

Is there still a point to UKIP? The future of British Euroscepticism post-Brexit

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*The United Kingdom Independence Party is in the process of appointing a new leader, following the resignation of Nigel Farage after the EU referendum. **Simon Usherwood** writes that in many respects the British Eurosceptic movement is now at a crossroads, having achieved its aim via the referendum, but still wanting to maintain a presence in British politics. He suggests that there are essentially three main paths open to British Eurosceptics in the aftermath of Brexit.*



At a first cut, the 23 June referendum result was the clearest possible vindication of the many years of concerted action by British Eurosceptics: on a high turnout, a majority of people voted to leave the EU, even if many of them wouldn't have particularly described themselves as Eurosceptics. The result has opened up a new path, out of the Union and into some new situation. Even if we don't know what that situation might be, the mere knowledge of its existence will prove to be an attractive lure for others.

And yet, in this moment of triumph there is a serious question for the British Eurosceptic movement: what is it for? For the quarter century since the Maastricht treaty, which crystallised critical British attitudes into a constellation of groups, there has been the critique – something's wrong with the EU – and a solution – reform or exit that organisation. Now that the country is indeed exiting, both the casual observer and the academic scholar might ask: what happens next. Does the movement continue, change or die?

Some context

Before we can answer this question, it's helpful to set out some context, of how the UK arrived at this place and where this place is. In many ways the UK has been the wellspring of Euroscepticism. This was the country that invented the very word, back in the 1980s, and saw the creation of the very first modern Eurosceptic groups at the end of that decade, building off Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech. The Maastricht treaty provided further mobilisation opportunities, with a raft of groups from across the political spectrum being formed and creating the basis for a much more critical political space in the UK for discussing European integration.

Aided and abetted by a print press willing to give a platform to these groups and a succession of governments not prepared to go beyond reactive problem/crisis management with regard to the EU, Eurosceptics were able to set public agendas to a very considerable extent, even if their power to make decisions remained very limited.

This last point is an important one, especially given the claims made by the likes of Nigel Farage after the referendum. For all the media attention that more focused, single-issue Eurosceptics received, it was those political actors for whom Euroscepticism was only one part of their make-up who actually shaped the political trajectory vis-à-vis the EU. The path to the referendum is a case in point.

The pressure from the 2000s on for popular referendums to underpin treaty reforms came from a broad spectrum, from those keen to build a stronger EU through to those wishing to slow or stop it. In the UK, the election of David Cameron as leader of the Conservative party in 2005 and his backtracking on a referendum on Lisbon once it made into force in 2009 provided a clear opportunity for his backbenches to pressure him towards every more critical positions on the EU.

That pressure came from a number of sources. The rise of UKIP from the late 2000s onwards had made some in the Tory party nervous that their voter base was at risk. But just as important were factors more internal to the

Conservatives: the growing number of new MPs for whom Euroscepticism was a visceral part of their political being, drawing on a very-oversimplified image of Margaret Thatcher as an unbending critic of European integration.

All of this points to a number of key conclusions that we need to keep in mind as we consider the future possibilities. First, Euroscepticism is clearly shaped by the context within which it operates. It is not the main driver of political or social change, but rather a marker of other forces, notably around dissatisfaction and disengagement, nationalism and identity politics, economic and social marginalisation.

Second, there is no 'Euroscepticism', only Euroscepticisms. There is no positive ideological core to this phenomenon, only the negative one of disliking some aspect of European integration. Instead, we find conservatives and socialists, greens and liberals, racists and libertarians all using their ideological bases to justify their attacks on the EU. Those who consider the EU to be the whole problem and the sole problem can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Third, and very much as a function of the first two points, Euroscepticism is contingent. As I have argued [before](#), this does not mean that it is ephemeral, but rather that while it provides a convenient proxy for other discontents, it has achieved sufficient critical mass to transcend those specific discontents. Maybe the most useful analogy is of a relay team, passing the baton from one to the next: however, this is a relay with no course or specific finish line.

Three paths for British Eurosceptics

With this in mind, we might discern three main paths that the current Eurosceptic movement might move down. This is based on both the constellation of actors involved and the changing opportunity structures that present themselves. In particular, it recognises that with the securing of a Brexit majority in the referendum, we have now moved into a fundamentally different situation.

This matters because it would appear to remove the key objective of the movement and thus the source of much of the mobilisation that has occurred. That mobilisation has three main elements, roughly equivalent to the point at which individuals became mobilised.

The first element might be termed *the ephemeral newcomers*. The most recent supporters – those who only came to matters as a result of the referendum campaign – are arguably the least engaged with the issue of European integration. While they might have been active in the Leave campaign, for many this was primarily an opportunistic move to register discontent, either with the EU or with something else, such as the government.

If we take a working assumption that 37% of the UK's adult population (the 52% majority on the 71.8% turnout) is not completely dissatisfied with the political system – and that would seem to be supported by the outcome of the 2015 general election – then we would expect these recent Eurosceptics to disappear back into the general population. As I noted in a [previous piece](#), there are serious questions – both political and academic – about whether the Leave campaign could really be described as Eurosceptic, but even if we take a generous view, we would still anticipate that the passing of the moment will see some activists being lost to the movement. The obvious category of people here would be those who now regret their choice in June.

Second, there are *the ideological masses*. This group, which is probably the largest, are those of more long standing: individuals who have been interested in the issue for some time and who might well have joined a pressure group or political party prior to 2015. For them, the European issue is more central to their political make-up, but probably still only part of their political identity.

As we know from various studies, even the most obvious destination for these people, UKIP, is a very broad church, in ideological terms. The party has no core ideology, only a shared negative of disliking the EU and, more latterly, of uncontrolled immigration. This breadth is seen in the various polls that have shown a small minority of UKIP supporters voting Remain, to take a more egregious example.

That breadth is seen across the Eurosceptic movement; indeed, it partly explains why there have been so many groups formed over the past 25 years – there is as much to divide as to unite. Thus, all political parties have their sceptics, as do trade unions, businesses and the rest. The organisational churn that has characterised the movement throughout its history will undoubtedly continue.

However, in the changed context of Brexit, we might expect that the force and effort of this second group will become redirected. This follows a logic of “we’ve won this one, so on to the next fight, to achieve our goals”. Here you can take your pick about where the next fight might be, but we can offer some obvious locations.

English nationalism has been highlighted by [several](#) observers as a very strong proxy for Euroscepticism and in the context of a revived Scottish independence movement the notion of enhancing (or even simply protecting) England’s place in the United Kingdom will become a more pressing issue. Add to this the scope for Northern Irish discontent over the reconstitution of the peace accords following Brexit and there is even more potential for Englishness to occupy a more central position in political debate. It touches on many of the same nexus of issues as Euroscepticism: representation, proximity of decision-making, group identity and ‘fairness’.

The immigration issue also still has much life in it, and even as the European dimension moves away from its current central position, there will be substantial pressures to keep the broader question alive. The likely persistence of high levels of immigration, whatever the regime for EU nationals, and the continued lack of central government policy to tackle the resolution of migration-related problems will provide a fertile ground for both more nativist and more moderate expressions of displeasure and concern. UKIP made use of this in their expansion since the mid-2000s, and any new leader of the party might decide that this is their best bet for continued relevance.

Finally, we might imagine that if there is a split in the Labour party between the Corbynistas and what used to be New Labour, then there is potential for a general reshaping of the party political system in the UK. In this scenario, the main cleavage would be between liberal cosmopolitans and more reactionary elements. This would offer new opportunities for members of this section of the Eurosceptic movement to move more fully into the party political system, again influenced by their ideological preferences.

The final group of Eurosceptics to consider are the *true believers*: those for whom the EU is their sole focus. This includes the most long-standing individuals and those who have chosen to devote all of their energies to this one cause. Almost by definition, it is the smallest of the three segments we consider here, but it is also the most obdurate and determined. Some years ago, I wrote about this group as the [rock in the sand](#), the stable base around which others have built their efforts. For them, the EU is either all that they care about, or is so consuming that they must see things through to the very end.

With that in mind, we would expect that this group will be in the vanguard of policing Brexit negotiations, stopping any backsliding in either overt or covert manner by the government. They have been the ones who have pushed hardest in the movement for speedy Article 50 notification, who have defended the result of the referendum most heartily, who have the most detailed plans of how to move through this phase to a new situation and who will still be on this issue when most others have gone. Indeed, they will be the core of any post-Brexit anti-EU group that will be set up – much along the lines of Norway’s [Nei til EU](#) – to ensure that the UK does not drift back into the EU’s orbit.

Concluding thoughts

The British Eurosceptic movement is a creature of its age. Its formation and evolution have followed and – to some degree – shaped the changing landscape of British politics. It is this basic characteristic that has informed this quick overview and which will be borne out by whatever actually comes to pass.

These changes again offer an excellent opportunity for us to consider what ‘Euroscepticism’ actually means (if anything) and to consider the subtle and wide-reaching effects that it has on the domestic and European political order. We stand at a crucial point in the development of Euroscepticism, as one country has chosen a path out of the

Union and Eurosceptics elsewhere have to make decisions about whether this is a path worth following. Even if British Eurosceptics are unlikely to be the force that they once were, they might still find themselves role-models for many across the continent.

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