioned to become a broader and deeper partnership. This process had required closer co-operation between a growing number of members from across the continent who were prepared to accept more standardised trading arrangements. The European Union that emerged from this provided economic benefits for participating states as well as a political dilemma for some. Nowhere was the resentment towards the so-called 'Brussels bureaucrats' more pronounced than in the UK. Somewhat paradoxically, the European parliament became the ideal platform for those most hostile towards the EU and its perceived threat to British sovereignty. Foremost among these critics was the United Kingdom Independence Party. UKIP didn't exist until 1993 but as its vote grew in successive EP elections so did its parliamentary representation. Although his party never replicated this success at Westminster, leader Nigel Farage became widely regarded as the most influential British politician to have never been elected to the House of Commons.

The influence of Farage and UKIP helped ensure that EP elections were increasingly concerned with European rather than largely domestic affairs. The ensuing debate was, however, increasingly framed in ways that forced Europhiles, particularly in the governing Conservative and Labour parties on to the defensive over the possibility of the UK's further integration within Europe. Leading politicians who were sympathetic towards the EU oversaw campaigns that qualified their support in a wider political context where substantial numbers of voters began to embrace the sceptical cause regardless of how they voted. Labour reacted by promising, if elected, to hold a plebiscite before endorsing further British integration within the EU; the Conservative response took this to another, fateful level when their leader and Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to call a referendum on the more fundamental question of whether the UK should remain members. Cameron was obliged to deliver on his commitment when he won the UK's General Election in 2015. The vote sig-

nalled the end of the Coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, with the former winning enough parliamentary seats to enable them to govern alone. By contrast, the election proved disastrous for the Liberal Democrats who were reduced to a rump. In a portent of what was to come, the party lost all but one of its MEPs in the preceding year's EP elections. Their demise proved another significant blow to the pro-EU cause within Britain from which it was unable to sufficiently recover in time for the fateful 2016 vote for Brexit.

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