

379
JANUARY
2016

BREXIT: a domestic debate?

Robert Kissack, Head of Studies and Assistant Professor of International Relations, IBEI. Editorial Board Member of Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals

Britain has long been considered a problematic European partner. From the handbag toting, rebate demanding Margaret Thatcher, through John Major's negotiation of opt-outs on the single currency and social charter in the Maastricht Treaty, to the current request by David Cameron in November 2015 to renegotiate British membership of the EU in four key areas. The forthcoming referendum on British exit from the EU – 'Brexit' – promised before the summer of June 2017 but widely expected sooner, is not the first time the UK public has voted on the matter. In June 1975, eight months after a divided Labour Party won a General Election by a majority of three seats, 67 per cent of British people endorsed the decision taken by parliament in 1971. Forty-one years later, what parallels can be drawn between the two referenda and what clues do they provide to the likelihood of Brexit?

To begin, consider the division within the political class and opinion makers. 'What happened was all the acceptable faces of British public life lined up on one side', while unifying the 'No' camp was 'their position outside of the mainstream of governing politics, their resistance to the edicts of centrism'. This is not 2016 but 1975, and the description given by Hugo Young in his respected history of Britain and Europe in *This Blessed Plot*. With at least six months to go, and Cameron's government refusing to commit to a position prior to the February EU Council meeting where it a formal response will be given, complete polarisation has not yet occurred. But William Hague and John Major, both former Conservative Party leaders, openly declared support for remaining inside the EU in recent weeks. Publicising their positions allows the government to maintain a voice in the Yes campaign while Cameron waits on the sidelines. If he is to campaign to stay in the EU, it will be from the position of a pragmatic sceptic who has weighed up the alternatives. If he commits too early he will be branded a closet Europhile who never seriously contemplated exiting - crippling his standing inside the party and providing abundant ammunition for the No campaign.

The 1975 referendum was held in the shadow of heightened concern over the future of the United Kingdom. Welsh and Scottish nationalists received record support in the October 1974 election, mirroring the complex situation today. Two issues, in particular stand out. The first concerns the outcome of the referendum in the four parts of the UK, and what will happen if Northern Ireland, Wales and

Scotland substantially vote in favour of continued membership while England votes against. The question of devolution would surely be returned to if England's considerable size carried the vote to leave against the wishes of the others. Indeed, this is one of the reasons Hague came out in favour of EU membership - leaving the EU would also likely lead to the breakup of the UK. The second issue concerns the use of tactical voting. Given the widely held belief that Euroscepticism is a predominantly English trait, and the decision to leave driven by the English majority (nearly 85 per cent of the UK), some nationalists in Scotland and Wales have proposed the idea of voting against EU membership as a way to accelerate independence, even though as sovereign states their first call would be to Brussels asking to (re)join the EU. A full disclosure of voting within the home nations would jeopardise this strategy. Were it apparent that majorities in Wales, Scotland and England came out in favour of exit, not only would an application for membership be more difficult to justify, it would also paradoxically illustrate the *Britishness* of collective decision to leave the EU.

There is another similarity. Then, as now, immigration fuelled elements of the debate, Enoch Powell being the most noteworthy member of the 1975 no campaign to advocate sovereign independence as a defence against the diluting of British identity and culture. In the UK today, the exit campaign rarely differentiates between EU citizens from Eastern Europe exercising lawful freedom of movement, refugees fleeing persecution, and economic migrants. While this might help canvass votes on the doorstep, it ignores the fact that UK economic growth in recent years has been fuelled in part by the inflow of Eastern Europeans into the labour market.

This leads to a significant difference. Heath wanted Britain in the EEC to capitalise on a growing market that outperformed the UK for much of the 1960s, as well as to catalyse structural reform of the economy. In 1975, despite concerns about escalating food prices because of the Common Agricultural Policy, the economy was still weak and the attraction of the common market strong. With the UK growing while many other European economies remain stagnant, fear of isolation has been replaced, in the No side, by the hope of liberation.

The most striking parallel between the two referenda is that both were predominantly about domestic politics. Quelling party infighting, holding the Union together, protecting the British identity from foreigners, and economic costs and benefits of membership are recurring issues. Meanwhile, we should not forget that Euroscepticism is not a uniquely British phenomenon anymore (if it ever was), evidenced for over 20 years beginning with the Danish vote against the Maastricht Treaty and the 'petite oui' in France over the same issue. If Britain chooses to stay, it will be as much because of domestic issues as European ones.