Politeja
No. 3(97), 2025, pp. 61-86
https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.22.2025.97.03

Benjamin Martill
University of Edinburgh

Alan Convery
University of Edinburgh

WITHOUT POWER COMES GREAT IRRESPONSIBILITY

Conservative Euroscepticism from Opposition to Brexit

ABSTRACT: In this article, we ask how Conservative Euroscepticism was able to transform over the years from a more-or-less reasonable critique of the terms of the Maastricht Treaty to a trenchant opposition to British association with the EU. We argue that policy radicalism is accelerated by a lack of power over policy outcomes, such that political claims (assumptions, policies) cannot be implemented and thus cannot be tested against the harsh light of reality. We argue that stints in opposition, in coalition, and in a state of severe internal division can all lessen the responsibilities of governing and thus remove the onus on political actors to own – and be held accountable for – their policies. This is reinforced by high levels of external interdependence, the instrumental use of policy pronouncements, and hand-tying strategies by governments, all of which diminish any expectation that policies will need to be delivered. Empirically we demonstrate our argument by charting the evolution of Conservative Euroscepticism from the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 to the present day, drawing on a number of elite interviews with current and former Conservative politicians.

Keywords: Brexit, UK, Conservative Party, responsibility, party change, Euroscepticism

INTRODUCTION

The Conservative Party in the United Kingdom (UK) has been the subject of a significant rise in Euroscepticism over the past several decades. While the Conservatives took Britain into the then European Communities (EC) in 1973, and while Euroscepticism at the time was most prominent on the Labour backbenches, since the 1990s it is the right of British politics that has been most associated with opposition to European integration. The Brexit referendum in 2016 represented the apogee of rising Euroscepticism in the Conservative party and the British population and unleashed a fraught battle between contending party factions over the nature of withdrawal. This culminated in mid-2019 with the rise of the hard Brexit faction under Boris Johnson and the passage of the Withdrawal Agreement and negotiation of the 'thin' Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), formally completing Brexit and setting the stage for a more distant – and highly fractious – future UK-EU relationship.[1]

The Brexit process shows not only how virulent Euroscepticism had become within the Conservative Party but also how divorced from the realities of governing pro-Brexit factions within the party had become. As an ideological project, Brexit was delivered at a significant political, social and economic cost, against the advice of civil servants and experts, and in a manner that brought about long-lasting challenges for the organs of the British state.[2] Prominent claims made by the Leave campaign about the withdrawal process, the EU's preferences and the likely outcome were proven incorrect within days of the Brexit vote, and the UK's negotiating strategy succeeded only in bringing about a harder Brexit which damaged the UK more than the EU.[3] Under such circumstances, it is perhaps understandable that scholars have questioned whether Brexit was rooted in a realistic appraisal of the situation and whether it represented an abrogation of political responsibility on behalf of those who delivered it.

In this article, we ask how Conservative Euroscepticism was able to transform over the years from a more-or-less reasonable critique of the terms of the Maastricht Treaty to a trenchant opposition to British association with the EU. We argue that policy radicalism is accelerated by a lack of power over policy outcomes, such that political claims (assumptions, policies) cannot be implemented and thus cannot be tested against the harsh light of reality. If it is true, as Ben Parker claims in the Spider-Man comics, that great power comes with great responsibility, then it is also the case that the absence of

1 S. Usherwood, "'Our European Friends and Partners'? Negotiating the Trade and Cooperation Agreement," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. S1 (2021), pp. 115-123; T. Wille, B. Martill, "Trust and Calculation in International Negotiations: How Trust Was Lost after Brexit," *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 6 (2023), pp. 2405-2422.

2 G. Baldini, E. Bressanelli, E. Massetti, "Back to the Westminster Model? The Brexit Process and the UK Political System," *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2022), pp. 329-344; J. Richardson, B. Rittberger, "Brexit: Simply an Omnishambles or a Major Policy Fiasco?," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2020), pp. 649-665.

3 F. Figueira, B. Martill, "Bounded Rationality and the Brexit Negotiations: Why Britain Failed to Understand the EU," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 28, no. 12 (2021), pp. 1871-1889.

power can engender irresponsibility. We argue that stints in opposition, in coalition, and in a state of severe internal division can all lessen the responsibilities of governing and thus remove the onus on political actors to own – and be held accountable for – their policies. This is reinforced by high levels of external interdependence, the instrumental use of policy pronouncements, and hand-tying strategies by governments, all of which diminish any expectation that policies will need to be delivered.

Empirically we demonstrate our argument by charting the evolution of Conservative Euroscepticism from the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 to the present day, drawing on a number of elite interviews with current and former Conservative politicians. We show how the period of opposition from 1997 onwards brought about a distrust of the previous (moderate) leadership and a new narrative of Britain's having been sold out at Maastricht. At the same time, Euroscepticism grew in the party, both as a stick with which to beat the pro-Labour government and by virtue of the absence of governmental engagement with Europe. Returning to power under a reformist leader, David Cameron, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition allowed Eurosceptics to blame their pro-European coalition partners for the absence of reform in the UK's relationship with Europe, and allowed Cameron to signal a harder course under a Conservative majority government. The Brexit referendum presented opportunities to future leadership contenders to signal their Eurosceptic credentials without (it was believed) having to deliver on withdrawal. When the public opted for Leave, the same individuals sought to promote more radical (and unworkable) designs on Brexit from the backbenches, leading to harder designs on withdrawal gaining strength.

Our argument contributes to our understanding of Conservative Euroscepticism and the Brexit process by showing how irresponsibility is fostered by the absence of the moderating effects of power. By showing how the Conservatives' long period in opposition, experience of coalition government and in-fighting contributed to the radicalising of preferences on Europe, we are able to better explain conceptually shifting attitudes on Europe. It also helps to systematise prominent claims that Brexit was an 'irresponsible' act. By unpacking the relationship between (ir)responsibility and political radicalism, we show that harder variants of Euroscepticism within the Conservative party were indeed fostered by the specific ways in which proponents were shorn of responsibility for implementing policies they professed. Theoretically, our argument contributes to debates on the sources of policy radicalism, showing how more extreme variants of existing ideas can be nurtured by situations in which their contact with political reality is minimised. We also contribute to the literature on political responsibility itself by showing how distinct configurations of governance arrangements and specific environmental conditions can alter the responsibility of political actors.

A THEORY OF (IR)RESPONSIBILITY AND POLICY RADICALISM

Policy radicalism is a normatively laden term and one that is contested along political and ideological lines. Labour's 1945 and the Conservatives' 1979 manifestoes were

both radical in their own ways. Moreover, what is radical and potentially illegitimate for one individual may be perceived as 'common sense' for others (e.g. restrictions on immigration). Nonetheless, policy radicalism is a helpful concept. There is a long tradition of studying radicalism on both the left and the right, and the term can help us differentiate between run-of-the-mill policy pronouncements and those – like Brexit – that have significant transformative potential. There are many sources of radical politics, including path dependence and spillover dynamics,[4] institutional determinants such as majoritarianism,[5] the rise of populist and insurgent parties,[6] and competitive party system dynamics.[7] We use a composite definition of policy radicalism that incorporates several different components. Policies which are more radical will, inter alia: (1) envision a significant departure from the status quo; (2) propose outcomes which are not shared across the political spectrum; (3) incur high costs, or come with the risks that high costs may result; and (4) challenge existing constitutional and political norms. This measure is an ideal-type and not all policies will exhibit each measure of radicalism, but generally speaking the more of these criteria are met, the more radical we can say a given policy is.

We argue here that, among other things, one significant determinant of policy radicalism is the extent to which political actors lack control over the policy environment. This is because control over policy induces temperance in the form of push-back from political reality. We distinguish two kinds of irresponsibility; internal and external. Internal sources of irresponsibility refer to the position political actors occupy within the system and their relationship to the levers of power within the state. In depicting these, we draw on different modes of executive-legislative relations[8] to help describe the different ways in which actors in the legislature can find themselves at arms' length to power (and thus responsibility). External sources of irresponsibility, on the other hand, are those situational factors which determine how much responsibility for the maintenance of the status quo political actors should feel.

---

4 M. Brusenbauch Meislová, B. Martill, "Getting Brexit Done? The Politics of Issue-Eclipsing Pledges," *Journal of European Public Policy* (2024), pp. 1-24; C. Hay, S. Farrall, "Establishing the Ontological Status of Thatcherism by Gauging Its 'Periodisability': Towards a 'Cascade Theory' of Public Policy Radicalism," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2011), pp. 439-458.

5 A. Lijphart, "Democratic Political Systems: Types, Cases, Causes, and Consequences," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1989), pp. 33-48.

6 L. Ezrow, "Research Note: On the Inverse Relationship between Votes and Proximity for Niche Parties," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2008), pp. 206-220; A.M. Sayers, D. Denemark, "Radicalism, Protest Votes and Regionalism: Reform and the Rise of the New Conservative Party," *Canadian Political Science Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2014), pp. 3-26.

7 N. Carter, M. Jacobs, "Explaining Radical Policy Change: The Case of Climate Change and Energy Policy under the British Labour Government 2006-10," *Public Administration*, vol. 92, no. 1 (2014), pp. 125-141.

8 A. King, "Modes of Executive-Legislative Relations: Great Britain, France, and West Germany," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1976), pp. 11-36.

Internal Sources of Irresponsibility

The first kind of powerlessness is rooted in participation in and responsibility for governing. If you have to govern, then you also have to take seriously the responsibilities of governing, including cautious management of the state, its institutions, its reputation, and key relationships. Governing also establishes responsibility to stakeholders external to the state, whether in the form of international organizations, allies, investors and financial markets, or global media and citizen audiences. Moreover, power over policy makes political actors subject to feedback loops from policy announcements, allowing them to adjust policies that do not succeed in having the desired effect. We articulate three distinct ways in which political actors can be unmoored from responsibilities of governing: (1) oppositional, (2) coalitional, and (3) factional.

The first is *oppositional*. Being in opposition loosens the responsibilities of power for political actors because it denies them the opportunity to act on their claims. Whilst in opposition, party commitments cannot be tested, and thus it cannot be established empirically what the opposition would do in a given situation, nor how successful any policy proposal would be. Opposition leaders do not need to justify their policies externally nor take the reputational hit when they deviate from agreed positions in the international arena. Opposition parties not only lack incentives for good statecraft, they may also have perverse incentives to recommend policies that actively undermine the standing of the government. (Such 'traps' are not unheard of in political history). Moreover, the move into opposition often undermines the position of established party leaders who have demonstrably not succeeded in maintaining power, further undermining the position in the party of those tempered by the realities of governing.

The second is *coalitional*. By sharing the responsibilities of government across multiple actors with distinct organisational interests, coalition government creates incentives for parties to engage in competition over the assignation of blame and responsibility. Specifically, party leaders can strategically cite the opposition of coalition partners to core party policies as a reason for their non-implementation in a manner that occludes their unworkability. In these circumstances, such policies are not rejected, but merely wait out the duration of the coalition government. Moreover, the responsibilities of governing and the inevitable compromises that result can easily be pinned on coalition partners, such that compromise becomes associated with an external constraint on the party's freedom of manoeuvre.

The third is *factional*. Even within governing parties, not all actors hold the same level of responsibility for government policy as others, which has implications for the extent to which they are held accountable for the government's position. Backbenchers, for instance, are largely freed from the responsibilities of delivering workable policies by virtue of not holding government posts, and are tied to policy in more diffuse means (e.g. the whipping system). Moreover, challengers and leadership hopefuls often seek to distance themselves from the government's actions and articulate new policy directions as part of this. Where significant factionalism exists, rival factions may too be in a position where their favoured policies do not inform the government's agenda. Under these

situations, backbenchers, challengers and non-dominant factions all find themselves relatively untethered from the realities of governing responsibly.

External Sources of Irresponsibility

There are also factors external to the state which can reduce the effective power of political leaders over outcomes and thus diminish the perceived sense of responsibility in a way that encourages radicalism. While a great many factors in principle can influence the responsibility political actors feel for the maintenance of the status quo, we focus here on two specific examples: (1) the extent of interdependence (and corresponding degree of policy 'lock in', and (2) the extent to which policies can be instrumentalised.

The first is *interdependence*. Where governments are tied into institutional arrangements from which exit is highly costly their responsibility to defend the status quo is correspondingly – and paradoxically – diminished, since these conditions make exit highly unlikely. In other words, the more inextricable existing arrangements are, the easier they are to criticise, since the likelihood of an actor's bluff being called are so low. Examples of this phenomena can be found in cases of asymmetric interdependence and of policy insulation and 'lock-in' across European politics, from threats of Euro-exit on behalf of Le Pen in France to Euro-rejectionist positions in small states like Hungary and Slovakia. The abrogation of responsibility fostered by such powerlessness is reinforced where there is no clear path to delivering any such policy or where there exists no mechanism through which it could be achieved.

The second is *instrumentality*. Where policies are designed for leverage and intended as threats, responsibility for delivering policies is correspondingly lowered, since the intention is never to deploy the intended policy. The threatened use of nuclear weapons for deterrence offers a stark example of how instrumentality brings about a less cautious approach to weapons that no state would ever wish to use.[9] But there are many other examples, too. Within international organisations and dense regime networks, it is a common strategy to use threats of 'exit' as a means of obtaining concessions and reform, since these organisations depend on states for their financing and credibility.[10] In these and other cases where the policy is never intended to be delivered, the lack of underlying responsibility engendered can lead to greater radicalism in policy proposals.

The third is *expectations*. Political actors often have expectations placed on them in terms of their responsibility for the maintenance of specific political and institutional arrangements. Where these expectations apply to actors, we would anticipate their sense of responsibility over policies which impact these areas would work so as to preclude radical change. Examples of such areas of responsibility abound in international politics, including the presumed responsibility for the European powers for formerly colonised territories, the responsibility accruing to the US for the maintenance of the

[9] F.C. Zagare, "Rationality and Deterrence," *World Politics*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1990), pp. 238-260.

[10] N. McEwen, M.C. Murphy, "Brexit and the Union: Territorial Voice, Exit and Re-Entry Strategies in Scotland and Northern Ireland after EU Exit," *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2022), pp. 374-389.

liberal international order,[11] or the responsibility of European states for the maintenance of the current European order, including those – such as Germany – which display high levels of responsibility in their actions.[12] Where these expectations are lacking – including in some quarters of UK party politics – one would expect radical policies to be less tempered by perceived responsibilities for the maintenance of the status quo.

CASE STUDY: CONSERVATIVE EUROSCEPTICISM FROM OPPOSITION TO BREXIT

In the remainder of this paper, we examine the relationship between (ir)responsibility and policy radicalism through a case study of Euroscepticism in the British Conservative Party since the 1990s. We chart the emergence of a virulent form of Euroscepticism among Conservatives during this period which underwent further radicalisation during the party's period in opposition and which was subsequently incubated among specific factions as the party returned to power. We show specifically how groupings that promoted Eurosceptic discourses after 2010 were able to do so because the policies were prevented from becoming government policy – and thus impinging on a reality which differed from the one they represented – by virtue of the constraints imposed by coalition government (from 2010) and by factional in-fighting (after 2015). These factors were reinforced by external background factors, including the high costs of leaving the EU (which made the prospect itself seem almost unthinkable), the instrumental way policies of exit were intended to be deployed by their proponents, and the absence of any perceived responsibility among Eurosceptic Conservatives for maintaining the overall EU system.

Conservative Euroscepticism provides a useful case study for several reasons. One is the seismic consequences which resulted from the decision to leave the EU in the June 2016 Brexit referendum. Britain's withdrawal from the EU – Brexit – has shaped British politics and foreign policy,[13] altered EU politics in important ways,[14] and

[11] G.J. Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2009), pp. 71-87; D.A. Lake, "Rightful Rules: Authority, Order, and the Foundations of Global Governance," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2010), pp. 587-613.

[12] H. Tewes, "Between Deepening and Widening: Role Conflict in Germany's Enlargement Policy," *West European Politics*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1998), pp. 117-133.

[13] G. Baldini, E. Bressanelli, E. Massetti, "Back to the Westminster Model?..."; B. Martill, "Withdrawal Symptoms: Party Factions, Political Change and British Foreign Policy Post-Brexit," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 30, no. 11 (2023), pp. 2468-2491; L. Rogers, "Cue Brexit: Performing Global Britain at the UN Security Council," *European Journal of International Security*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2024), pp. 122-140; M. Russell, "Brexit and Parliament: The Anatomy of a Perfect Storm," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 2 (2021), pp. 443-463.

[14] L. Béraud-Sudreau, A. Pannier, "An 'Improbable Paris-Berlin-Commission Triangle': Usages of Europe and the Revival of EU Defense Cooperation after 2016," *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2021), pp. 295-310; P.J. Cardwell, "The End of Exceptionalism and a Strengthening of Cohe-

influenced the course of global politics.[15] As such, accounting for the developments that led to Brexit is an important scholarly endeavour. Another reason the case is a helpful one is that it allows us to gain purchase on the key theoretical concepts under study. The Brexit vote represented a radical break with the status quo but has also been frequently talked about in terms of 'irresponsibility',[16] albeit that the concept itself has not been subject to critical inquiry. Moreover, changing discourses of Euroscepticism, coupled with changes in the proximity of Conservative Eurosceptics to power since the 1990s, afford analytical leverage over the relationship between the relationship between (ir)responsibility and policy radicalism.

We adopt a historical approach which follows changes in the variables of interest and charts the Conservatives' relationship to power and responsibility alongside the degree of radicalism expressed through discourses of Euroscepticism. As we will show in the following sections, Conservative Euroscepticism became more radical as the party found itself out of power, and was subsequently maintained by limitations on the extent to which the policies could be implemented in practice. Our narrative draws on information from a range of sources, including the voluminous secondary literature on Brexit, biographies of the major political actors during the period, speeches by political leaders, and background insights from interviews conducted with senior officials and politicians during the period. In the sections below, we first set out the background to the Conservative Party's thinking on European integration before discussing the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes in opposition from 1997 to 2010, the party's experience of coalition government alongside the Liberal Democrats from 2010 to 2015, and the evolution of the Brexit process as it evolved from David Cameron's 2015-16 renegotiation to Boris Johnson's negotiation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) in 2020.

We must also acknowledge that there were additional pressures on the Conservative Party to adopt a more Eurosceptic position. First, the perception that the threat from UKIP could be dampened or neutralised by hardening the party's European policy was a powerful incentive to move on this issue. From the mid-1990s, the Conservative Party had to consider how to deal with the threat on the right, from the Referendum Party in 1997 to UKIP in the 2000s. The rise of UKIP reflected other fissures in the electorate beyond the European issue[17] but it incentivised Conservative elites to think about how they could change their policy stance to win back voters from challenger parties on the

rence? Law and Legal Integration in the EU Post-Brexit," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 57, no. 6 (2019), pp. 1407-1418; B. Laffan, S. Telle, *The EU's Response to Brexit: United and Effective*, Basingstoke 2023; L.A. Schuette, "Forging Unity: European Commission Leadership in the Brexit Negotiations," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. 5 (2021), pp. 1142-1159.

15 R. Adler-Nissen, C. Galpin, B. Rosamond, "Performing Brexit: How a Post-Brexit World Is Imagined Outside the United Kingdom," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2017), pp. 573-591.

16 C. Duggan, "Interfering in Brexit: Responsibility, Representation, and the 'Meaningful Vote' That Wasn't," *European Journal of English Studies*, vol, 25, no. 1 (2021), pp. 49-64.

17 M. Sobolewska, R. Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, Cambridge 2020.

right. Second, Conservatives were also influenced by broader perceptions of the UK's economic performance. Whilst it appeared the UK's economy was outperforming the Eurozone, particularly after 2008, it was easier to argue that EU membership represented a barrier to economic dynamism. The Conservatives' version of Euroscepticism always involved an appeal to a more Thatcherite and free-trading political economy.[18]

We acknowledge also that there are dynamics other than the absence of responsibility which contributed to a harder Brexit, the ultimate end-state of Conservative Euroscepticism in this paper. Indeed, the existing literature highlights a multiplicity of factors contributing to the radicalisation of Conservative views on Europe after the referendum, including: (a) a politics of intransigence between rival party factions;[19] (b) outbidding among contenders for leadership of the pro-Brexit right;[20] (c) the absence of a landing zone capable of appeasing both UK and EU negotiating aims;[21] (d) the difficulties of brokering agreement within a majoritarian political system;[22] and (e) unsuccessful efforts to make credible UK threats to 'walk away'.[23] Our claim in this article is simply that the distance of various pro-Brexit groupings from power at crucial moments lessened their responsibility for implementing the proposals they tabled and contributed independently to increased radicalisation of Eurosceptic views in the party. Our historical approach aims to capture this effect alongside other relevant dynamics and developments.

1. BACKGROUND

Britain's relationship with the EEC/EU has differed in many respects from those of other member states. Unlike the original six, the UK did not join at the beginning in the 1950s, a product of Britain's intra-Commonwealth trade patterns at the time, its global (yet declining) geopolitical status, and its status as a victor in the Second World War. When the UK did apply to join the EEC in 1961 it was only after an about--turn regarding the potential of European integration to enhance Britain's global clout and economic competitiveness. Britain had to wait a further ten years to join owing

[18] D. Baker, A. Gamble, D. Seawright, "Sovereign Nations and Global Markets: Modern British Conservatism and Hyperglobalism," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2002), pp. 399-428.

[19] T. Heinkelmann-Wild et al., "Divided They Fail: The Politics of Wedge Issues and Brexit," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2020), pp. 723-741.

[20] M. Brusenbauch Meislová, B. Martill, "Getting Brexit Done?...".

[21] P. Schnapper, "Theresa May, the Brexit Negotiations and the Two-Level Game, 2017-2019," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2021), pp. 368-379.

[22] Th. Quinn, N. Allen, J. Bartle, "Why Was There a Hard Brexit? The British Legislative Party System, Divided Majorities and the Incentives for Factionalism," *Political Studies*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2024), pp. 227-248; M. Russell, "Brexit and Parliament...".

[23] A. Convery, B. Martill, "Neverland: The Strange Non-Death of Cakeism in Conservative European Thought," *Journal of European Integration* (2024), pp. 1-20.

to French President Charles de Gaulle's veto of the British application, with the UK joining in 1973 alongside Ireland and Denmark. The wait to join not only meant Britain had not had the opportunity to shape the project, it also helped to discount in London's eyes some of the issues that would become perennial bugbears for the UK, including the imbalance of budgetary contributions.[24] Britain's role as the 'awkward partner'[25] was cemented by the Wilson government's decision to hold an in-out referendum on renegotiated terms of membership in 1975, which dented Britain's standing among its European allies, even as the electorate opted by 67% to stay in. At the time, Euroscepticism was principally a phenomenon of the left, but this would change under the next Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher.

Thatcher herself had campaigned to remain in the EC in the 1975 referendum. But she made obtaining a sizeable rebate from the UK's budgetary contribution a cornerstone of her European policy upon coming to power, approaching the task with a characteristically uncompromising approach.[26] Her success in locking in a permanent rebate in 1984 was seen as a triumph for British hard bargaining and became something of a touchstone for future Eurosceptics within the party.[27] Thatcher was a supporter of efforts to establish the single market programme, but not of the institutional changes her European partners felt should be part of the process. When the French and Germans pushed to re-open the Treaties in the mid-1980s – a process that would result in the Single European Act (SEA) – the Prime Minister felt she had been pushed into accepting moves towards European federalism she instinctively opposed.[28] UK officials felt that the provisions of the SEA were more expansively interpreted by EU institutions than they had foreseen.[29] Thatcher's increasingly hostile position on Euro-federalism was on display in her 1988 speech at the College of Europe in Bruges, after which a prominent pro-Brexit think tank – the Bruges Group – takes its name.

Thatcher's increasingly strident position on Europe would continue in opposition in a manner that would shape Conservative politics for the next several decades. During the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, her successor, John Major, used a combination of Britain's blocking power and calm but steadfast diplomacy to secure British opt-outs from the common currency. Major's approach received support from the party-at-large, and the 1992 election included a manifesto commitment to ratification. Yet the Danish rejection of the Treaty stalled the process, leading Major to delay ratification, all the while Conservative critics – including Thatcher, from the backbenches – accused the Prime Minister of failing to push for more concessions in light of

24 S. Wall, *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit*, Oxford 2020.

25 S. George, *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community*, Oxford 1988.

26 C. Fontana, C. Parsons, "'One Woman's Prejudice': Did Margaret Thatcher Cause Britain's Anti-Europeanism?," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2025), p. 94.

27 S. Wall, *Reluctant European...*, p. 170.

28 C. Fontana, C. Parsons, "'One Woman's Prejudice...'", p. 94.

29 S. Wall, *Reluctant European...*, p. 180.

the Danish vote.[30] In the end, Parliamentary assent of the Treaty was only secured by designating it a confidence vote, giving many Conservative MPs the impression their hands had been forced.[31] Criticism of Major's handling of Maastricht, especially among Thatcherites, helped to establish a clear Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party and fused the idea that to be a good Thatcherite meant also being much more sceptical on Europe.[32]

2. THE CONSERVATIVES IN OPPOSITION

Hague (1997-2001)

The Conservatives returned to opposition in 1997 after an unusually long period in government. It was the first time they had been released from the discipline of governing since 1979 and the position of the UK and the European Question had both changed markedly during that period. The party had transformed itself into an institution that was much more in the mould of Thatcher than its predecessors. Heppell has demonstrated that the parliamentary Conservative Party in 1997 was much more economically liberal and Eurosceptic than in the previous Parliament.[33] Many of the most prominent pro-Europeans had retired or did not take any further leadership positions. Although Heseltine and Clarke remained in the House of Commons, the centre of gravity in the shadow cabinet shifted much more towards a Eurosceptic position.

Hague was more sceptical on European matters than Major. The major debate at the time centred on the issue of Economic and Monetary Union. Essentially, should the UK join the Euro now, keep the option open for later, or rule it out altogether? Hague inherited Major's 'wait and see' policy that stated that the UK would not join during the 1997 Parliament but might do so in the one after that if the public approved it in a referendum. However, even before the election loss, the leadership struggled to hold the line with this policy. Several candidates (including a young David Cameron) publicly stated that they did not agree with this position and made it clear that they thought the UK should never join the single currency.

Hague was under pressure during the leadership campaign and subsequently to adopt a harder line on the single currency issue. His eventual position was that the UK would not join EMU for at least two parliaments. This concession to a more Eurosceptic position on the single currency was not in reality a major shift for the party. It confirmed a position that many MPs already held, and it was difficult to imagine a future

30 C. Fontana, C. Parsons, "'One Woman's Prejudice...'", p. 99.

31 J.D. Huber, "The Vote of Confidence in Parliamentary Democracies," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 90, no. 2 (1996), pp. 269-282.

32 C. Fontana, C. Parsons, "'One Woman's Prejudice...'", p. 99.

33 T. Heppell, "The Ideological Composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party 1992-1997," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2002), pp. 299-324.

Conservative Government proposing to join the Euro. Clarke and Heseltine had appeared at a pro-Euro event with Tony Blair, but opposition to the new policy was muted. Moreover, this debate was essentially over in the UK by 2003 when Brown declared that his economic tests had not been met and therefore the Government did not think the time was right to join. Euro membership has not been a significant issue in UK politics since that point.

The gradual shift of the EC towards a more interventionist stance on social and employment matters made it a much more attractive proposition for the Labour Party through the 1990s. Blair in particular was more Europhile than previous Labour leaders had been, part-and-parcel of his 'Third Way' combination of egalitarianism and the free market, and his belief in European integration as a means to regulate globalisation. Even though Labour was in practice 'leading from the edge' when it came to European integration,[34] the governing party's embrace of European integration in principle – and in its rhetoric – gave the Conservatives an additional incentive to bash the EU from the opposition benches.

Opposing new EU treaties negotiated by the Labour Government was also not very significant in the longer term for the Conservative Party. Civil servants were already worried that there was nothing in the proposed new Amsterdam Treaty that the Conservative Government could agree to.[35] Entering opposition meant that the party did not have to think too hard about this. It could simply oppose all new treaties without much thought. This position also had the benefit of uniting the party. Some MPs opposed the contents of the new treaties; some wanted to oppose the government because that is what oppositions do; and others wanted to oppose because they saw any further move towards integration as a threat to UK sovereignty (and this group also contained those who were flirting with the idea of leaving altogether).

Subtler shifts in emphasis and demands were more significant during this period and had longer-term consequences for Conservative European policy. In government, the Conservatives had used their ability to block further integration (via the UK's veto) as leverage to extract concessions from other Member States during the negotiations for new treaties. This was a delicate process that involved compromise and a clear idea of what was possible. Initially, Major's negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty was seen as a British triumph because of the opt outs from the Social Chapter and EMU. However, some Conservative MPs took the view that Major had not negotiated hard enough and that a more favourable deal for the UK was possible. In particular, they thought that it was possible for the UK to undo some of the integration it had already signed up to in the Single European Act. Thus, the idea of a much more à la carte UK membership began to be discussed while the Conservatives were still in office.

In opposition, this idea took on new importance. Instead of Foreign Office civil servants telling Malcolm Rifkind that such a deal was not achievable, the Conservatives

[34] P. Holden, "Still 'Leading from the Edge'? New Labour and the European Union," in O. Daddow, J. Gaskarth (eds), *British Foreign Policy: The New Labour Years*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 157-169.

[35] S. Wall, *Reluctant European...*, p. 226.

were free to explore this option without constraints. The idea that a new form of membership was possible thus started to move from tentative discussion into policy and eventually the new Conservative orthodoxy. In a speech in Germany, William Hague talked about the idea of a multi-speed Europe. Member States, he argued, should not be forced into a one-size-fits-all Europe. Instead, some might decide to opt out of certain Treaty provisions altogether. As Shadow Foreign Secretary, Francis Maude began to flesh out these ideas. Eventually, this new policy on Europe appeared in the 2001 Conservative manifesto. The Conservatives would negotiate a better deal for the UK, particularly around the issue of fisheries. The 2001 manifesto stated:

> *We will insist on a Treaty 'flexibility' provision, so that outside the areas of the single market and core elements of an open, free-trading and competitive EU, countries need only participate in new legislative actions at a European level if they see this as in their national interest.*[36]

Duncan Smith and Howard (2001-2005)

Having appeared in the 2001 manifesto, the à la carte European policy represented the new baseline for the Conservative position. Iain Duncan Smith encountered no internal dissent when he announced that the Conservatives would rule out joining the Euro forever. He also talked about the idea of negotiating a better deal for the UK in the EU.

Under Michael Howard, the leadership also talked about some more specific requests for the UK's reformed membership. At one point, Howard had to be talked out of announcing that the UK was going to leave and then put it to a referendum. Business leaders were horrified about the prospect and the idea was quickly dropped.[37]

At the 2005 election, the party doubled down on the idea of renegotiation. The party promised to renegotiate the UK's opt out from the Social Chapter as a part of a wider commitment to deregulation.[38] There is the commitment to a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty within six months of a new Conservative Government and policy to reform the CAP and try to renationalise control over fisheries policy.[39]

These proposals drew on a wider belief that a different form of membership was available for the UK. These opposition proposals also paid little attention to the difficult choices the Conservatives faced on European questions when in office and the compromises they thought were necessary to keep the UK on board. Glencross refers to this as cakeism: the idea that the UK could have the economic benefits of membership

[36] Conservative Party, *Time for Common Sense*, London 2001, at https://manifesto.deryn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UK-Conservatives-2001-Manifesto.pdf, 27 January 2025.

[37] F. Elliott, J. Hanning, *Cameron: Practically a Conservative*, London 2012, p. 259.

[38] Conservative Party, *It's Time for Action, Conservative Election Manifesto 2005*, London 2005, p. 4, at https://manifesto.deryn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Conservatives-manifesto-uk-2005-1.pdf, 27 January 2025.

[39] Ibid., p. 26.

without the political co-operation.[40] The debate in centre-right think-tanks at this point also downplayed the idea of non-tariff barriers as a problem for the UK outside the EU and instead emphasised the potential benefits of new trade agreements.

3. CAMERON, COALITION, AND THE BREXIT REFERENDUM

Coalition

David Cameron was elected leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005. While Cameron described himself as a Eurosceptic, he was not affiliated with the cadre of highly Europhile MPs who might be described as the true believers. As a relatively young and socially liberal candidate, Cameron was seen by many MPs and Tory members as someone who could modernise the party and help secure electoral victory. Yet Cameron needed support from Eurosceptics to become leader and in the campaign he committed himself to withdrawing the Conservatives from the European People's Party grouping in the European Parliament, as did his then rival for leadership, Liam Fox.[41] As leader, he followed through with this pledge, establishing an alternative party grouping, the European Conservatives and Reformists, in 2009 following the European Parliament elections that year. The move would prove short-sighted when Cameron later needed a venue for informal conversations with other EPP leaders, especially Angela Merkel.[42]

When the Conservatives obtained a plurality of seats following the 2010 general election, Cameron became Prime Minister atop a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Coalition governments occur infrequently under the UK's majoritarian Westminster system and the requirement of compromise with their Liberal Democrat partners was not something many Tory MPs were prepared for.[43] Given the pro-European credentials of the Liberal Democrats, any significant pushback against Europe would be ruled out during this period. Hence, policies focused on precluding future integration, including the Referendum Lock which committed the government to hold a referendum on any future transfers of power, and the Balance of Competences Review, which sought to establish what the appropriate division of power was between the UK

[40] A. Glencross, "The Origins of 'Cakeism': The British Think Tank Debate over Repatriating Sovereignty and Its Impact on the UK's Brexit Strategy," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2023), pp. 995-1012.

[41] Ph. Lynch, R. Whitaker, "Where There Is Discord, Can They Bring Harmony? Managing Intra-Party Dissent on European Integration in the Conservative Party," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2013), p. 323.

[42] T. Bale, K. Pike, ., "Hopes Will Be Dashed: Brexit and the 'Merkel Myth,'" *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2024), pp. 135-153; F. Figueira, B. Martill, "Bounded Rationality...".

[43] R. Hayton, "Conservative Party Statecraft and the Politics of Coalition," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 1 (2014), pp. 6-24.

state and the EU. For the Tory leadership, the presence of a coalition partner arguably helped to manage internal dissent, since it provided a credible means of precluding the adoption of a harder-line on Europe that did not require directly confronting the Eurosceptic cadre of the party. Thus, radical proposals on Europe were not rejected by the leadership at the time owing to their lack of basis in reality, but rather owing to the needs of governing in coalition. Nonetheless, pressure continued to mount from the Conservative backbenchers for a tougher line on Europe and began to disrupt policymaking in other domains, making governing difficult.[44]

Cameron's premiership also coincided with the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis. While the crisis had proven electorally expedient for the Tories in exposing the Labour government's nonsensical claim to have ended 'boom and bust' economics, it would also increase concerns within the party regarding Europe. And it would also set the stage for the deeply unpopular austerity policies adopted under the coalition government and the subsequent rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) as a serious challenger on the right of the party.[45] Moreover, the crisis brought about increased migration into the UK from the EU's economic periphery,[46] further highlighting the distortions resulting from EU rules on free movement.[47] Cameron was specifically concerned that the sustainability of Britain's status as a non-Eurozone member within the EU was threatened by the response to the financial crisis, which saw the EU's priorities shift to firefighting the Eurozone crisis. Some of these efforts involved further integration in areas the UK opposed – e.g. the Banking Union – while others, including proposals for a 'Financial Transactions Tax' threatened the status of the City of London and would disproportionately impact the UK's economic model.[48] Cameron was also concerned that the crisis would undermine UK veto power over future developments in the EU, as illustrated most viscerally by the 2013 Fiscal Compact, which became a non-EU treaty signed by the other member states after a UK veto made a specific EU measure impossible.

With pressure mounting from the backbenches, UKIP threatening to drain support on the right, and increasing concern about Britain's position in the EU, Cameron committed to an in/out referendum on Britain's EU membership in January 2013. Cameron would renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU before putting these new arrangements to a popular vote, subject to the Tories obtaining a majority at the next general election. In Cameron's mind, the referendum and renegotiation would complement one another, since the referendum would provide leverage in the renegotiation and the renegotiated deal would help secure victory in the referendum. The

44 D. Cameron, *For the Record*, London 2019.

45 T. Bale, "Who Leads and Who Follows? The Symbiotic Relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives – and Populism and Euroscepticism," *Politics*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2018), pp. 263-277.

46 H. Thompson, "Inevitability and Contingency: The Political Economy of Brexit," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2017), pp. 434-449.

47 C.J. Bickerton, "The Limits of Differentiation: Capitalist Diversity and Labour Mobility as Drivers of Brexit," *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2019), pp. 231-245.

48 H. Thompson, "Inevitability and Contingency...".

idea of Brexit was something to be deployed instrumentally, for bargaining leverage, rather than a desired outcome. Unlike later years, support for exit at the time was high only among Conservative backbenchers, and was not something supported actively by government ministers or even the general public. Moreover, it is unclear whether Cameron expected that the pledge would need to be triggered, contingent as it was upon a majority Conservative government. Thus, while 2013 was a turning point in the history of UK Euroscepticism, there was very little expectation the policies spoken about at the time would need to become reality.

Renegotiation

Cameron's referendum pledge was triggered in May 2015 when the Conservatives were returned to power with a majority for the first time since 1992. Wishing to avoid the upcoming French and German elections, Cameron set out on a tour of European capitals later that year to sound out EU leaders on the possibility of reform. The UK's effort to renegotiate its relationship was poorly received. European leaders were more focused on dealing with the fallout from Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and considered Britain's aims a distraction. Moreover, they did not see what the problem was – Merkel confronted Cameron over why immigration was an issue when the UK had a labour shortage – and they did not believe the UK was really prepared to walk away from the Union.[49] The Prime Minister was initially cagey about his demands, since he did not want to ask for more than he would get.[50] Gradually, as the scope of potential reforms on the table became clearer, Cameron formalised his asks into four 'baskets': economic governance, sovereignty, immigration, and competitiveness. Judged on their own terms, Cameron's renegotiation was successful. The Prime Minister obtained all his asks, with the exception of a veto for European Parliaments and limits to in-work benefit payments.[51] But critics contended that Cameron had not asked for enough and that the renegotiation showed that Europe was not willing to address the UK's concerns in full.[52]

When the campaign got underway, the renegotiation was seldom used by the Remain campaign, which instead focused on the benefits of EU membership for the UK economy, workers' rights, security, and Britain's influence on world affairs.[53] Because of the overall emphasis on the severe risks to the UK from leaving the EU, Leave supporters dubbed the Remain campaign 'Project Fear'. Cameron's ability to sell the renegotiated agreement was made more difficult by the months he had spent talking up the

[49] D. Cameron, *For the Record*.

[50] D.A. Kroll, D. Leuffen, "Ties That Bind, Can Also Strangle: The Brexit Threat and the Hardships of Reforming the EU," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, no. 9 (2016), pp. 1311-1320.

[51] J. Smith, "David Cameron's EU Renegotiation and Referendum Pledge: A Case of Déjà Vu?," *British Politics*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2016), pp. 324-346.

[52] D. Hannan, *A Doomed Marriage: Why Britain Should Leave the EU*, London 2016.

[53] A. Rogstad, B. Martill, "How to Be Great (Britain)? Discourses of Greatness in the United Kingdom's Referendums on Europe," *European Review of International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2022), pp. 210-239.

possibility of Brexit to European leaders, which not only cost him time defending EU membership later on but also made his own claims less credible when he switched registers during the referendum campaign.[54] The Leave campaign argued that EU membership threatened Britain's independence, its democratic norms, and its global status, claiming that the UK would be financially better off if Britain left the Union.[55] The campaign benefited from the claim that Britain would be able to maintain all the benefits of membership even while leaving, which undercut the Remain side's arguments.[56] It also benefited from the support of prominent individuals on the Tory side, including Cabinet Ministers like Michael Gove and popular personalities like Boris Johnson. The referendum created incentives for these individuals to back Leave in order to burnish their Eurosceptic credentials, whilst the widely-held presumption citizens would ultimately back Remain made this relatively costless in principle. Many on the Leave side, including Johnson, promoted Brexit in instrumental terms, just as Cameron had during the renegotiation. By voting Leave, they claimed, the EU would be forced to listen to the UK and offer a better deal.[57]

Following the vote on 23 June 2016 it became evident that citizens had voted to leave the EU by a narrow margin of 51.9%. The results showed significant disparities across different regions of the UK – Scotland and Northern Ireland voted majority remain – and also across pre-existing socio-political divides.[58] The vote presented a major challenge to the status quo in British politics, not only because of the seismic repercussions of undertaking such a radical break in the relationship with Europe, but also because Brexit was not the preferred policy of the government, nor of the leadership of the main political parties, and Parliament had a considerable majority of pro-Remain MPs.[59] Under such circumstances, Cameron tendered his resignation after the vote, leaving the formalities of leaving the EU to his successor, a role that would go to his former Home Secretary, Theresa May. The greatest challenge for the next government would not only be navigating the new political environment established by the referendum, but also deciding what Brexit would even look like, given the number of different forms of possible association with the EU, and the (incompatible) promises made by the Leave campaign.

[54] D. Cameron, *For the Record*.

[55] A. Rogstad, B. Martill, "How to Be Great (Britain)?...".

[56] A. Glencross, "The Origins...".

[57] C. Oliver, *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit*, London 2016.

[58] S.B. Hobolt, "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, no. 9 (2016), pp. 1259-1277; M. Sobolewska, R. Ford, *Brexitland...*

[59] A. Menon, J.-P. Salter, "Brexit: Initial Reflections," *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 6 (2016), pp. 1297-1318; M. Russell, "Brexit and Parliament...".

4. DELIVERING BREXIT

Theresa May

May, accepted that Brexit would need to be delivered and committed her government early-on to implementing what she understood as the 'will of the people' expressed in the referendum vote. Accused by many of being secretive,[60] May's designs on Brexit were hinted at in the October 2016 Party Conference speech and spelled out in more detail the following year in the January 2017 Lancaster House speech. May's vision for Brexit, built around several 'red lines' that would rule out many of the existing options, and a rejection of 'off the shelf' forms of association which she judged unsuitable for a country with the economic heft of the UK. Alongside this, however, the Prime Minister sought considerable continuity in the underlying economic relationship and in other areas of cooperation, on the basis that it would be against the interests of both sides not to maintain arrangements where both sides would gain. May's pursuit of a bespoke Brexit helped to maintain the uneasy coalition of 'hard' and 'soft' Brexiteers within the Conservative Party, since it effectively allowed her to signal to both sides that they would get what they wanted out of the agreement.

The EU's response to the Brexit vote undercut the logic of May's asks, however. EU leaders early on agreed that Brexit represented an existential threat to the single market and the integrity of the Union, largely because of the risk that an advantageous deal for the UK would undermine the value of membership and lead to a clamour for the exit door.[61] The EU thus actively sought to preclude the kind of outcome the UK was hoping for and established an institutional framework for the Brexit process that would maximise unity among the remaining EU27 whilst taking advantage of the Commission's considerable expertise in negotiating international agreements.[62] Michel Barnier, a seasoned political operator, was appointed to head Taskforce 50 within the Commission and would lead the Brexit negotiations on the basis of a mandate from the European Council.[63] The talks would be sequenced with a Withdrawal Agreement negotiated first and, one this was agreed, the beginning of talks on the future relationship, arrangements which reflected the different legal bases of the two tasks[64] but which also prevented the UK from using its budgetary contributions to 'buy' access to the single market.[65]

60 M. Heide, B. Worthy, "Secrecy and Leadership: The Case of Theresa May's Brexit Negotiations," *Public Integrity*, vol. 21, no. 6 (2019), pp. 582-594.

61 P. Beaumont, "Brexit and EU Legitimation: Unwitting Martyr for the Cause?," *New Perspectives*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019), pp. 15-36.

62 L.A. Schuette, "Forging Unity...".

63 B. Laffan, "How the EU27 Came to Be," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 57, no. S1 (2019), pp. 13-27.

64 G. Barwell, *Chief of Staff: Notes from Downing Street*, London 2021.

65 M. Barnier, *My Secret Brexit Diary: A Glorious Illusion*, transl. by R. Mackay, London 2019.

Negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement began in July 2017 and saw both sides discuss arrangements for citizens' rights, the UK's outstanding contribution to the EU budget, and the Northern Ireland border issue. The latter of these issues proved especially tricky, since the need for a regulatory border on the island of Ireland would only be clear after the future relationship had been negotiated, leading both sides to negotiate 'Backstop' arrangements to preclude this. The Backstop would prove highly contentious among pro-Brexit Conservatives. Their opposition to the arrangements led May to spell out designs on the future relationship that would preclude the Backstop, but these in turn were interpreted by the party right as 'softer' proposals for Brexit. During the negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement, May had placed a triumvirate of senior Brexiters – Boris Johnson, David Davis, Liam Fox – in high positions, hoping that this would make them jointly responsible for the negotiated outcome. But they eschewed efforts to be associated with May's deal, with Davis actively undercutting and misrepresenting commitments May had signed up to, Johnson taking multiple opportunities to criticise May's approach, and Fox opposing any proposals that would undermine an independent UK trade policy.

During this period a combination of factors, including the government's lack of a majority in Parliament, factional conflict within the party, and an unclear direction from the Labour opposition conspired to turn Brexit debates into a tug-of-war within the Conservative Party itself. [66] With the membership more radical than MPs, what emerged was a battle for the party right among would-be challengers to May, resulting in candidates 'outbidding' one another for the more radical Brexit position.[67] When May outlined her proposals for the future relationship in July 2018 (the Chequers Plan) both Davis and Johnson resigned and the party split, depriving May of the majority she would need to pass her agreement. After postponing the vote, May was still unable to muster sufficient support and her agreement was rejected by a considerable margin on 15 January 2019.[68] After talks with the Labour opposition failed, May returned to Brussels to request further concessions on the backstop, but returned empty handed. After two more successive defeats in the Commons of her agreement, May resigned on 24 May 2019, triggering a leadership contest within the party.

Boris Johnson

Criticism of May during the negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement had focused on May's ostensible soft-Brexit credentials as well as her seeming inability to convince the EU that Britain was prepared to walk away if it failed to get a better deal. Within this fevered environment, the contest to replace her focused to a considerable extent on each candidate's willingness to leave the EU without a deal if necessary, with only the

[66] G. Baldini, E. Bressanelli, E. Massetti, "Back to the Westminster Model?..."; T. Heinkelmann-Wild et al., "Divided They Fail..."; M. Russell, "Brexit and Parliament...".

[67] A. Seldon, *May at 10*, London 2019.

[68] B. Martill, "Deal or No Deal: Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement and the Politics of (Non-)Ratification," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. 6 (2021), pp. 1607-1622.

moderate candidate Rory Stewart ruling out this option. Johnson, who was popular among the grassroots, was the front-runner and easily triumphed over his rival Jeremy Hunt in the final round, becoming Conservative leader and Prime Minister on 24 July 2019. Although far from a true-believer, Johnson at this moment represented the party right and their views on Brexit, and his tenure as Prime Minister would be defined by his harder stance on Brexit. Indeed, the period from 2019 onwards marked the first moment that the pro-Brexit right found themselves in the driving seat, given the May government's efforts to negotiate what they hoped would be a softer landing and to deploy harder forms of exit as leverage vis-à-vis Brussels.

Yet the ideas underpinning Johnson's harder designs on bargaining and on the Brexit outcome could not be neatly transposed into reality without pushback, based as they were on largely false premises (i.e. that a bespoke deal was not available simply because the UK was not tough enough with Brussels).[69] Implementing the Brexit policy of the party right thus required a heavy emphasis on performativity – being seen to 'take the fight to Brussels' – and on representing compromise as a victory for a harder Brexit outcome. And Johnson's political style was well-suited to this task. This much was evident in the new Prime Minister's first self-appointed task, the renegotiation of May's Withdrawal Agreement. The Commission had refused to re-open the agreement, noting that they had spent years negotiating it and were unwilling to make further concessions, and pointing out that Johnson had inherited the same impossible parliamentary situation as May.

A meeting between Johnson and Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach, broke this impasse, paving the way for replacement of the Backstop with the Northern Ireland Protocol, and affording the opportunity for small and largely cosmetic changes to the language in the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. Johnson claimed he had a new agreement, even though much remained the same and the Protocol arrangements were politically unfeasible, and had been rejected by his predecessor on this basis.[70] Nonetheless, Johnson's victory in the December 2019 general election afforded the Prime Minister a substantial majority of 80 seats and removed the blocking power of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), paving the way for the passage of the Withdrawal Agreement.

With the withdrawal issues settled, Johnson turned to the future relationship, for which he sought a more distant relationship than that imagined in May's Chequers Plan.[71] Johnson wished to agree a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU, similar to that negotiated with Canada. This would offer a more distant relationship, which appeased many Brexit supporters, while also being more palatable to the EU, since it crossed fewer of their own red lines. In principle the agreement would be easier to negotiate, since the UK was asking for less. But the UK sought to jettison level playing field

69 F. Figueira, B. Martill, "Bounded Rationality...".

70 Ch. Grey, *Brexit Unfolded: How No One Got What They Wanted (and Why They Were Never Going to)*, London 2021.

71 S. Usherwood, "'Our European Friends and Partners'?...".

(LPF) requirements, which were a requirement for the EU given Britain's geographical proximity, and much of the time was spent convincing the UK of the need to include LPF provisions.[72] Considerable divergence also emerged on governance – where the UK wanted no role for the Court of Justice of the EU – and on fisheries, which mainly involved distributive bargaining over how much each side would get.[73] The UK's negotiating position was highly performative, with Johnson threatening to walk away from the table frequently – and at one point doing so – with the Commission interpreting these moves as intended for domestic consumption and waiting for the UK to return to the table.[74] In the end, while the final agreement was more complicated owing to UK demands over governance and the level playing field, it did not differ significantly from what the EU had claimed was initially on offer.[75]

CONCLUSION

Brexit is often spoken about in terms of 'irresponsibility', but common usage of the term focuses more on the normative connotations of the term – referring to a bad decision – than the role which responsibility itself has played in political processes. In this article we have sought to add some conceptual and theoretical precision to notions of (ir)responsibility by exploring the relationship between responsibility and policy radicalism. We argued that lower levels of responsibility for implementing policies is associated with increasing policy radicalism. The absence of responsibility, we argued, can result from several conditions. Internally, it can result from (1) opposition status, (2) coalition government and power sharing, and (3) intra-party factionalism. Externally, it can be understood as a function of (a) the extent of interdependence and policy 'lock in', (b) the degree of instrumentalist in policy proposals, and (c) the extent of responsibility for maintaining the status quo. Under each of these conditions, political actors are incentivised to devise and promote policies they do not expect to have to implement.

We examined these dynamics through a case study of Euroscepticism in the British Conservative Party from the 1990s to the present day. We showed that the origins of Tory Euroscepticism lay in backbench opposition to the Maastricht Treaty amplified by Thatcher's personal position, cementing a Eurosceptic faction of the Conservative Party whose views became progressively more radical in opposition. When returning to power under a coalition government in 2010, the failure to implement Eurosceptic Conservative policies was blamed on the presence of pro-European coalition partners, further preventing these ideas from contact with reality. As Cameron sought to address rising Euroscepticism, rather than challenge these positions, he sought to instrumentalise them, leading to the Brexit referendum and Cameron's resignation. While May

[72] S. De Rynck, *Inside the Deal: How the EU Got Brexit Done*, London 2023.

[73] S. Usherwood, "'Our European Friends and Partners'?...".

[74] T. Wille, B. Martill, "Trust and Calculation...".

[75] S. De Rynck, *Inside the Deal...*

committed to delivering Brexit, she sought greater continuity than many in the pro-Brexit faction in her party was willing to tolerate, and more radical designs on Brexit – including no deal – were promoted by challengers, to the point where her deal was rejected. In each of these instances, the radicalisation of Euroscepticism has stemmed from the political incentives of those who are out of power and do not expect to have to implement these policies.

Our article seeks to make a number of empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, we show how being out of power – in various respects – helped to radicalise Conservative positions on Brexit. By showing how the long years in opposition, the demands of sharing power, and the dynamics of factionalism shaped Eurosceptic attitudes, we are able to explain crucial political determinants of Brexit. Our argument also highlights some of the ironies and paradoxes of Brexit. We demonstrate, for instance, that the very impossibility of the idea of withdrawal – and the high costs associated with this – precluded moderation of pro-Brexit attitudes, and that the instrumental deployment of these ideas allowed them to circulate 'cost free' in the party, until there was nothing else left to do but implement the policies. Theoretically, our argument helps to unpack the notion of 'irresponsibility', showing how specific institutional and environmental factors which delimit the bounds of responsibility for policy outcomes are associated with higher levels of policy radicalism. By spelling out the distinct mechanisms through which responsibility can be bounded and policy radicalism encouraged, we show that – in politics, as in Spider-Man – without power comes great irresponsibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adler-Nissen R., Galpin C., Rosamond B., "Performing Brexit: How a Post-Brexit World Is Imagined Outside the United Kingdom," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2017), pp. 573-591, https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117711092.

Baker D., Gamble A., Seawright D., "Sovereign Nations and Global Markets: Modern British Conservatism and Hyperglobalism," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2002), pp. 399-428, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.t01-1-00086.

Baldini G., Bressanelli E., Massetti E., "Back to the Westminster Model? The Brexit Process and the UK Political System," *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2022), pp. 329-344, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120967375.

Bale T., "Who Leads and Who Follows? The Symbiotic Relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives – and Populism and Euroscepticism," *Politics*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2018), pp. 263-277, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718754718.

Bale T., Pike K., "Hopes Will Be Dashed: Brexit and the 'Merkel Myth,'" *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2024), pp. 135-153, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2252575.

Barnier M., *My Secret Brexit Diary: A Glorious Illusion*, transl. by R. Mackay, London 2019.

Barwell G., *Chief of Staff: Notes from Downing Street*, London 2021.

Beaumont P., "Brexit and EU Legitimation: Unwitting Martyr for the Cause?," *New Perspectives*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019), pp. 15-36, https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X1902700302.

Béraud-Sudreau L., Pannier A., "An 'Improbable Paris-Berlin-Commission Triangle': Usages of Europe and the Revival of EU Defense Cooperation after 2016," *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2021), pp. 295-310, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1740215.

Bickerton C.J., "The Limits of Differentiation: Capitalist Diversity and Labour Mobility as Drivers of Brexit," *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2019), pp. 231-245, https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.36656.

Brusenbauch Meislová M., Martill B., "Getting Brexit Done? The Politics of Issue-Eclipsing Pledges," *Journal of European Public Policy* (2024), pp. 1-24, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2399223.

Cameron D., *For the Record*, London 2019.

Cardwell P.J., "The End of Exceptionalism and a Strengthening of Coherence? Law and Legal Integration in the EU Post-Brexit," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 57, no. 6 (2019), pp. 1407-1418, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12959.

Carter N., Jacobs M., "Explaining Radical Policy Change: The Case of Climate Change and Energy Policy under the British Labour Government 2006-10," *Public Administration*, vol. 92, no. 1 (2014), pp. 125-141, https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12046.

Conservative Party, *It's Time for Action, Conservative Election Manifesto 2005*, London 2005, at https://manifesto.deryn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Conservatives-manifesto--uk-2005-1.pdf.

Conservative Party, *Time for Common Sense*, London 2001, at https://manifesto.deryn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UK-Conservatives-2001-Manifesto.pdf.

Convery A., Martill B., "Neverland: The Strange Non-Death of Cakeism in Conservative European Thought," *Journal of European Integration* (2024), pp. 1-20, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2429099.

De Rynck S., *Inside the Deal: How the EU Got Brexit Done*, London 2023.

Duggan C., "Interfering in Brexit: Responsibility, Representation, and the 'Meaningful Vote' That Wasn't," *European Journal of English Studies*, vol, 25, no. 1 (2021), pp. 49-64.

Elliott F., Hanning J., *Cameron: Practically a Conservative*, London 2012.

Ezrow L., "Research Note: On the Inverse Relationship between Votes and Proximity for Niche Parties," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2008), pp. 206-220, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00724.x.

Figueira F., Martill B., "Bounded Rationality and the Brexit Negotiations: Why Britain Failed to Understand the EU," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 28, no. 12 (2021), pp. 1871-1889, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1810103.

Fontana C., Parsons C., "'One Woman's Prejudice': Did Margaret Thatcher Cause Britain's Anti-Europeanism?," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2025), pp. 89-105, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12205.

George S., *An Awkward Partner: Britain in the European Community*, Oxford 1988.

Glencross A., "The Origins of 'Cakeism': The British Think Tank Debate over Repatriating Sovereignty and Its Impact on the UK's Brexit Strategy," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2023), pp. 995-1012, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2072371.

Grey Ch., *Brexit Unfolded: How No One Got What They Wanted (and Why They Were Never Going to)*, London 2021.

Hannan D., *A Doomed Marriage: Why Britain Should Leave the EU*, London 2016.

Hay C., Farrall S., "Establishing the Ontological Status of Thatcherism by Gauging Its 'Periodisability': Towards a 'Cascade Theory' of Public Policy Radicalism," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2011), pp. 439-458, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00443.x.

Hayton R., "Conservative Party Statecraft and the Politics of Coalition," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 1 (2014), pp. 6-24.

Heide M., Worthy B., "Secrecy and Leadership: The Case of Theresa May's Brexit Negotiations," *Public Integrity*, vol. 21, no. 6 (2019), pp. 582-594, https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3460974.

Heinkelmann-Wild T. et al., "Divided They Fail: The Politics of Wedge Issues and Brexit," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2020), pp. 723-741.

Heppell T., "The Ideological Composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party 1992-1997," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2002), pp. 299-324.

Hobolt S.B., "The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, no. 9 (2016), pp. 1259-1277, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1225785.

Holden P., "Still 'Leading from the Edge'? New Labour and the European Union," in O. Daddow, J. Gaskarth (eds), *British Foreign Policy: The New Labour Years*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 157-169, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230307315_9.

Huber J.D., "The Vote of Confidence in Parliamentary Democracies," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 90, no. 2 (1996), pp. 269-282.

Ikenberry G.J., "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2009), pp. 71-87, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709090112.

King A., "Modes of Executive-Legislative Relations: Great Britain, France, and West Germany," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1976), pp. 11-36, https://doi.org/10.2307/439626.

Kroll D.A., Leuffen D., "Ties That Bind, Can Also Strangle: The Brexit Threat and the Hardships of Reforming the EU," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, no. 9 (2016), pp. 1311-1320, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1174532.

Laffan B., "How the EU27 Came to Be," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 57, no. S1 (2019), pp. 13-27.

Laffan B., Telle S., *The EU's Response to Brexit: United and Effective*, Basingstoke 2023, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26263-0.

Lake D.A., "Rightful Rules: Authority, Order, and the Foundations of Global Governance," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2010), pp. 587-613, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2010.00601.x.

Lijphart A., "Democratic Political Systems: Types, Cases, Causes, and Consequences," *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1989), pp. 33-48, https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692889001001003.

Lynch Ph., Whitaker R., "Where There Is Discord, Can They Bring Harmony? Managing Intra-Party Dissent on European Integration in the Conservative Party," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2013), pp. 317-339, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00526.x.

Martill B., "Deal or No Deal: Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement and the Politics of (Non-) Ratification," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. 6 (2021), pp. 1607-1622, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13205.

Martill B., "Withdrawal Symptoms: Party Factions, Political Change and British Foreign Policy Post-Brexit," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 30, no. 11 (2023), pp. 2468-2491, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2198578.

McEwen N., Murphy M.C., "Brexit and the Union: Territorial Voice, Exit and Re-Entry Strategies in Scotland and Northern Ireland after EU Exit," *International Political Science Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2022), pp. 374-389, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512121990543.

Menon A., Salter J.-P., "Brexit: Initial Reflections," *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 6 (2016), pp. 1297-1318, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12745.

Oliver C., *Unleashing Demons: The Inside Story of Brexit*, London 2016.

Quinn Th., Allen N., Bartle J., "Why Was There a Hard Brexit? The British Legislative Party System, Divided Majorities and the Incentives for Factionalism," *Political Studies*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2024), pp. 227-248, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217221076353.

Richardson J., Rittberger B., "Brexit: Simply an Omnishambles or a Major Policy Fiasco?," *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 27, no. 5 (2020), pp. 649-665, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1736131.

Rogers L., "Cue Brexit: Performing Global Britain at the UN Security Council," *European Journal of International Security*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2024), pp. 122-140, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2023.27.

Rogstad A., Martill B., "How to Be Great (Britain)? Discourses of Greatness in the United Kingdom's Referendums on Europe," *European Review of International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2022), pp. 210-239.

Russell M., "Brexit and Parliament: The Anatomy of a Perfect Storm," *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 2 (2021), pp. 443-463, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa011.

Sayers A.M., Denemark D., "Radicalism, Protest Votes and Regionalism: Reform and the Rise of the New Conservative Party," *Canadian Political Science Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2014), pp. 3-26, https://doi.org/10.24124/c677/2014570.

Schnapper P., "Theresa May, the Brexit Negotiations and the Two-Level Game, 2017-2019," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2021), pp. 368-379, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1753665.

Schuette L.A., "Forging Unity: European Commission Leadership in the Brexit Negotiations," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. 5 (2021), pp. 1142-1159, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13171.

Seldon A., *May at 10*, London 2019.

Smith J., "David Cameron's EU Renegotiation and Referendum Pledge: A Case of Déjà Vu?," *British Politics*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2016), pp. 324-346, https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2016.11.

Sobolewska M., Ford R., *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, Cambridge 2020, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108562485.

Tewes H., "Between Deepening and Widening: Role Conflict in Germany's Enlargement Policy," *West European Politics*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1998), pp. 117-133.

Thompson H., "Inevitability and Contingency: The Political Economy of Brexit," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2017), pp. 434-449, https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117710431.

Usherwood S., "'Our European Friends and Partners'? Negotiating the Trade and Cooperation Agreement," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 59, no. S1 (2021), pp. 115-123, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13238.

Wall S., *Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit*, Oxford 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198840671.001.0001.

Wille T., Martill B., "Trust and Calculation in International Negotiations: How Trust Was Lost after Brexit," *International Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 6 (2023), pp. 2405-2422, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad243.

Zagare F.C., "Rationality and Deterrence," *World Politics*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1990), pp. 238-260.

Benjamin MARTILL – Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations and Associate Director of the Europa Institute at the University of Edinburgh. His research examines the politics of foreign and security policy, with a focus on contemporary European security and defence.

Alan CONVERY – Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. He studies UK and Scottish politics and conservatism and the Conservative Party. He is the author of *The Territorial Conservative Party* (MUP 2016).