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The Disregarded European Question and the British Party System: a Crucial Test for Tories and Labour

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The vote by the British people to leave the European Union is not only the manifestation of an economically weak and discontented class. Rather, it reflects a British – and in particular English – handling of the European continent. Since the EU cleavage lays across the conflict lines of the big parties, neither Tories nor Labour can organise majorities capable of acting. Specificities of the political system, political culture and historical factors all serve to tighten the current deadlock. Furthermore, the European question is not only a matter of Britain's relations with the continent; indeed, it risks threatening the unity of the United Kingdom itself.

Preconditions: The Island and the Continent

The attitude of Great Britain towards the project of European integration has always been characterised by rational pragmatism rather than emotional confessions. Unlike in Germany and France, the EU-project was never understood as a historical imperative. Continentals often cite a speech of Winston Churchill given in Zurich, in which he demands the 'United States of Europe'. Such citations misunderstand that Churchill was in fact addressing the continent of Europe, and excluding Britain from his visionary idea. At that time, nothing seemed more fantastical in the self-perception of the British Empire – which still incorporated the entire Indian subcontinent – than to bow to the idea of shared European sovereignty. Only the disappointments about the expected 'special relationship' with the U.S., the disappointment by the outcomes of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the scarce compensational potential of the Commonwealth led to the insight that it might be reasonable to consider participating in the advanced project of European integration on the continent.

Thus, Great Britain's decision to join the European Community was rather economically driven and pragmatic by nature. It was only in 1973, after a waiting period of ten years, that the U.K. was finally able to join the European project, under the leadership of Tory Prime Minister, Edward Heath. Prior to their accession, Charles de Gaulle would twice veto their admission, fearing special demands from the U.K. Posterity has proven de Gaulle's fears to have been, in part, founded. There have been numerous disputes between Brussels and London over the course of British membership; three British Prime Ministers (Margaret Thatcher, John Major and David Cameron) have fallen due to the European question so far; and British leaders have made a habit of showing off their distance towards the continent, for instance when Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown ostentatiously absented himself from the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Nevertheless, it would be insufficient to explain Great Britain's special relationship to the continent as a mere consequence of Britain's slightly obstinate self-perception. Two more crucial things led to enduring desynchronisation between London and Brussels. First, the doctrine

of absolute sovereignty of parliament contradicts the idea of superordinate European law. Second, it is hard to combine the British tradition of Case Law, Common Law and Customs, that makes a written constitution obsolete – with the continental custom of codified legislation. The evolution of these two principles, almost without discontinuity, and the functionality in political decision-making can not be simply replaced by bare expectations in better common European decision-making.

The continuity of British constitutional reality, the historical awareness of being a stabilising power intervening in the never-ending quarrels on the continent, and finally the economic considerations that led to the admission to the EC, constitute a unique relation between the U.K. and the rest of Europe, and serves as a backdrop for the exceptionalism the U.K. has always fostered. Naturally, this exceptionalism affects the present day as well. A glance at the two big parties will demonstrate that neither Tories nor Labour were able to develop a consistent position on the EU-project. Hence, one can find EU-supporters, -sceptics and -opponents in both parties. These internal party challenges affect the political system as a whole.

Dissolution: Tories, Labour and the European Question

Many scholars mention Great Britain as a classic example of a two-party-system. The British first-past-the-post voting system promotes the dominance of two parties. Thus, recent history was characterised by changes of government between the Conservative Party (Tories) and the Labour Party. However, a more detailed view of the British party landscape demonstrates that the Scottish and Northern Irish parts of the United Kingdom clearly differ from those of England and Wales. Both Tories and Labour gain their constituencies mainly in England and Wales, whereas the explicitly pro-EU Scottish National Party (SNP) seems to replace both Tories and Labour as the new dominant party in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, in contrast, parties align themselves along the major societal cleavage between Catholic Irish Nationalists, favouring a united Ireland, and Protestant Unionists, who

support the unity of the U.K. In Northern Ireland, thus, the dominant political parties have compiled clear and consistent positions on the EU. Nationalist Sinn Féin acts the role of a (reluctant) EU supporter, while the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) encouraged their supporters to vote for Brexit.

On the contrary, the governing parties in Westminster, namely Tories and Labour, were unsuccessful in taking up an unambiguous stance on the EU-question. As such, one can find all tonalities in both parties, from staunchly EU-supporting to strongly hostile. The cross-laying European question remained rather unedited with the consequence that it is nearly impossible to organise majorities in the national political system.

This being said, both parties have succeeded in cultivating pockets of devout and long-standing Euro scepticism.

On the side of the Tories, this has a long tradition, which has erupted today in the core of Tory-Brexiteers. They mention four arguments as to why leaving the EU would be better for Britain. First, they fear a loss of sovereignty and insist on an own British identity and way of decision-making. Second – which also follows along with the first argument – they wish to prevent an overregulation by the ‘eurocrats’ in Brussels, as labelled by Margaret Thatcher. Third, outside the European Union, the U.K. would finally be able to establish its own tariff- and tax-policies. The deregulated economy would lead to the rapidly growth of GDP, London would become the ‘Singapore-upon-Thames’, a buzz-word of laissez-faire Brexiteers. Fourth, Brexit would enable the U.K. to once more make its own decisions on EU migration. Unrestricted European mobility coupled with policies of social inclusion metamorphosed into a spectre in the eyes of Conservative Brexiteers. Although Great Britain is not part of the Schengen area, the controversy discussed pictures of migrant flows during the refugee crisis seem to have emphasised the impression of the EU-sceptics, that Brussels is losing control over its borders.

These ideas are not limited to a radical minority within the Conservative Party but are instead deeply rooted in the political views of both party and grassroots.

Although, one group has emerged prominently among proponents of a hard Brexit. The European Research Group (ERG), under the leadership of Jacob Rees-Mogg, currently includes between 90 and 100 of the 314 Conservative MPs and fosters an open enmity against Theresa May's agreement negotiated with the EU. So called 'pressure groups' are very common in British politics. Nevertheless, observers call the ERG a 'party within the party'. The ERG meets regularly, has its own party whip (Mark Francois), and frequently informs Downing Street of its own positions and the red lines that should not be crossed if government desires the support of all conservative MPs. Jacob Rees-Mogg was the one of the main initiators of the internal vote of no-confidence that tried to oust Theresa May last December. Furthermore, the ERG's opposition was a predominant factor in the successive defeats of Theresa May's withdrawal agreement. Despite this antagonistic stance, the ERG possesses good connections to government members. Thus, the group is able to act as a hinge between backbench rebels and government seats. More moderate groups, such as the Brexit Delivery Group (BDG), who supports achieving some form of withdrawal agreement, or even Remainers, appear less able to lobby for their demands when compared to the degree of interconnectedness between the ERG and government. The ERG has thus been able to appoint itself as a de facto veto power. When it comes to May's Withdrawal Agreement, they argue primarily that the integrity of the United Kingdom would be threatened by risking the establishment of a special position for Northern Ireland. The DUP, which helps the government to obtain the needed majority in most cases, shares this view.

Hence, the existence of the ERG is a structural problem for the Conservative party. Inconsistent parliamentary groups that back a government always cause deadlock, instability and may also lead to a legitimacy loss in the broader public. But the discrepancy within the party is not the only problem of the Conservatives. In fact, positions represented by the ERG connect both with a broader part of the Tories, as well as with a large part of the electorate. Both Theresa May

and David Cameron were aware of this in the run-up to the Brexit-Referendum. Both feared losing their leadership position. Whereas David Cameron reluctantly supported to vote for staying in the EU, Theresa May avoided to clearly position herself during most of campaigning, finally siding with Remain. This inconsistency is criticisable however, it is a symptom, not the root of Tories' problems.

Labour, meanwhile, also has its own traditions of Euroscepticism which has other roots than an underlying idea of laissez-faire economies. On the contrary, Labour's critical attitude towards the EU is founded upon classical left-wing arguments. Labour feared higher competitive pressure on the industrial sector, caused by European free trade. In consequence, either jobs would be cut, or state-sponsored welfare and employment rights would be reduced.

Not until the 1980s, then-time Labour leader Neil Kinnock excluded Trotskyites from the party and reconsidered the close ties between his party and the socialist labour unions. Under Kinnock's leadership, the party developed a reluctant pro-European position. In the 1990s and early 2000s, under 'New Labour', Tony Blair re-defined the party, moving away from its originary socialist demands for communisation. However, even during this less Eurosceptical moment, Labour's heart was not in the EU. Tony Blair signed the European Social Charter, but only agreed with Brussels if it was in accordance with Britain's national interest. And concerning extensive efforts for deeper integration, Tony Blair still acted as an opponent.

The current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn personifies the inner conflict of his party. Corbyn belongs to the old, socialist left wing of Labour and is regarded as long-time Eurosceptic. He once called the EU a 'capitalist club' and voted against joining. Furthermore, Corbyn's inner circle consists of Eurosceptics as well. He and his supporters dislike the European Union mainly because of EU State Aid law, which contradicts their conceptions of socialism, which are essentially dependent on generous state subsidies. Publicly, Corbyn accepts the Leave-vote of the referendum and remained ambiguous concerning the demands of his party for a second referendum. The fact remains that during the

entire Brexit debate, he has never credibly professed a desire to remain in the EU. He instead, not entirely unlike the Tories, attempts an impossible balancing act between leave-voting Labour constituencies and small towns, on the one hand, and the urban, remain-voting metropolises, on the other. Thus, his ambiguous policy on the Brexit negotiations. However, his failure to take a clear stance is not only due to an attempt to please all viewpoints, but can also be put down to political manoeuvring. Whatever his personal view on the EU may be, he has worked tactically, in a party-political gambit, to prevent what he calls a "Tory-Brexit".

At the same time, many Labour MPs are discontent with Corbyn's leadership. On the one hand, they dismiss some of Corbyn's radical leftist demands. On the other hand, many Labour MPs are Remainers who mistrust the Eurosceptic Labour leadership. The splitting-off of the Independent Group (TIG), that is now a new Party called 'Change UK' and consists of eight Labour MPs and two former Tory MPs, demands a second referendum and can be regarded as a moderate centrist party – for now. The dissatisfaction with Labour's leadership was further fuelled by a recent antisemitism scandal. Many members regrouped surrounding the Future Britain Group and its informal leader, Tom Watson. He wants to move Labour more into the centre of the left spectrum since he belonged to the camp of the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Furthermore, many Labour MPs fear a second referendum because they have majority Leave constituencies. They thus fear that a second referendum would be regarded as a treason by their electorate, which would cost them their seats in parliament.

As regards party members themselves, there are also Labour Brexiteers, but fewer than Tory ones. However, Corbyn excepted, the Labour Brexiteer views surrounding core Brexit questions are in fact closer to Tory positions than to Corbyn's demands.

In summary, one can assert that the necessity to dispute over the relation towards the continent after the referendum quarried the different and partly contradicting positions in both parties.

Completely different points of view try to 'drag' the European question for their favour. In consequence, no functioning majority can be developed. Any government, regardless which party under which leadership, must ask itself the question whether its decisions will be made in order to achieve what it considers to be the will of the people or in order to preserve party unity. Considering the current circumstances, both impossibly can be unified.

Consequences: Deadlock, Possible Beneficiaries and Centrifugal Forces

The specificities of the British political system intensify cross-party-conflict, making finding a solution which can be backed by all much more challenging. The system itself, thus, contains factors that decelerate consensual decision-making. Thus, although one can criticise Theresa May for a number of leadership mistakes, one must consider the underlying structural factors as well.

Some continental political systems, in contrast, focus on achieving consensus in a context of discussions with a broad spectrum of stakeholders. The Westminster system, meanwhile, emphasises the accountability of political decisions, which are clearly attributable to one single party. Therefore, the British first-past-the-post-voting aims to convert even the narrowest majorities during elections into distinct majorities in parliament. Proportional representation according to relative votes doesn't play a role. Thus, there are either winners or losers after British elections. Since loyalty to one's party and discipline during parliamentary votes are so important, coalitions are almost unthinkable in the British political system. If one party is not able to achieve absolute majority in parliament, minority governments assume responsibility alone. Correspondingly, a 'continental' solution of a bipartisan coalition to find a Brexit-compromise is not realistic from a historical stance for Great Britain. Although, one can currently witness landmark bipartisan talks between Tories and Labour. However, it is to be seen if Brexit is an appropriate occasion to change a political culture reaching back to the very beginning of Parliament. Furthermore, the

vote directly links MPs to their electoral districts. Given that, MPs from Brexit-constituencies are unlikely to act as compromise agents for a softer Brexit or even to remain and vice versa. In the recent past, backbenchers who feared they could lose their constituencies practised high pressure on their own government or even sought to bring it down. Consequently, any government has to fear deficient compliance by MPs from opponent constituencies.

Another structural element which has contributed to the deadlock is the weak role of parliament itself, which cannot exercise major influences on decision-making. Its main function is to facilitate confrontation between government and opposition since the influence of government on legislation in general and the agenda in the House is extraordinarily high. Parliament has significant power to obstruct but rather limited power to construct, as one can currently witness. Government and opposition thus sit facing each other, with the opposition acting as a form of 'standby-government', with its own shadow cabinet. Although there are committees in parliament, their role is weak, and they are convoked ad-hoc. Consequently, parliament was not able yet, to develop check instruments comparable to the strength of younger parliaments. The inherent risk of the system is that when government itself is divided, it faces opposition from within its own ranks, as well as from across the floor. This can lead to deadlock – as, indeed, can currently be witnessed.

For this reason, it is very unlikely that a change of leadership in one or both big parties will solve the deadlock on the European question, given the long history of Euroscepticism on both sides, and the underlying structural challenges in the case of divisive issues. One can assume that the European question, especially the question of how the U.K. wishes to shape its future relation to the EU, will affect political dispute sine die – regardless of if and how the U.K. leaves the EU. After all, the U.K. will remain a part of the European system even if it is no longer a member of the EU. This is true not least with respect to the Irish border, which will have to be dealt with backstop or no backstop – geographic reality will not be shifted.

Regardless of what happens on the European question, it will be necessary for both parties to regroup in order to re-establish party unity, somehow repairing their internal antagonisms. There is the possibility that both parties will be grinded by the European question or will at least suffer relative electoral loss. Since voters now demand a consistent stance on the issue, there are incentives to vote for another party than usually. In the most recent past, Liberal Democrats, who have often gained votes from former dissatisfied Tory or Labour voters, and who clearly support the EU could establish themselves as one pole on a continuum. The antipode being movements such as the ERG, which pro-Brexit voters feel represented by.

Finally, the EU conflict could if not has triggered centrifugal forces within the UK. The Scottish stance on the EU is clearly supportive, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) is confidently institutionalised to channel both the pro-EU arguments and the latent demands for independence. Whereas Tories and Labour Party are still internally debating their position on the future relations between the UK and the EU, it is not unlikely that the Scottish will try another attempt for independence in the aftermath of Brexit. The European question is so important that it could act as a catalyst for a divorce between the UK and Scotland. Meanwhile, some observers fear the resurgence of fighting in Northern Ireland. A hard border on the Island of Ireland could stir 'The Troubles' up again. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 served to calm the antagonism, however the political conflict between Unionists and Nationalists remains. As such, there are fears it could cross over the threshold into violence once more.

The political system of the United Kingdom has proven itself stable and adaptive over centuries. Unfortunately, its specificities emphasise deadlock when a disregarded topic causes disruption in the political landscape. However, there is no reason to assume, that the U.K. system is not able to also deal with this upcoming major challenge as it has done numerous times before. Having said that, it remains to be seen how both big parties will face this problem without losing support or even risk division.



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