

Conclusions

This chapter's analysis of British public attitudes towards the EU has shown that the British public combine scepticism about Europe with high self-declared levels of lack of knowledge about the EU and its workings. "Don't know", "don't understand" and "don't trust" would appear to be the mantra when looking at the EUR (CEC, 2002c: 24). The UK also has powerful Eurosceptic voices in the press and much EU coverage has been strongly negative. Research suggests that direct effects of press coverage on public attitudes are limited. Effects might be subtler if they reinforced understandings of the 'naturalness' of the 'imagined national community', and also reinforced zero-sum understandings of national identity.

Television is the preferred and most trusted source of information about the EU. Studies of television coverage of European economic news suggest that coverage tends to reinforce the idea of European integration as a zero-sum game, perhaps reflecting the UK's own 'winner takes all' political system. Such coverage is not likely to be fertile ground for the development of 'we-feeling' that is important to the construction of European identity.

In the UK neither public opinion nor the media industries appear to be particularly Europeanized. People in Britain appear not to feel particularly European or to identify strongly with the EU while the structures of the UK's media industries, political communication and public relations seem Americanized rather than Europeanized. At the same time, EU institutional structures appear unlikely to lend themselves too easily to the forms of political communication that have become prevalent in the UK since the 1990s.

11

Conclusions: The European Union and British Politics Assessed

Introduction

No account of political change in Britain can ignore the ways in which European integration works its way into the nooks and crannies of British political life. For more than 30 years 'Europe' has become institutionalized as a core concern of the British state with important effects on political actors, the strategic environment within which they operate, and the various elements that need to be accounted for when political change in Britain is assessed. This book has sought to account for these effects, for the changes that European integration has brought about in British politics, and has endeavoured to weigh these developments alongside other causes of change.

The analysis has centred on Britain's *conditional* and *differential* engagement with European integration. The roots of this conditional and differential engagement were traced to decisions made about Britain's place in Europe and the world after the Second World War. Decisions made at this time have had important structuring effects on political outcomes ever since because they ordered the strategic environment within which politicians have operated. To return to the historical institutional analogy used in Chapter 2, choices made after the Second World War can be likened to a tree from which have grown over the last 50 years three strong branches of Britain's European policy. Even though the EU has developed considerably since the 1950s while the British state has undergone major changes, they still remain identifiable aspects of the contemporary British approach. The first branch is a preference for intergovernmentalism rather than supranationalism, combined with a dislike of federal solutions and a self-consciously pragmatic distrust of grand designs aimed at Europe's *finalité*. The second

branch is in the realm of the international political economy and marked by a preference for global free trade, which has brought with it since the 1980s a consistent support for market liberalization that unites Conservative and Labour governments. The third branch is the continued emphasis placed on the Atlantic alliance as a core British interest. This tree and its three strong branches have been consistent elements of Britain's European policy.

The book then developed its analysis of Britain's conditional and differential engagement by distinguishing between two analytical themes that each explored the ways in which Britain has participated in the EU and the ways in which the EU has then impacted on British politics. First, a *Britain in Europe* theme assessed Britain's role in European integration through analysis of relationships with developing processes of integration since the 1950s with other member states and with EU institutions. This involved thinking about the ways in which national policy preferences in the UK have been pursued at European level since the 1940s. Second, a *Europe in Britain* theme allowed examination of the 'Europeanization' of British politics and the ways in which European integration has been absorbed as a concern in domestic politics and the effects on laws, institutions, policies and collective identities. A number of questions were raised in the book's first chapter, to which we now return.

What factors have motivated British policy towards the European Union?

The underlying issues here are the continuities and changes in British relations with Europe during more than 30 years of membership. Have there been major variations in British relations with the EU, or can strong continuities be detected? It has been argued that there are strong core elements – the three branches referred to in the previous section – that continue to have important structuring effects on British relations with the EU. Preferences for intergovernmentalism, market liberalization and Atlanticism can frustrate any attempt by British governments to locate themselves at the heart of Europe because any such move could compromise these underlying preferences that have been central to the British state's perception of itself and its place in the world during the post-war period.

New Labour in power provides a good test of the continued resonance of these branches of Britain's European policy. Beneath Blair's genuine

pro-EU beliefs and his call for 'constructive engagement' rest a series of well-engrained national preferences that are not so readily moulded into a policy stance that facilitates any move to the heart of Europe. The three strong branches of British European policy mean that it has been difficult to characterize Britain's commitment to Europe as amounting to full-hearted consent. There is too much equivocation, too much doubt about where Britain's interests lie, and too much deep-rooted reluctance (bordering sometimes on scepticism) for the aspiration for 'ever closer union' to be an objective that lies close to the heart of many in Britain's political elite or general public.

Have British governments possessed the capacity to turn preferences into European Union priorities?

Given that equivocation and doubt have characterized British relations with the EU then this does not appear to provide a propitious setting for the translation of British preferences into EU priorities. Indeed, the three branches of British European policy have proved difficult to accommodate by core EU member states since at least the 1960s. If we look at the scope, direction, form and content of European integration since the mid-1980s then the development of forms of deeper integration and a shift into areas of high politics can be detected that did not necessarily coincide with British interests expressed in the run-up to these negotiations, but that require British accommodation with their central objectives once they are adopted and implemented. Moreover, there has also been an integrative dynamic led by other member states and supported by key EU institutions (such as the Commission and Court of Justice) that has sometimes aroused suspicion in the UK, particularly in the Euro-sceptic right who fear a secret federalizing agenda and are willing to proclaim the bad faith of EU partners.

A core test of whether Britain can turn preferences into EU priorities (i.e. upload its domestic agenda) will be proposals for European economic reform (and, linked to this, membership of the Euro). The UK has sought to upload preferences for market liberalization into a pan-EU agenda of economic reform. It has become increasingly clear as the Euro debate has developed that the perceived capacity of the British government to make and win arguments about its vision of economic reform and modernization in Europe is central to wholehearted engagement with the EU's defining feature, the single currency and EMU.

Have British governments been particularly effective players of the European Union game?

The evidence accumulated over more than 30 years of British membership is that Britain has not always been a particularly effective player of the EU game. At the most basic level, the UK has spent nearly half of its time as an EU member in dispute with other member states (renegotiation in the 1970s, the budget in the early 1980s, the Maastricht saga and Conservative Euroscepticism in the 1990s). One reason for this is that membership in the 1970s was not based on wholehearted conversion to the merits of supranational European integration. Another is that the 'EU game' requires rather different skills from those required in the winner takes all UK system. The EU centres on coalition building, compromise, deal making and the search for consensus. Not surprisingly these were anathema to Margaret Thatcher, the arch conviction politician. As it became ever more clear that other EU leaders did not share her convictions (and neither, it must be said, did key members of her own government) her distaste for the EC grew concomitantly.

Moreover, the capacity to win arguments at EU level can depend on the maintenance of a stable domestic coalition. Between 1988 and 1997, UK governments were wracked by divisions over Europe, which made the development of a consistent EU policy well nigh impossible. The Major government was predictably unpredictable to its EU partners while peering anxiously over its shoulder at the turmoil within the Conservative parliamentary party. This was not the strongest position to be in while engaged in complex intergovernmental negotiations. Tony Blair was able to heal some of these fractured relations, not least because his crushing parliamentary majority marginalized the small number of Eurosceptic voices in his parliamentary party. Yet Blair's dilemma is that while he has been able to make the case for Britain in Europe (although the war in Iraq fractured some relationships), he has not been able to make the case for Europe in Britain. Even as the most instinctively pro-European Prime Minister since Edward Heath (although the competition is not exactly tough) there has been a noticeable reluctance to advance the pro-European cause, particularly the case for the Euro. It is here that the book's analysis switched to the Europe in Britain theme and assessed the ways in which European integration has been incorporated as a core concern in British politics.

What impact has European integration had on the organization of the British political system?

The intra-state dimension of Europeanization is the issue at stake when exploring the effects of European integration on the organization of the British political system. Rather than simply absorbing European integration's effects and prompting uni-directional change driven by European integration, it was argued that the British political system (like those in other member states) will refract these effects in accordance with the standard operating practices and animating ideas of the domestic process. It is necessary to distinguish Europe's effects on the British political system from other sources of political change. The EU's impact on Whitehall, Westminster and devolved government were all explored and various explanations for change explored. It was shown that a well-established Whitehall ethos was the template on which the adaptation of British central government to European integration was based and that, despite the substantial changes which European integration has brought with it, this Whitehall ethos based on co-ordination, collective responsibility and information sharing remains strong, supplemented by an emphasis on effective transposition into UK law of agreed policies. Europe's impact on devolved government since 1997 was set against the impetus from a domestic constitutional reform agenda driven in the main by domestic politics, although the EU's structural funds have created new political opportunities for regional and sub-national government and contributed to their post-1997 flowering. There has been no well-established template from which regional and sub-national governmental responses to European integration could draw because these were new issues for the British state. This causes some tensions between the EU's multiple levels and the UK's asymmetrical process of devolution. Important questions remain unresolved about the role and function of these sub-national tiers of government in Britain's EU policy.

Some of the most tumultuous EU-related events have occurred in the legislative arena. The main divisions over Europe have occurred within rather than between the main parties. Anti-European integration sentiment has evolved from the anti-marketisers of the 1960s and 1970s into a distinct brand of (mainly) right-wing and Conservative Euroscepticism since the 1990s. Although the issues of Maastricht and the Euro have engaged the political class rather more than they did the general public, arguments about Europe were flushed out into the open and Eurosceptics

(supported by key sections of the press) developed a powerful critique of the EU. The key drivers of this Euroscepticism were the EU's move into areas of high politics (EMU and the Maastricht Treaty, in particular) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coupled with the small parliamentary majority of John Major's Conservative government between 1992 and 1997.

To what extent do British policy priorities and the organization of the British economy and welfare state fit with those in other member states and with an emerging European Union model?

The question of the Europeanization of British politics does, of course, extend beyond the arena of Whitehall and Westminster. It also touches upon core socio-economic priorities. A series of core EU policy issues were explored, and a varied pattern of adaptation and change was found, although it was also seen that Britain's late membership meant that key policy priorities were established in the UK's absence and were not necessarily to the UK's advantage. This was then the basis for wrangling as the UK sought a better deal from other member states (with their own interests tied up with these policy choices) which were not always disposed to accommodate UK demands. Underlying these policy debates has been a branch of UK European policy that prefers free trade and market liberalization. The UK economy has become more closely linked with the EU since accession, although this has not necessarily generated demands for 'more Europe' in the way that straightforward transactional approaches might suggest. Rather, there remains a perception that the UK socio-economic approach is different even in the face of greater concentration of economic activity within the EU. These developments motivated the desire of the Thatcher governments to raise economic liberalization to a European level through the single market programme and, more recently, New Labour's links between British participation in the Euro and economic reform that mirrors UK emphasis on liberalization and labour market flexibility (and look to the US as an example of good practice). This 'Anglo-Saxon' approach seems as likely to engender suspicion as it does support in other member states, while illustrating New Labour's move away from mainstream social democratic thinking.

In what directions have public attitudes towards the European Union developed and what part has the mass media played in shaping these views?

Public opinion data shows Britain to be the 'don't know, not interested and don't trust' capital of the EU. These attitudes and the factors underpinning them were the subject of Chapter 10, which examined public opinion and the media representation of Europe. It was shown that while it is difficult to make straightforward links between press coverage and public opinion, coverage of the EU has become particularly negative since the early 1990s. It was shown that media representation of Europe in the UK (particularly television and newspaper coverage) are unlikely to support the development of 'we-feeling' often seen as necessary for the development of European identity. The result is that collective identities in the UK do not appear to be particularly Europeanized and there is little space for Europe, while UK forms of political communication are Americanized rather than Europeanized. Indeed, it is not clear what a European form of political communication would involve given the diverse national models and the often rather technical (and thus difficult to represent) core purposes of the EU.

In search of a critical juncture

The arguments developed in this book have explored the ways in which there has been a historical institutional patterning of Britain's relations with the EU. Reluctance, awkwardness and semi-detachment have been based on the three well-established branches of policy. The effects of historical choices on the interests and identities of political actors are fairly well-entrenched components of the strategic environment within which they operate. In such circumstances, it can be easier to explain institutional persistence than it is to account for political change.

In the light of these circumstances, what predictions can be made about future engagement with the EU and its core projects? Of these core projects, the Euro stands out as particularly important. Trying to detect the UK government's approach is akin to advanced forms of Kremlinology as subtle shifts in positions are spun in the national newspapers and inside sources provide accounts of the attitudes of the two key players (Brown and Blair). While the criteria for accession are economic, the real decision is intensely political and will be a defining

moment in the history of New Labour in power. Whether or not the decision is taken in the lifetime of the Parliament elected in 2001 to have a referendum on the Euro remains an open question.

There is, however, a deeper issue. The UK has spent much of the last 30 years running to catch up with the other member states. The cognitive readjustment that EU membership requires has been filtered through a domestic context and underlying EU preferences that have militated against active and full-hearted participation in key EU ventures. The result is that the debate about Britain and the Euro is another example of the difficulty that the British political class has found in adjusting to European integration. As one adjustment occurs then the pace of economic and political integration means that others are required (the Convention, reforms of institutions, the impact of enlargement all loom on the horizon too). Thus whether Britain replaces the pound with the Euro is the current manifestation of a deeper, underlying trend in relations between British politics and European integration. These centre on the three core elements of Britain's European policy (intergovernmentalism, market liberalization, Atlanticism), which have not always rested well with the EU's core purposes. If we accept that Britain's future lies with the EU (and no British government since accession has thought otherwise) then either Europe becomes more British, or Britain needs to become more European. Either way, Europe will remain a core dilemma at the heart of British politics that forces us to think about the underlying, organizing principles of the British political system and their expression in current debates about Britain's place in the world.

Bibliography

- Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso).
- Anderson, P. and Weymouth, A. (1998) *Insulting the Public? The British Press and the European Union* (London: Longman).
- Aspinwall, M. (2000) 'Structuring Europe: Powersharing Institutions and British Preferences on European Integration', *Political Studies*, 48 (3), 415-42.
- Aspinwall, M. (2003) 'Britain and Europe: Some Alternative Economic Tests', *Political Quarterly*, 74 (2), 146-57.
- Bache, I. (1998) *The Politics of European Union Regional Policy: Multi-Level Governance or Flexible Gate-Keeping* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).
- Baker, D. (2002) 'Britain and Europe: More Blood on the Euro Carpet', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55 (2), 317-30.
- Baker, D., Gamble, A. and Ludlam, S. (1993a) '1846...1906...1996? Conservative Splits and European Integration', *Political Quarterly*, 64 (2), 420-35.
- Baker, D., Gamble, A. and Ludlam, S. (1993b) 'Whips or Scorpions? The Maastricht Vote and the Conservative Party', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 46 (2), 151-66.
- Baker, D., Gamble, A. and Ludlam, S. (1994) 'The Parliamentary Siege of Maastricht 1993: Conservative Divisions and British Ratification', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47 (1), 37-59.
- Baker, D., Gamble, A. and Ludlam, S. (2002) 'Sovereign Nations and Global Markets: Modern British Conservatism and Hyperglobalism', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4 (3), 399-428.
- Balls, E. (2002) 'Why the Five Economic Tests', The Cairncross Lecture, St Peters College, Oxford, 4 December 2002.
- Bauman, Z. (2002) *Society Under Siege* (Cambridge: Polity).
- Beloff, M. (1970) *The Intellectual in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson).
- Bennett, L., Curtee, J. and Rudig, W. (1995) 'Liberal, Social Democrat or Liberal Democrat? Political identity and British centre party politics', in D. Broughton et al. (eds), *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1994* (London: Frank Cass).
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage).
- Black, I. (2002) 'How The Sun Cast a Two-Faced Shadow on the Euro-Zone', *The Guardian*, 8 January.
- Blair, T. (2000) 'Speech at Chent City Hall', 20 February 2000.
- Blair, T. (2003) 'Speech at the Foreign Office Conference', 7 January 2003, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page1765.asp>