

The British Question

What Explains the EU's New Angloscepticism?

Martin Kremer / Roderick Parkes

For much of this year, Brussels has been nervously eyeing the UK. Attention has naturally focussed on the general election and the rather ambitious European policy pledges made by the Conservative Party. Yet, there is also a latent scepticism about the nature of the UK's participation in European cooperation more generally: although the Tories are clearly marked out in their hostility to European integration, aspersions have been cast about the willingness of all British governments, whatever their political stripe, to engage in the EU. The political system developing under the Lisbon Treaty demands a constructive approach to European cooperation from its member governments. The UK has always been considered an asset for the EU's global ambitions and has therefore profited from notions of its pragmatic exceptionalism. Mainland governments are unlikely to permit this any longer without demanding greater concessions.

With questions such as the governance of the Eurozone, the European External Action Service and soon also the EU's financial perspective on the table, the Union needs a firm hand on the tiller. Over the past decade, however, the European Commission has proved unequal to the task of advancing EU cooperation in sensitive areas like foreign policy and the management of crises. Member governments, long resistant to Commission influence, now have to contribute more constructively to agenda-setting. By recognising the European Council as an EU institution, formalising its role in agenda-setting, and giving it a semi-permanent President, the Lisbon Treaty encourages them to do so.

This new setup is sometimes referred to as an Anglicisation of the EU's political system. Even if the UK is not entirely at ease with the presidential elements of the new system or indeed its means of eking out a global role for itself, the changes have seen a move towards the kind of strategic intergovernmentalism which the UK has long advocated. Yet scepticism about the UK's willingness to engage with the new system is rife. Even at the beginning of this year, with the May general election a distant prospect, many predicted that the UK would be the first large member state to undermine the new system.

The reason is simple. For this strategic intergovernmentalism to work, the mem-

ber states will have to compromise in favour of common goals. With the UK already peripheral to issues such as the governance of the Eurozone, this will be a tall order for the next government. If the UK retains or intensifies the traditional traits of its European policy, gridlock and lowest-common-denominator policies could ensue. Such a result has long been considered almost certain under a Conservative government, but could not be ruled out even under a different government, including a coalition comprising the more pro-European Liberal Democrats.

The EU's current financial problems have turned certain member states into the Union's whipping boys. Hostility to the British is of a more structural nature, and is born of a frustrated awareness of the benefits which the UK's global reach would bring to the Union. Some remark only half-jokingly about a growing "Anglosepticism" or even "Anglophobia". Britain's Baroness Commissioner has become a lightning rod for criticism about the lack of progress under the Lisbon system. In issues such as the regulation of financial services, British representatives complain of being stonewalled.

Britain's pragmatic exceptionalism

It is unsurprising that British European policy has tested the patience of its partners. Too often the UK's constructive engagement in Europe has rested on just two pillars—an aspiration to reform the EU, coupled with short-term, cost-benefit calculations of participation. For many in Brussels, this reflects an aversion to compromise on common goals.

Whitehall, they complain, will engage in constructive cooperation only where this is clearly in the British interest ("value-added") or where the UK can make it so ("British leadership"). The UK still does not have sufficient commitment to the European Union as a political project to proceed in anything but a zero-sum way.

There is much truth in this assessment, which applies most strongly to Conservative governments. But it is still mysterious that a country famed for its pragmatism maintains an ambiguous relationship with Europe, where it could exert much influence (not least by "delivering" the EU to the US), and an unambiguous bilateral relationship with the US, where it cannot (given the mismatch between its global ambitions and its resources).

Many, not least in the Tory party, have explained this arm's length relationship with the EU by reference to the country's mythical "exceptionalism": the UK simply does not fit in the EU as other members do. Britain has a unique history, and its social, economic and constitutional models are often closest to those of North America. It is no wonder that the UK is so reluctant to compromise with its European neighbours.

This is a more or less wilful misreading of a more complex reality. The UK's mode of European policy is not simply reactive to a desire to safeguard its social, economic and constitutional idiosyncrasies. The goal of maximising the country's international scope of manoeuvre exists as an independent principle of foreign policy and is at the heart of Britain's much vaunted pragmatism. As a principle, it is supposed to allow the UK to turn on a pinhead and to prevent complex international commitments from pre-defining Whitehall's actions.

This principle explains certain traits in British policy which are distinctly unpragmatic. For one thing, the UK's current approach to foreign policy tends to maintain excessive scope for alternative forms of cooperation. The UK famously overestimates the significance of transatlantic cooperation. For another thing, Whitehall has done little to counter domestic hostility to British EU membership, treating the EU as just one of many channels of cooperation. This leaves it unusually reactive to domestic forces. These traits indicate that, despite its very rational nomenclature, the pragmatic approach is a deeply ideological one.

The willing scapegoat

The results of Britain's rather zero-sum approach have been predictable. Even under the more pro-European of its governments, the UK has spent much time hectoring its partners about how to behave and how to create the business model of the future, only to hold back on its resources when it succeeds in making its case. In the wake of experiences such as Britain's 2005 EU Presidency (strained budget talks antagonizing old and new member states alike; contradictory policies on poverty reduction; clumsy efforts at economic reform), nerves in Brussels are more than a little frayed.

Faced with this latent hostility, successive British governments have adopted the same response, albeit to varying degrees. They have offered themselves up as a willing scapegoat to other member states. The UK has permitted more reticent countries which share its opposition to a certain proposal to hide behind it. This blocking role is the third pillar of British European policy: when the UK is hostile to a Commission proposal, it has carefully ensured that its position is aligned with the concerns of other member states more worried about maintaining the appearance of pro-Europeanism.

All member states, in particular the larger ones, are increasingly ambivalent about EU cooperation. With its in/out relationship to the EU, none is as constant or open about its scepticism as the UK. Thanks to the reification of British exceptionalism, the UK is happy to be identified as a European outsider in a way that would terrify its continental neighbours—not least those which understand that transatlantic influence depends upon constructive engagement in the EU. The UK has thus acted as a brake on various proposals, knowing that it speaks for silent but grateful groups of other member states.

This is an invitation for a marriage of convenience. In an EU which has been marked by a general reluctance to set out an agenda for European action, let alone

see this realised in a coherent manner, the dichotomy between pro-European and sceptical member states is obviously not clear cut. Certainly, Britain is unusual for the intensity of its reluctance. All members, however, can rely upon the UK to dampen integrationist fervour and set an exceptional precedent, be this in strategic thinking (Stockholm Programme), constitutional development (Charter of Fundamental Rights) or day-to-day negotiations (European External Action Service).

The Lisbon context

Ahead of the May general election and a purdah of unusual strictness, those concerned about maintaining the UK's long-term relations with its EU partners sought to defuse concerns about the Conservatives. They have tried to show that the Tories, if elected, would not deviate too far from the existing principles of British European policy (see *SWP Comments 27/2009*).

The hope was communicated that the Conservatives would engage with individual European policy issues, rather than playing an undifferentiated blocking role. The subtext was clear: the marriage of convenience can survive. Even this sunniest of scenarios, however, failed to appease the UK's partners. It has become clear that business as usual would scarcely be acceptable to most member governments, and any intensification of the UK's zero-sum approach to European cooperation would be beyond the pale.

In former times, the member states were well able to accommodate the UK's zero-sum approach to cooperation. Agenda-setting authority still lay with bodies such as the Commission or Convention. A deft brake from the UK was often welcome because the European Council did not always feel the need to come up with a constructive alternative. The Lisbon Treaty, by contrast, pins political responsibility for the EU's strategic development more clearly upon member state governments, particularly the large ones. Should the UK play an

uncompromising or a blocking role today, it will be antagonistic to other member governments—governments which are under greater pressure to formulate a positive agenda for the EU.

course, the other member states will be keen to keep the UK on board and avoid a splintering of cooperation under this new mode of EU cooperation, but they will not be ready to offer the same concessions as before.

Prospects

Against this background, references to the Lisbon setup as “anglicised” should set off alarm bells in any new British government. This branding could facilitate an abdication of responsibility for the Lisbon system and its good functioning to the UK. The time is thus propitious for a rethink of the UK’s mode of European policy not least because the resolution of the Eurozone issue is proving a defining moment for European integration.

The political system developing under the Lisbon Treaty demands a greater commitment from the UK to European cooperation. Yet the conjuncture of these structural factors and the limits imposed on the UK’s agenda-setting capacity by the ill health of its political and economic models may lead a eurosceptic British government to a rather different conclusion. Dismayed by its lack of positive influence in Europe, a eurosceptic new government may be tempted to defuse tensions simply by stepping out of the way of its more constructive European partners.

The formulators of the Lisbon Treaty planned for the eventual failure of consensual intergovernmental agenda-setting. The Treaty foresees various means by which smaller groupings of member states could proceed, leaving recalcitrant ones behind. Until now, the UK has appeared ambivalent about their use. Recourse by other member states to closer cooperation could after all close down possibilities for British cooperation, and stands in contrast to the UK’s principle of maximising its range of avenues for international cooperation. A eurosceptic British government, by contrast, would see closer cooperation amongst other states as a means to shift agenda-setting responsibility to its partners. Of

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