

Book Review: The Making of Eurosceptic Britain, Second Edition, by Chris Gifford

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The Making of Eurosceptic Britain is interesting reading for undergraduates interested in the general field of Britain's relationship with Europe. The fact that its narrative remains coherent in the face of five years of substantial change in British Euroscepticism is a testament to its rigour, writes Harry Evans.

The Making of Eurosceptic Britain. Second Edition. Chris Gifford. Ashgate. 2014.

Find this book: 

The original edition of Chris Gifford's *The Making of Eurosceptic Britain* was published in 2008, before the coalition government and the steady rise of UKIP. The new second edition weaves post-2008 events into Gifford's already established narrative. Developments have led to a complete revision of the text, including a new introduction and updated final chapters.

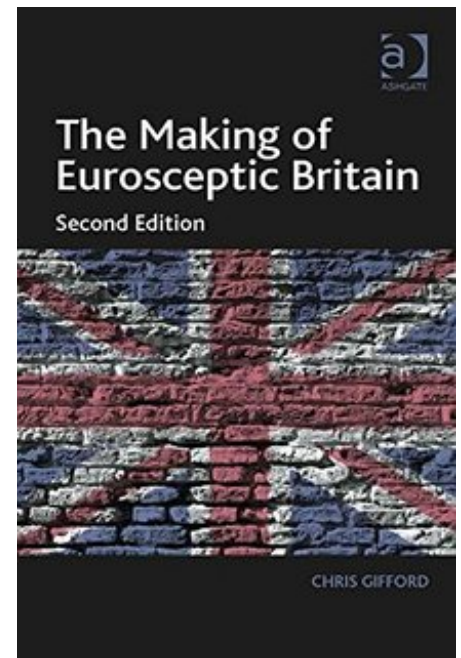
Gifford – who heads up the department of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Huddersfield – has written extensively on Euroscepticism as well as more broadly on issues of European and British identity. In *The Making of Eurosceptic Britain*, Gifford brings together the ideas of Euroscepticism and post-imperial Britishness to demonstrate how the problems of British integration into Europe have been a symptom of residual imperialistic identity (p. 171).

The timing of the second edition is no accident. UKIP's rise in the polls, as well as their strong popular performance in European Parliament elections, demonstrates that Euroscepticism is widespread and no longer a fringe movement. The institutional attitude towards Europe has also 'unravelling' in recent years (p. 12) as Europe has been forced onto David Cameron's agenda. This has led to cooler relations between Britain and Europe over issues such as free movement, defence and the budget. Through Gifford's exploration of the historical context, he effectively argues that these issues are continually reappearing in the Britain-Europe relationship, regardless of the apparent pro-European stance of politicians.

The central argument in the work is that these reappearing issues are ones that tend to get framed in a way that excludes Britain from Europe. There was, Gifford argues, an underlying post-imperial worldview which underpinned entry to Europe; a result of wishing to stay relevant even after imperialism (p. 15). The paradox in an entry to Europe being driven by imperialistic tendencies dominates the relationship and further attempts at integration, where Europe is frequently subordinated to 'the national interest' (p. 173).

In the chapter 'British membership and its opponents', Gifford outlines the positions within both main parties in the 60s and 70s, and is very sensitive to presenting the nuances within parties and their attitudes towards Europe. Despite being anti-EC membership in the 60s, economic crises convinced the Labour leadership to pursue a second application for EC membership as a way out of their woes (p. 58). As Gifford points out (p. 59), there was no ideological conversion to the ideal of European integration, membership of the EC was desirable because it would stop the British slide into economic darkness and shore up whatever remaining world standing it had left.

To some extent, the narrative that painted European membership as the answer to Britain's problem was bought



wholesale by groups, such as the CBI and multinational businesses. In 1967, the vote in the House of Commons on applying to the EC was won by the biggest majority in the 20th Century, with only 26 voting against the motion (p. 60). This might be seen as the high point for Europe, with widespread corporate, political and popular support. The second application for membership was, nevertheless, comprehensively rejected by De Gaulle. This was still a high-point of consensus around Europe and it resulted in the first significant mobilisation of Eurosceptic forces in reaction.

By the time the referendum on membership came around in 1975, the consensus had been broken, and there were significant splits on both the left and right. The extremes of both parties led a nationalistic charge, whilst the Yes campaign put forward a pragmatic, economic case. Again, the Yes campaign was not committed to the integrationist ideology; it allied itself with common sense. This European conservatism was bought into by a British public who sought stability above change, and the referendum was carried with 67% of the vote.

The chapter is book-ended by economic crises. As other European countries contemplated further integration to insulate against an international economic crisis, the Callaghan government pursued closer ties with America and neo-liberalism (p. 77), laying the groundwork for Thatcherite Euroscepticism in the following decade.

'The Eurosceptic challenge to the coalition government' seeks to extend the narrative into a period where we are perhaps closer to a referendum on Europe than we have been since 1975. Gifford begins by describing the fractious nature of politics directly after the 2010 election. In coalition negotiations, no party would defend a weak Europe to the detriment of their other political objectives (p. 156).

The Eurosceptics in the Conservative party also achieved what had proved impossible in the 1970s, which was a uniting of far-right and centre-right Euroscepticism (p. 158). Euroscepticism extended far outside of the Conservative party, though, with popular Eurosceptic movements increasingly springing up and a right-wing press more vocal on the issue. UKIP had exceptional breakthroughs in the European Elections of 2012 and the local elections of 2013 (p. 159). UKIP's policies, and their proximity to the right wing of the Conservative party, posed a significant problem for the Conservative leadership.

During the period up to 2013, there was a growing consensus across the political spectrum that no further European integration could occur without a referendum. This consensus was bolstered by a consistently weakly performing Eurozone. The chapter ends by noting the difference in tone from a Labour party that had been vociferously pro-European in the previous governments – Labour's voice in 2013 was significantly more muted (p.168).

The Making of Eurosceptic Britain is comprehensive in its account of the developments within the party system that have contributed to a hardening of Eurosceptic views, and the argument that it is a result of a post-imperial hangover is persuasive. To develop this, it would have been interesting to see more exploration of the views of the public, of academics and also culturally, to see whether the post-imperialism is a Westminster phenomenon. Despite this, the work is interesting reading for undergraduates interested in the general field of Britain's relationship with Europe. The fact that its narrative remains coherent in the face of five years of substantial change in British Euroscepticism is a testament to its rigour.

Harry Evans is a Philosophy graduate of the University of York and he has also completed a Masters in Scandinavian Studies at UCL. He currently works as a research analyst at the Social Research Institute, Ipsos MORI, specializing in Health and Politics.

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