

## **David Cameron’s catastrophic miscalculation: The EU Referendum, Brexit and the UK’s ‘culture war’**

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### **Abstract**

The United Kingdom had never been an enthusiastic member of the European Union, with membership mostly based on pragmatism rather than principle, and assumptions about the economic advantages to be accrued, rather than any commitment to political union or supranational governance. However, this lukewarm commitment to UK membership of the EU cooled between 2010 and 2016, both reflected and reinforced by internal developments inside the Conservative Party under David Cameron’s leadership, the electoral threat posed to the Conservatives by the increasing popularity of Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and a growing perception in many towns and communities that had been ‘left behind’ due to de-industrialisation, Globalisation, and an apparently out-of-touch London-centric liberal elite. These feelings of anxiety and *anomie* were further fueled by the austerity program imposed by Cameron’s coalition government, which exacerbated the economic and social problems of many citizens and communities in already impoverished parts of Britain. This simmering discontent led to resentment against the EU and migrant workers, a hostility readily encouraged by opponents of the EU in the Conservative Party and the EU. Cameron’s confidence that he could overcome this antipathy by negotiating a better deal for the UK in the EU, and then advocate a ‘Remain’ vote in a once-in-a-lifetime referendum, proved to be a serious error of judgement. Not only did the electorate (narrowly) vote to Leave the EU, but the UK has subsequently become even more deeply politically and socially divided, and Brexiters, as an integral part of a resurgent Right, have embarked on a more general anti-modernist and populist ‘culture war’.

**Key words:** *David Cameron; Conservative Party; Eurosceptics; Leave; referendum; Remain; United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)*

### **Introduction**

Until the late 1980s, Britain’s Conservative Party enjoyed a reputation for public unity, rejection of ideology, pragmatism, deference among MPs towards its leaders, and governmental competence, attributes which underpinned its renowned ‘statecraft’, and remarkable electoral success. However, from the late 1980s onwards, the Conservative Party has been prone to often deep and damaging disagreements and divisions over Britain’s relationship with the European Community (EC), and then the European Union (EU), with a growing number of MPs questioning the need for UK membership of the EU. This reflected and reinforced a change in the nature of intra-Party divisions over EU membership, for whereas internal disagreements had previously been between Europhiles (pro-Europeans) and Eurosceptics, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the emergence of a new division, between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ Eurosceptics.

Cameron's difficulties in managing intra-Party dissent over Europe were exacerbated the increasing popularity and media coverage enjoyed by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by the charismatic and populist Nigel Farage. Although UKIP was not expected to win many (if any) seats in House of Commons, it was deemed likely to win enough votes in some constituencies to deprive the Conservative candidate of a plurality of votes, and therefore allow the Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate to claim victory. It was in the context of these developments that Cameron announced, in January 2013, a referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU, although this would not be held until after the next general election, scheduled for 2015. In the meantime, Cameron – as a 'soft' Eurosceptic – intended to renegotiate the UK's membership of the EU, in the expectation of reclaiming some powers, and thereby establishing a looser, more flexible, relationship with Europe. He would then urge people to vote for the UK to 'Remain' a member of the EU. It was to prove a disastrous strategy, a monumental miscalculation.

### **Cameron's initial intention to neutralise the EU issue**

Upon being elected Conservative leader in December 2005, following the Party's third consecutive general election defeat to New Labour, Cameron sought to 're-brand' the Party, in order to move away from or beyond Thatcherism, by promoting a more conciliatory and compassionate mode of Conservatism. This entailed promising to end the ideological (neoliberal) hostility towards public services (education, the NHS, etc), acceptance of multiculturalism, and the promotion of liberal or progressive issues such as environmentalism, eradicating poverty, same-sex relationships, social justice, and work-life balance.<sup>1</sup> However, his advocacy of such values and policies alienated some on the Right of the Party, where social and moral attitudes remained very conservative and often authoritarian<sup>1</sup>, and this later made it more difficult to manage Conservative MPs when he became Prime Minister.

Integral to this apparent commitment to a new mode of post-Thatcherite Conservatism, Cameron also urged his Party, at its 2006 annual conference, to stop 'banging on about Europe'<sup>2</sup>. Not only had the Party's Euroscepticism failed to prevent three heavy election defeats in 1997, 2001 and 2005, the intra-Party arguments over the UK's relationship with the EU had merely reminded voters about just how divided the Conservatives were over Europe, and, indeed, how obsessed some Conservatives were with the issue. It had also contributed significantly to Margaret Thatcher's downfall in 1990, and then fatally undermined John Major's 1990-97 premiership. Yet it proved impossible for Cameron to avoid the issue of Europe, due to the hostile stance of some Conservative MPs, and the electoral threat posed by UKIP.

During the first half (2005-2010) of Cameron's leadership, when the Conservatives were *not* in government, the most contentious issue *vis-à-vis* the EU concerned the Lisbon Treaty, which he initially insisted should be subject to a referendum prior to the UK's ratification. This claim, though, was primarily prompted by the necessity of intra-party management, with Cameron hoping that the allusion to a referendum on ratification would pacify the Conservatives' more vehement and vocal Eurosceptics, and enable him to focus on the Party's domestic policy agenda. However, in November 2009, Cameron abandoned the referendum pledge, because by this time, other EU

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bale, T., *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*, Cambridge: Polity, 2010; Dorey, P., 'A new direction or another false dawn? David Cameron and the crisis of British Conservatism', *British Politics*, 2 (2), 137-166, 2007; 'Heppell, T., Cameron and Liberal Conservatism: Attitudes within the Parliamentary Conservative Party and Conservative Ministers', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15 (3), 2013, pp. 340-361

<sup>2</sup> BBC News online, 'Cameron places focus on optimism', 1 October 2006, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5396358.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5396358.stm)

member-states had ratified the Lisbon Treaty. In so doing, Cameron insisted that: ‘We cannot hold a referendum and magically make...the Lisbon treaty...disappear, any more than we could hold a referendum to stop the sun rising in the morning’<sup>2</sup>

This announcement alerted many Conservative Eurosceptics to the risk that Cameron would prove unreliable in resisting further European integration if he became Prime Minister. In an attempt at allaying such concerns, Cameron offered another pledge, via the Conservatives’ 2010 manifesto, that ‘in future, the British people must have their say on any transfer of powers to the European Union...any proposed future treaty that transferred areas of power, or competences, would be subject to a referendum.’<sup>3</sup> This was another clear attempt at agenda-management and attention-deflection by attempting to downgrade a contentious issue, but when Cameron became Prime Minister in May 2010, three factors significantly enhanced the saliency of the EU as a policy issue, thereby exacerbating divisions in the Conservative Party and posing serious problems for Cameron’s leadership.

#### *Cameron’s failure to lead the Conservatives to victory in 2010*

The first factor was the result of the 2010 general election, when the Conservatives were the largest Party in terms of seats won (306) but did not win an overall parliamentary majority.<sup>3</sup> For many Conservatives on the Right of the Party, which is also where the most militant Eurosceptic MPs were located, Cameron’s failure to secure outright victory was attributed to his ‘modernising’ agenda and social liberalism, and his concomitant refusal to adopt a more explicitly anti-European stance. This was deemed to have alienated some of the Party’s more ‘conservative’ voters, while confusing some potential supporters who were unsure about what (or who) the Conservative Party represented under Cameron’s leadership.

Instead of opting to preside over an unstable or weak minority government, Cameron decided to enter a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (57 seats); the two parties’ combined number of seats in the House of Commons provided a comfortable majority.<sup>4</sup> However, the Liberal Democrats were widely recognised to be the most pro-European of Britain’s main political parties, a fact which deepened the apprehension of some Conservative Eurosceptics, who feared both that the Liberal Democrats would exercise too much influence or leverage over Cameron on European policy, and that Cameron would not be strong enough to resist. Having reneged on his previous pledge to conduct a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, Cameron was now subject to even more suspicion and scrutiny from many Conservative Eurosceptics who anticipated further ‘betrayal’ over Europe.

Cameron did attempt to pacify these critics by withdrawing the Conservative Party from the (moderate) centre-Right European People’s Party bloc in the European Parliament, but in so doing, he alienated some of the key leaders from other member states whose support he would later need in attempting to renegotiate the terms and conditions of the UK’s membership. In effect, short-term intra-party management was to have longer-term repercussions which Cameron probably could not have envisaged when responding tactically to backbench discontent over ‘the European question’.

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<sup>3</sup> Dorey, P., ‘Faltering before the finishing line: The Conservative Party’s performance in the 2010 general election’, *British Politics* 5 (4), 402-435, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Dorey, P., and Garnett, M., *The British Coalition Government, 2010-2015: A Marriage of Inconvenience*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016,

## The Changing Character of Conservative Euroscepticism

The second factor which greatly enhanced the significance of the EU as an issue within Cameron's Conservative Party was the character of the division over Europe during his premiership. Under the previous two Conservative Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and John Major (1990-97), the main distinction had been between Europhiles (pro-Europeans or Euro-enthusiasts) and Eurosceptics. The latter viewed EU membership in neo-liberal terms; free trade between member-states, the post-1992 single market, and promoting competition and de-regulation. However, they were strongly opposed both to further integration or harmonisation – including the single European currency – and to the EU's increasing jurisdiction over other policy spheres, such as employment rights, the environment, and social justice.

However, after the 2010 general election, this demarcation was superseded by a new division among Conservative MPs, between 'soft' and 'hard' Eurosceptics<sup>5</sup>; only seven Conservative MPs elected in 2010 were pro-Europeans, a mere 2.3% of the parliamentary Party.<sup>6</sup> This was an integral aspect of more general process of 'Thatcherisation' in the Conservative Party, whereby an ever-increasing number of its MPs since 1992 have been economic neo-liberals, and Eurosceptics.<sup>7</sup> Instead of Thatcherism becoming weaker after Thatcher's 1990 resignation, her economic and European views have become much more extensive and entrenched among Conservative MPs; indeed, they are now hegemonic. The One Nation (and pro-European) Tories who were prevalent in the Conservative Party until the 1970s are now virtually extinct.<sup>8</sup>

According to Taggart and Szczerbiack, 'soft' Euroscepticism 'is where there is not principled objection to European integration or EU membership' *per se*, but there are concerns about particular policy issues or institutional jurisdiction, and hence a 'qualified opposition to the EU, or...a sense that the "national interest" is currently at odds with the EU's trajectory'.<sup>9</sup> As such, 'soft' Eurosceptics tend to favour continued EU membership, but on looser or more flexible terms, and with some powers or policy jurisdiction reclaimed by the nation-state. This was certainly David Cameron's stance<sup>10</sup>, and one shared by many of his Conservative colleagues in the Cabinet, such as his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and the then Home Secretary Theresa May – who became Prime Minister following Cameron's immediate post-referendum resignation.

By contrast, 'hard' Eurosceptics share 'a principled opposition towards the EU and European integration' and therefore 'think that their countries should withdraw from membership'.<sup>11</sup> As such, 'hard' Eurosceptics tend to view membership of the EU as non-negotiable, because they are fundamentally opposed to European integration and any loss of parliamentary sovereignty;

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<sup>5</sup> Lynch, P., 'Conservative modernisation and European integration: From silence to salience to schism', *British Politics* 10 (2), 185-203, 2015; D'Ancona, *In It Together: The Inside Story of the Coalition Government*, revised edition, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 239, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Heppell, T., 'Cameron and Liberal Conservatism: Attitudes within the Parliamentary Conservative Party and Conservative ministers', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15 (3), p. 349, Table 4, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Heppell, T., 'The Ideological Composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party from Thatcher to May' in A. Mullen, S. Farrall and D. Jeffery (eds) *Thatcherism in the 21st Century: The Social and Cultural Legacy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 15-34, 2020. See also Dorey P., 'Towards exit from the EU: The Conservative Party's increasing Euroscepticism since the 1980s', *Politics and Governance*, 5 (2), pp. 27-40, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the decline of One Nation Conservatism, see Dorey, P., and Gamett, M., "'The weaker-willed, the craven-hearted": the decline of One Nation Conservatism', *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought* 5 (1), pp.69-91, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Taggart, P., and Szczerbiack, A., 'Introduction: Opposing Europe? The politics of Euroscepticism in Europe' in A. Szczerbiack & P. Taggart (Eds) *Opposing Europe: The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism, Volume 1*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 8, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron, D., *For the Record*, London: William Collins, p. 404, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Taggart, P., and Szczerbiack, A., *Op cit*, p. 7.

negotiation entails compromise, and will thus still entail at least some betrayal and loss of sovereignty, regardless of any corresponding concessions granted. Consequently, for ‘hard’ Eurosceptics, nothing short of complete and irrevocable withdrawal from the EU will suffice.

Although the majority of Conservative MPs during Cameron’s leadership were actually ‘soft’ Eurosceptics, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptics comprised 35.4% of backbench Conservative MPs, and thus a significant minority of the parliamentary Party.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, although fewer in number, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptics were much more clearly-focused in their objective, more vocal in their criticisms and demands of the leadership, and well-organised; many of them, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, Steve Baker, Iain Duncan Smith, John Redwood, and Bill Cash, are associated with the European Research Group, although it refuses to publish a list of its members or supporters. In every respect, they appeared much more cohesive and combative than the more disparate ‘soft’ Eurosceptics (the critics of the Group have variously accused it of operating as ‘a party inside a party’), and so convinced of the need to leave the EU that they were willing to defy the Conservative leadership and official Party policy on the issue of Europe. In so doing, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptics viewed themselves as true patriots, prioritising the long-term national interest over short-term party interests, and promoting convictions over pragmatic compromise (the latter often viewed as ‘selling-out’). If ‘soft’ Eurosceptics accused them of betraying the leadership and unity of the Party, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptics would sometimes retort that their ‘soft’ Eurosceptic Conservative critics – and pro-Europeans more generally – were traitors betraying their country, and thus being unpatriotic.<sup>13</sup>

According to a Minister in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government who witnessed the arguments very closely, some prominent Conservatives who called for, or clearly favoured, UK withdrawal from the EU from 2010 onwards, had previously wanted a looser, more flexible, form of membership, but subsequently became more hostile in their stance on Europe during the first decade of the 21st Century.<sup>14</sup> In effect, they themselves shifted from ‘soft’ Euroscepticism in the 1990s and early 2000s to ‘hard’ Euroscepticism by 2010, having become increasingly concerned at what they perceived to be the EU’s trajectory towards ever-closer union, stronger supranationalism and the abrogation of increasing powers over an increasing range of policies. John Redwood argued that anyone reading the Maastricht and subsequent Treaties for the first time ‘would conclude that the intention is none other than the establishment of a new country called Europe ... It is amazing how far the process has gone, and how few people have woken up to the intentions.’<sup>15</sup> Consequently, ‘hard’ Eurosceptics were convinced that renegotiating the UK’s membership would not be sufficient – assuming it was even possible; the UK needed to leave the EU altogether, or it would eventually cease to exist as an independent nation-state.

These ‘hard’ Eurosceptics were not convinced by Cameron’s insistence that the Lisbon Treaty was ‘a line drawn in the sand’, by which he meant that no further ‘surrender’ of sovereignty would be permitted unless clearly approved by the British people. As the Conservatives’ 2010 manifesto pledged, ‘in future, the British people must have their say on any transfer of powers to the

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<sup>12</sup> Heppell, T. *Op cit*, 2013, p. 347, Table 3.

<sup>13</sup> For the accusations that those who did *not* want to Leave the EU were ‘unpatriotic’, see, for example: Moore, M., and Ramsay, G., *UK media coverage of the 2016 EU Referendum campaign*, London: Kings’ College/Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, pp. 75-76, May 2017; Hobolt, S. B., Leeper, T., and Tilley, J., ‘Emerging Brexit Identities’ in *The UK in a Changing Europe, Brexit and Public Opinion*, p. 19, 2018; McKinstry, Leo, ‘With just one leap we could finally be FREE of the EU’, *The Daily Express* 13 June 2016; Editorial, ‘Whingeing. Contemptuous. Unpatriotic. Damn the Breemoaners and their plot to subvert the will of the British people’, *The Daily Mail*, 12 October 2016;

<sup>14</sup> Letwin, O., *Hearts and Minds: The Battle for the Conservative Party from Thatcher to the Present*, London: Biteback, pp. 12-14, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Redwood, J., *The Death of Britain?*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 33, 1999.

European Union ... any proposed future treaty that transferred areas of power, or competences, *would be subject to a referendum*'.<sup>16</sup> Yet this pledge did not quell the doubts which the Conservatives' 'hard' Eurosceptics held about Cameron's reliability or sincerity on this key issue, and so the early years of his premiership witnessed repeated demands, by 'hard' Eurosceptics, for a referendum on the UK's membership, without waiting for any further initiatives or Treaties from the EU.

For example, October 2011 heard a debate, in the House of Commons, on a parliamentary motion introduced by a Conservative backbencher, demanding a national referendum on the UK's continued membership of the EU. Although a three-line whip was imposed on Conservative MPs by the Party's leadership, instructing them to vote *against* the motion (on the basis that it was incompatible with existing policy, as decreed in the Party's election manifesto the previous year), 81 Conservative backbenchers defied this edict. Not surprisingly, these constituted a *de facto* list of 'hard' Eurosceptics, including Conservatives such as Steve Baker, Graham Brady, Douglas Carswell, Bill Cash, Bernard Jenkin, Edward Leigh, Priti Patel (the current Home Secretary), John Redwood, and Jacob Rees-Mogg.<sup>17</sup>

Even when David Cameron did eventually pledge (see below) to hold referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, many 'hard' Eurosceptics did not trust him to fulfil this promise, and so they attempted (unsuccessfully) to introduce legislation which would guarantee that a referendum was held after the next general election; it would not be a mere personal pledge by the Prime Minister, but a statutory requirement endorsed by Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

### **The emergence of UKIP as an electoral threat**

The third development which increased pressure on Cameron over the issue of Europe was the increasing popularity of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which campaigned explicitly for the UK's total and permanent withdrawal from the EU. The issue had actually been of low electoral salience in the 2010s, not because of any widespread love of the EU among the British people, but because the electorate had not previously judged EU withdrawal to an important issue compared to the economy, the NHS, education, pensions, crime, etc. Indeed, in the 2010 general election, it had only been ranked 10<sup>th</sup> when voters were asked to rate policy issues in terms of their electoral importance. Many voters would endorse the UK's withdrawal from the EU if presented with a simple binary choice (leave or remain) in an opinion poll or public attitudes survey, but relatively few voters felt sufficiently strongly about the EU to rate it as the most important issue facing either themselves or the country. This clearly posed a political dilemma for a supposedly 'single issue' party like UKIP.

However, from 2010 onwards, UKIP's support steadily increased, and, in turn, placed growing pressure on David Cameron to 'toughen' his stance on Europe. Two developments boosted UKIP's popularity between 2010 and 2016.<sup>19</sup> First, the return of Nigel Farage as UKIP leader (having resigned to concentrate on campaigning as a candidate in the 2010 election) was accompanied by an energetic strategy of gaining a higher media profile, via media interviews,

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<sup>16</sup> The Conservative Party, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, London: Conservative Central Office, p. 113, emphasis added, 2010

<sup>17</sup> Hansard, House of Commons debates, Volume 534, 24 October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Hansard, House of Commons debates, Volume 565, 5 July 2013.

<sup>19</sup> An excellent account of the rise of UKIP (as an integral part of the populist radical Right) is provided by Ford, R., and Goodwin, M., *Revolt on the Right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain*, London: Routledge 2014. See also, Lynch, P., *Op cit*, pp. 195-197; Seldon, A., and Snowden, P., *Cameron at 10: The Inside Story, 2010-2015*, London: William Collins, chapter 31, 2015.

‘soundbites’, and appearances on ‘current affairs’ television programmes such as BBC’s weekly *Question Time*.<sup>20</sup> By raising his own profile and prominence through regular television appearances, and making anti-EU speeches which were guaranteed to enjoy prominent reportage, Farage also enhanced UKIP’s visibility and popularity. He also adopted a ‘cheeky chappy’ persona, who oscillated between trenchant criticism of mainstream politicians and the EU, and open ridicule and laughter. In so doing, he claimed to be saying what millions of ordinary British people were thinking privately or instinctively felt, but were afraid to say openly.

The second factor which boosted UKIP’s popularity after 2010 was the manner in which Farage linked withdrawal from the EU to the issue of immigration, particularly migrant workers who worked in Britain under the auspices of the ‘free movement of labour’. Farage had recognised that campaigning against UK membership of the EU solely on constitutional grounds (the loss of sovereignty, and supranationalism) would only attract limited support, because these were rather abstract or esoteric issues to many voters; they were too technocratic. What was needed, he reasoned, was to identify a particular issue which was tangible, could be portrayed as problematic, arguably affected many people and communities, and was directly attributable to membership of the EU. By identifying migrant workers, especially those from East European countries which had joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, as a ‘problem’, Farage imbued the campaign for UK withdrawal with an emotional and visceral appeal, against which evidence-based counter-arguments by mainstream politicians, particularly about the ‘benefits’ of immigration and multiculturalism, often had limited appeal or impact.

What made the tactic of targeting migrants workers even more toxic – but also more effective electorally from UKIP’s perspective – was the austerity program which the Cameron-led Coalition Government pursued from 2010, which entailed deep cuts in spending on public services and welfare. As a result, anger and frustration increased over higher unemployment, pay ‘freezes’ for those who retained their jobs, longer NHS waiting lists, over-crowded school classrooms, lack of affordable housing, and increasing inequality and poverty. While these developments were a consequence of the Coalition Government’s ‘austerity’ programme – and neoliberalism in general – many residents of the communities most affected were readily persuaded that their problems were actually due to the EU and immigrants/migrant workers; these thus became the ‘scapegoats’ blamed for the material hardships suffered by many people. However, in the context of support for Leave/Brexit, hostility toward immigration was often strongest in towns which had experienced a relatively sudden increase in migrant workers in recent years. In other words, it was not necessarily or simply the *number* of migrants which fuelled resentment and xenophobia, but the *pace* of immigration.<sup>21</sup>

The material deprivation and suffering in these communities were compounded by more general economic changes in parts of the UK since the 1990s. In many towns in Northern England and South Wales, which had once thrived due to industries such as coal, steel, ship-building and textiles, local people often felt that they had been ‘left behind’ by globalisation and the automation of many jobs, but had not benefitted from the expansion, since the 1980s, of new white-collar and professional jobs in sectors such as financial services, Information Technology, and ‘creative industries’; many of these were based in the already prosperous south of England and London. Instead, many of the jobs which either remained, or were created, in the ‘left behind’ towns, were insecure, low-paid, had unsocial hours and poor working conditions; they were characterised by poverty wages and precarious employment contracts. This lack of secure or well-paid employment, combined with the decimation of public services and lack of affordable housing, meant that Farage

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<sup>20</sup> Farage, N., *The Purple Revolution: The Year That Changed Everything*, London: Biteback, chapter 6, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Goodwin, M., and Heath, O., ‘The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result’, *The Political Quarterly*, 87 (3), p. 329, 2016.

and UKIP found it relatively easy to persuade some of these ‘left behind’ and impoverished citizens that their immiseration was caused by the EU, and migrant workers either ‘taking their jobs’ or ‘driving-down’ wages, while also adding to the pressures on already over-stretched public services and housing.

The increasing popularity of UKIP – as highlighted at the end of this paragraph – naturally caused considerable concern for Cameron, not because he feared that Farage’s party would actually win many (if any) parliamentary seats, but that it might attract just enough support away from the Conservatives in ‘marginal’ constituencies to allow the Liberal Democrats or Labour to win seats instead, due to the manner in which the first-past-the-post electoral system operates; a simple plurality system in which the winner is the candidate who has the single largest number of votes, rather than an overall majority. Although, more recently, it has been the Labour Party which has suffered the most from defections to UKIP, and then the Brexit Party, among some working-class voters (especially in the 2019 election), during Cameron’s premiership, most of UKIP’s growing support emanated from disillusioned Right-wing Conservatives who were increasingly alienated by Cameron’s social liberalism and/or ‘soft’ Euroscepticism.<sup>22</sup> For example, in 2012, there were a couple of by-elections in which the UKIP candidates polled more votes than the Conservative candidates, and thereby pushed the latter into fourth and fifth place, in Middlesbrough, and Rotherham, both in northern England. Moreover, in September 2014, two Conservative MPs, Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless, actually defected to UKIP.

### **Cameron’s referendum pledge**

Cameron eventually conceded to the increasing demands for a referendum via a January 2013 speech at the London office of Bloomberg media company, in which he announced that a direct poll on the UK’s membership of the EU would be held in the next [post-2015] Parliament. As with the referendum on EC membership pledged by the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the mid-1970s, Cameron’s promise of such a plebiscite was not motivated by a sudden desire for direct democracy *per se*, but by the urgent tactical need to manage the issue inside the Conservative Party. According to a senior pro-European Conservative, Kenneth Clarke: ‘It was obvious that David had taken [the decision] mainly for reasons of party management’, in the context of ‘the constant backdrop of Right-wing nationalist Conservative backbenchers agitating on Eurosceptic causes’, although he also envisaged that it might neutralise the growing electoral threat posed by UKIP.<sup>23</sup> Even so, Clarke insisted that to resolve crucial or complicated national issues by asking citizens to answer simplistic either/or question was ‘reckless beyond belief ... [a] foolish and extremely risky decision’. Clarke was astonished at ‘the irresponsibility of this gamble’.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Chris Patten, a former Cabinet Minister and chair of the Conservative Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s, argued that a referendum ‘should have no place in a parliamentary democracy. It undermines the whole notion of parliamentary sovereignty’, and supplants ‘discussion and compromise among those we elect [MPs] to give us the benefit of their judgement’. Indeed, Patten claimed that using a referendum to resolve complex or constitutionally important issues was a political ‘blunderbuss’.<sup>25</sup> Further criticism emanated from Cameron’s Chancellor, George Osborne, who ‘did not just think a referendum was a bad idea, he thought it was a disastrous idea’, partly because it would only present the electorate with a stark In/Out, all-or-

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<sup>22</sup> For relevant data, see Ford, R., ‘The rise of UKIP: What does it all mean?’, *Political Betting*, 4 December 2012. (Available from: <http://www2.politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2012/12/04/the-rise-of-ukip-what-does-it-all-mean?>).

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, K., *Kind of Blue: A Political Memoir*, London: Macmillan, p. 473, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 472, p.473.

<sup>25</sup> Patten, C., *First Confession: A Sort of Memoir*, London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, p. 248, 2018.



nothing choice, and partly because he anticipated the ‘major risk that several uncontrollable forces would combine in a referendum campaign’ such as anti-government sentiment, and political opportunism from opponents, ‘and then you lose.’<sup>26</sup>

Cameron however, could point to the fact that there had been a referendum on EEC membership back in 1975, and that such a poll was thus not unprecedented. Also, given that this referendum had been almost 40 years ago, Cameron could argue that the time was right to allow the UK people to be given another opportunity to express their views on continued membership of the EU, especially as there had been so many changes since 1975. Besides, the Cameron’s Government had already allowed a referendum on electoral reform, in which his campaign *against* adopting the Alternative Vote method of election had proved victorious. Cameron would also hold a referendum on whether Scotland should be allowed to become independent, and his advocacy of Scotland remaining part of the United Kingdom (ie, rejecting a ‘leave’ vote) also proved successful. These two victories were very likely to have boosted Cameron’s confidence that he could lead ‘Remain’ to victory in a referendum on the UK’s continued EU membership, and thereby ‘settle the question’ for a generation. Indeed, this confidence – what proved to be over-confidence or hubris – was strengthened by two other factors at the time he pledged an EU referendum.

The first were opinion polls which asked people how they would vote if Cameron could negotiate a ‘better deal’ for the UK, and then recommended a vote to remain in the EU. Although many polls offered respondents a simple binary choice between Leave and Remain – with Leave often the slightly more popular choice – there was a different response when people were asked how they would vote on the basis of successfully renegotiated terms and conditions of UK membership. For example, a YouGov poll, conducted at the end of 2013, offered respondents three options, and each attracted significantly different responses, as illustrated by Table 1.

Table 1: How people said they would vote in three scenarios, December 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Scenarios	Would vote Leave	Would vote Remain	Conservative supporter – would vote Leave	Conservative supporter – would vote Remain
No renegotiation	45	32	62	22
Modest renegotiation	38	39	47	38
Major renegotiation	23	52	21	63

The clear message to Cameron was that if he could secure a major renegotiation of the UK’s membership, entailing the return of various powers to Parliament, then there would be a 52/23 majority in favour of the UK remaining in the EU, whereas if he failed to obtain any changes, the UK public would vote 45/32 to Leave. The same poll also revealed that whereas Conservative supporters would vote 62/22 to Leave the EU if there was no change in the terms of the UK’s membership, these Conservatives would vote 63/21 for the UK to Remain in the EU if Cameron secured a major renegotiation. It seemed that much of the public, and also many Conservative supporters, were ‘soft’ Eurosceptics – it was not the UK’s membership of the EU itself that they objected to, but the current (perceived) imbalance of power and erosion of parliamentary sovereignty. If the terms and conditions of UK membership could be significantly recalibrated, thus yielding a looser, more flexible, relationship, then there would be majority support among the UK public in general, and Conservative voters in particular.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Shipman, T., *All out war: The full story of how Brexit sank Britain’s political class*, London: William Collins, p. 3, 4, 2016. See also Seldon A., and Snowdon, P., *Op cit*, p. 547.

<sup>27</sup> YouGov, ‘EU referendum: the red lines for swing voters’, 18 December 2013.

Following directly on from this, the second factor which encouraged Cameron's confidence that he could secure a Remain vote in the promised referendum was his belief that he would be able to renegotiate the basis of the UK's membership of the EU, and thereby reclaim various powers. However, Cameron's confidence (critics would have viewed it as hubris) in his own charisma and powers of persuasion were mistaken or overestimated, and he was only able to obtain modest, often opaque, concessions, rather than the 'major' changes which, according to the polling data, would have led to a strong 'Remain' vote in the subsequent referendum. Certainly, he was unable to secure the significant reforms on the two issues of most importance to voters (according to the polling data), namely migrant workers via the 'free movement of labour', and their entitlement to welfare benefits as EU citizens. Instead, he was obliged to compromise in order to secure an agreement over *some* curbs, but the concessions he secured were not substantial or visible enough to allay the concerns of those voters for whom these were the most problematic aspect of EU membership.<sup>28</sup>

That Cameron failed to obtain more substantial concessions from his renegotiation was due to various factors, most notably that: the grievances he was articulating on behalf of the UK were not equally viewed as problems or priorities in other most other EU member states (British 'exceptionalism!'); similarly, the changes he was demanding were not a priority for other EU leaders, especially as many other European politicians were pre-occupied with addressing the aftermath of the euro-zone crisis; other European leaders recognised that Cameron's pursuit of renegotiation was not motivated by a desire genuinely to improve EU governance or efficiency, but was driven by domestic considerations and internal Conservative Party politics; he had already alienated some other EU leaders when he had withdrawn Conservative MEPs from the centre-Right European People's party bloc in the European Parliament – in so doing, he seriously depleted his political capital from the outset, and reduced the goodwill he might otherwise have enjoyed from other European leaders.<sup>29</sup>

This, in turn, made it difficult for Cameron (and Remain campaigners in the referendum) to persuade 'soft' Eurosceptics voters that he had secured substantive and durable reforms from other EU leaders. On the contrary, the limited reforms he attained convinced many people that Cameron himself was a weak leader who was incapable of 'standing up for' the UK's interests in Europe, and/or that the EU itself was incapable of reform, or at least reformed in the manner that would benefit the UK. Thus did the June 2016 referendum see 17.4 million people vote Leave, while 16.1 million supported Remain – 52-48% of votes cast respectively, on a turnout of 72%. In spite of the relatively narrow margin of their victory, Leave supporters immediately insisted that the referendum result was emphatic, and represented 'the democratic will of the British people' – a claim repeated consistently ever since.

## Why Cameron and the 'Remain' campaign lost the 2016 Referendum

The explanations for why the UK (narrowly) voted to Leave the EU in the June 2016 referendum have provided the basis for several journal articles and books.<sup>30</sup> In this final section, we briefly

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<sup>28</sup> For a simple comparison of what Cameron wanted from these negotiations, and/or what he actually obtained, see BBC, 'EU reform deal: What Cameron wanted and what he got', 20 February 2016; Grant, C., 'Cameron's EU Gamble: Five reforms he can win, and ten pitfalls he must avoid', Centre for European Reform, 2015; Rankin, J., 'David Cameron's EU deal: what he wanted and what he got', *The Guardian* 19 February 2016; Wall, S., *Reluctant Europeans; Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 282-286, 2020. For Cameron's own account of the negotiations, see Cameron D., *Op cit*, chapter 45.

<sup>29</sup> Bevington, M., 'Brexit: David Cameron did even more damage than you think', *Prospect* 10 August 2018.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: Alabrese, E., Becker, S., Fetzer, T., and Novy, D., 'Who voted for Brexit? Individual and regional data combined', *European Journal of Political Economy* 56, pp. 132-150, 2019; Clarke, H., Goodwin, M., and Whiteley,

outline three factors underpinning the result of the June 2016 referendum: the greater emotional or visceral appeal of the ‘Leave’ campaign; the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of many ‘Leave’ voters; the underlying cultural aspects of the ‘Leave’ vote, in terms of a populist and anti-modernist backlash.

### *The emotional/visceral appeal of the ‘Leave’ campaign*

Much of the success of ‘hard’ Eurosceptics in campaigning for Britain’s withdrawal from the EU derived from their ability to simplify the issues via short and simple slogans - ‘take back control’ was a notable example - and appeal to people’s emotions or gut-instincts in denouncing EU bureaucracy, immigration and a European ‘super-state’. By contrast, ‘Remainers’ had assumed that the case for the UK’s continued membership of the EU could be made largely by appealing to ‘facts’, logic, reason, and economic criteria – citing the volume of trade with Europe, and the damage that would be caused to the UK’s economy by withdrawing. However, the Remain campaign’s economic claims lacked the simplicity and visceral appeal of anti-European (sometimes xenophobic) arguments and sentiments.

Furthermore, as we explain below, many Leave voters lived in towns which had suffered most from years of deindustrialisation, neoliberalism and the concomitant increase in social deprivation. As such, when advocates of ‘Remain’ warned of the extensive job losses which were likely to follow a Leave vote, as many companies relocated to mainland Europe, or even further afield – warnings denounced as ‘Project Fear’ – supporters of UK withdrawal from the EU were likely to respond by asking ‘what jobs?’, a reference to the chronic lack of employment in these areas anyway. Many of these Leave voters felt that they literally had nothing to lose by voting to Leave the EU, while others shared the view of a Leave voter in northern England who confessed that ‘I don’t mind if we take an economic hit. Our lives have never been easy ... But it will be nice to see the rich folk down south suffer.’<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, Leave supporters concluded that the economic and social problems which their towns suffered were clear evidence of the irrelevance of the EU; what the Remain campaign claimed were the valuable benefits of EU membership were a source of mystification to many Leave voters, and seemed to confirm that ‘Remainers’ were out-of-touch with the painful experiences of much of the UK. If Remainers insisted that the EU had *not* caused the socio-economic problems endured by the ‘left behind’, the Leave campaign could retort that the EU had done little, or nothing, to prevent or alleviate such problems, but had certainly made them worse via the ‘free movement of labour’.

Ultimately, the arguments of the pro-EU/Remain campaign were often too abstract, esoteric or intangible, and thus lacked the emotive or visceral appeal of the Leave campaign.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, it

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P., *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; Curtice, J., ‘Why Leave Won the UK’s EU Referendum’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55 (S1), pp. 19-37, 2017; Glencross, A., *Why the UK Voted for Brexit: David Cameron’s Great Miscalculation*, London: Palgrave, 2016; Goodhart, D., *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics*, London: Penguin Books, 2017; Goodwin, M., and Heath, O., *Op cit*, 2016; Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D., and Jones, R. W., ‘How Brexit was made in England’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19 (4), pp. 631-646, 2017; O’Rourke, K., *A Short History of Brexit: From Brentry to Backstop*, London: Pelican, 2019; O’Toole, F., *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, New York: Apollo, 2018; Shipman, T., *Op cit*; Swales, K., *Understanding the Leave Vote*, London: NatCen Social Research/The UK in a Changing Europe, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Menon, A., and Salter, J-P., ‘Brexit: Initial Reflections’, *International Affairs*, 92 (6), p. 1,315, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Clarke, H., Goodwin, M., and Whiteley, P., *Op cit*; Koller, V., Kopf, S., and Miglbauer, M., (Eds) *Discourses of Brexit*, London: Routledge, 2019; Moss, J., Robinson, E., Watts, J., ‘Brexit and the Everyday Politics of Emotion: Methodological Lessons from History’, *Political Studies*, 68 (4), pp. 837-856, 2020.

proved impossible for the Remain campaign to convince citizens who were anxious or angry about the perceived negative impact of migrant workers on local jobs, wages, public services and housing that immigration was a ‘positive’ policy and development, from which the UK had benefitted and been enriched – a factor that Cameron subsequently acknowledged.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, many of those who campaigned to ‘Remain’ in the 2016 Referendum were widely associated with the ‘liberal elite’ (especially Conservatives like Cameron, who lived in the previously fashionable and bohemian Notting Hill district of West London) and the out-of-touch inhabitants of the ‘Westminster bubble’. As a consequence, they lacked the requisite credibility or trust to persuade enough people of the case for continued British membership of the EU.

*The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of many ‘Leave’ voters*

One of the most notable aspects of the UK’s referendum on EU membership was the extent to which support for Leave/Remain corresponded closely to different sections of British society, as illustrated in Table 2. It is evident that the strongest support for the UK *leaving* the EU

Table 2: Characteristics of Leave and Remain voters in the 2016 UK Referendum (%)<sup>34</sup>

	Voted ‘Leave’	Voted ‘Remain’
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	25	75
25-34	40	60
35-44	35	55
45-54	56	44
55-64	61	39
65-74	66	34
75+	63	37
<b>Sex/Gender</b>		
Male	55	45
Female	49	51
<b>Social class/employment status</b>		
AB (professional/managerial)	41	59
C1 (Middle class)	48	52
C2 (Skilled working class)	62	38
DE (semi-skilled/unskilled)	64	36
Unemployed	60	40
Student	20	80
Retired	64	36
<b>Educational attainment</b>		
No qualifications	30	70
GSCE/Diploma/A-Level	44	56
Degree	32	68
<b>Party supported in 2015 election</b>		
Conservative	59	41
Labour	36	64
Liberal Democrat	31	69

<sup>33</sup> Cameron, D., *Op cit*, p. 670.

<sup>34</sup> Ipsos Mori, ‘How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum’, 5 September 2016.

emanated from older voters, the working class, and those with a minimal formal education, features which have been confirmed by other studies.<sup>35</sup> This educational aspect is a feature prevalent in both socio-demographic categories. In the 1950s, only 3% of the population attended university, both because the vast majority of (industrial) jobs did not require a degree, and because there was a clear, patriarchal, sexual division of labour, whereby women were generally expected to become wives and mothers, rather than attending university prior to pursuing their own careers. For most of today's oldest citizens, the relatively recent expansion of Higher Education came too late in their lives.

Meanwhile, there is a clear correlation between class and educational attainment; workers in 'manual' or 'unskilled' occupations are unlikely to have attended university – for most of them, a degree has not been viewed as necessary or worthwhile for their jobs. There also seems to be a widespread anti-intellectualism among much of the English working class, which further fosters the view that a university education is unimportant, unnecessary, and over-valued. It is notable that, on Facebook, for example, many Brexiters' 'bios' boast 'the School of Hard Knocks, and the University of Life'.

Conversely, support for 'Remaining' in the EU was strongest among students and ex-graduates, younger people in general, and citizens in higher-status or better-paid jobs – many of which also require a university degree. Overall, therefore, how people voted in the UK's EU referendum correlated very closely to their age, social class or occupation (and thus income), and level of education or qualifications attained. This is not really surprising, because it is widely recognised that older voters are more 'conservative' and 'nationalistic' than younger, more 'liberal' and 'cosmopolitan', citizens. Similarly, the English working class is characterised by a strong strand of authoritarianism on many social issues (crime and immigration especially)<sup>36</sup>, and is also highly nationalistic or xenophobic – a trait ruefully noted by George Orwell back in the 1940s.<sup>37</sup>

### *The cultural and populist aspect of the Leave vote*

The demographic 'divide' apparent in the support for Brexit has also reflected and reinforced another feature of contemporary UK politics, namely the increasingly bitter 'culture war'. As noted earlier, many of those who voted Leave did so because they wanted to stop immigration via the 'free movement of labour'. By leaving the EU, they wanted the UK to 'take back control' of its borders – a manifestation of sovereignty.

However, Leave supporters are also characterised by various other socially conservative or traditionalist views and values beyond hostility to immigration and support for a reassertion of (English) nationalism. According to polling evidence, and a perusal of their social media posts or declarations, many Leave supporters are also admirers of former US President, Donald Trump, sceptical about the existence of climate change (they also hate Greta Thunberg – a strong, confident, young woman), hostile towards Black Lives Matter (often insisting that 'All Lives Matter' – but not those of refugees or pro-Europeans), believe that free-speech has been destroyed by 'political correctness', and generally believe that much of the UK media, most universities, the civil service, and 'the Establishment', have been infiltrated and colonised by liberals and Leftists

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Curtice, J., *Op cit*, pp. 33-34; Goodwin, M., and Heath, O., *Op cit*, 2016; Swales, K., *Op cit*, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> On 'working class authoritarianism', see Lipset, S. M., *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, New York: Doubleday, chapter 4, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Orwell, G., *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, first published by Secker and Warburg, 1941, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 49, 1982.

‘who hate their country’.<sup>38</sup> Leave voters are also overwhelmingly hostile towards multiculturalism, and feminism, both of which are judged to have had a damaging and destructive impact on British society and traditions.<sup>39</sup>

These Leave-supporting ‘culture war’ warriors thus exude an ostensibly paradoxical blend of libertarianism and authoritarianism. They apparently want to restore the freedom-of-speech that ‘political correctness’ and the ‘fascist Left’ are accused of having suppressed, and also revive the liberties allegedly destroyed by both Brussels, and the UK’s ‘nanny state’ – many of them have been opposed to COVID Lockdowns and being required to wear face-masks, and also still resent the ban on smoking in pubs and restaurants which was introduced in 2007 (to prevent ‘passive smoking’). To a large degree, many Brexiters exude a strong sense of victimhood, believing themselves to have been oppressed or persecuted by curbs on their lives and freedom-of-speech: what they often mean when complaining about limits on their free-speech is that they feel unable to use racist, sexist or the homophobic language, due to ‘political correctness’ – they want to be able to make derogatory or offensive remarks about people they do not like, or who they consider to be inferior to them, without suffering any sanctions.

However, whilst they want more liberty for themselves, they often evince remarkable intolerance and contempt towards those who hold different views and values, and/or choose to lead ‘alternative’ lives; hence many Brexiters can readily be defined as authoritarian.<sup>4</sup> As just noted, many Brexiters are very critical of ‘hippy’ environmentalists and Black Lives Matter (the latter is often deemed Marxist), have loudly condemned both the civil service and the House of Lords when these were suspected of delaying or diluting Brexit, have demanded the ‘sacking’ (dismissal) of prominent BBC presenters who are known to oppose Brexit, and want both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly abolished; Brexit supporters usually define themselves as English, rather than British.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, Brexit can be interpreted an integral part of the rise of an English nationalism, and a perception that England, and English identity, have been weakened both by the EU (and ‘excessive’ immigration), and devolution to Scotland and Wales. Not only was there a perception that England paid ‘too much’ to the EU via budgetary contributions, but also a grievance that England was ‘subsidising’ Scotland and Wales. Moreover, the EU, Scotland and Wales all have their own elected law-making bodies, but England does not (the Westminster Parliament is a UK legislature, in spite of devolution) – there is no specifically or exclusively English Parliament.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of their socio-economic deprivation, limited formal education, a sense of being ‘left behind’, hatred of ‘liberals’, contempt towards those they call ‘snowflakes’<sup>42</sup> or label as ‘woke’, and

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<sup>38</sup> This is a core feature of populism; the ideological distinction between the ‘pure’, ‘honest’ or ‘hard-working’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elite who have betrayed their country. On this aspect, see Burleigh, 2021, p. 8; Eatwell, R., and Goodwin, M., 2018, *passim*; Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser, C. R., 2017, p. 68, and *passim*; Müller, J-W, 2017, *passim*; Taggart, P., 2000: chapter 8.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Ashcroft, M., ‘How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why’, 24 June 2016; Zmigrod, L., Rentfrow, P., and Robbins, Y., ‘Cognitive underpinnings of nationalistic ideology in the context of Brexit’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115 (19), E4532-4540, 2018; Sobolewska, M., and Ford, R., *Brexitland, Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Norris, P., and Inglehart, R., *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; Sumner, C., Scofield, J. E., Buchanan, E. M., Evans, M-R., and Shearing, M., ‘The Role of Personality, Authoritarianism and Cognition in the United Kingdom’s 2016 Referendum on European Union Membership’, *The Online Privacy Foundation*, 3 July 2018; Swales, K., *Op cit*, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of the rise of English nationalism, see Henderson, A., and Jones, R. W., *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021; Wellings B., *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> On the use of ‘snowflake’ as an intended insult by the Right against young liberals, Leftists, and ‘progressives’,

authoritarian attitudes generally, many Brexit supporters share strong similarities with Donald Trump's followers in the US. They complain that 'all politicians are the same; corrupt, liars, self-serving', but vote *en masse* for populist politicians who actually have the worst reputations or legacies for honesty and integrity.

In many respects, many Brexiters seem to have experienced what Emile Durkheim termed *anomie*, an anxiety, or even anger, that traditional morality, modes of behaviour and societal values have been undermined or superseded as a consequence of extensive or rapid social and cultural changes.<sup>43</sup> This can cause many citizens to feel that they have lost their social status, and feel bewildered or 'lost' in a society whose codes of conduct and social mores seem to have changed almost beyond recognition in a relatively short period of time. Not surprisingly, such feelings often prompt a desire to 'turn back the clock' several decades, and recreate society as it was prior to these changes; before the UK joined the EU, before large-scale immigration, before the development of multiculturalism, before the legalisation of same-sex-relationships and marriage, and when the UK still had an Empire. Indeed, two years before the EU referendum, one close observer of the Cameron Government was arguing that ultimately, UKIP's 'fixations were overwhelmingly cultural rather than constitutional' and that the Party was deliberately encouraging public discontent with the EU in order 'to make progress as a gentrified anti-immigration movement.'<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Having fatally undermined Margaret Thatcher's and John Major's premierships, the issue of the EU subsequently destroyed David Cameron's, and then Theresa May's after him; four successive Conservative Prime Ministers were unable to resolve their Party's disagreements and divisions over the UK's relationship with the EU. Indeed, under Cameron's leadership, the nature of the division itself had changed enormously, from intra-party debates about the nature of the UK's membership (more integration and 'ever closer union', or maintain the status quo by resisting any further widening or deepening), to internal arguments about whether the UK should renegotiate the terms of its membership in order to secure a looser, more flexible, relationship, or withdraw from the EU altogether.

Cameron and about two-thirds of the parliamentary Conservative Party favoured the former option, and having felt unable to resist the increasing political pressure for a referendum – in the context of repeated demands and dissent by 'hard' Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, and growing electoral support for UKIP – he was confident that he could successfully undertake such a renegotiation, whereupon he would recommend a 'Remain' (in the EU) vote in the subsequent plebiscite. However, Cameron's inability to achieve the reforms, and reclamation of powers, that he had originally envisaged, had the effect of persuading many Conservative MPs, and sections of the British public, that either Cameron was a weak leader unable to defend the UK's interests in the EU, or that the EU was so institutionally intransigent and integrationist that it could not be reformed – at least, not in the manner than the UK wanted.

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see Gallagher, S., 'What does the term snowflake mean, and why is it used?', *The Independent* 6 October 2020; Nicholson, R., "'Poor little snowflake" – the defining insult of 2016', *The Guardian* 28 November 2016; Godwin, R., '2017 was the Year of the Snowflake - but are millennials misunderstood', *The Evening Standard* 21 December 2017; McIntosh, J., 'Crybabies and Snowflakes' in J. Mackintosh and N. Mendoza-Denton (Eds) *Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 74-90, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Durkheim, E., *The Division of Labour in Society*, first published in 1893, London: Macmillan, *passim*, 1984. Durkheim, E., *On Suicide*, first published in 1897, London: Routledge, *passim*, 2002.

<sup>44</sup> D'Ancona, M., *Op cit*, p. 251; Ashcroft, M. and Oakeshott, I., *Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron*, London: Biteback, pp. 555-557, 2015.

As a consequence, Cameron and the ‘Remain’ campaign struggled to offer voters a positive narrative in the referendum, beyond arguing that Britain had benefitted from immigration. Much of the Remain campaign focused on the alleged economic costs of withdrawal, in terms of diminished trade, higher prices and job losses. Yet these somewhat esoteric or technocratic arguments struggled to compete against the much more emotive and visceral counter-arguments of the Leave campaign, which invoked simple three-word slogans, and emphasised that leaving the EU would both restore the sovereignty of Parliament, and enable the UK to stop migrant workers from undermining the jobs and wages of indigenous workers.

Yet what has become evident since the referendum is that for many Leave supporters – most of them older, less-educated, in low-paid or insecure employment, and living in economically and socially ‘deprived’ towns – Brexit has acquired a wider significance than commentators and critics realised at the time of the referendum. Brexit has become a symbol of a wider ‘culture war’ by those who feel ‘left behind’ by modern society and globalisation, and have experienced feelings of alienation and *anomie*. Rather than blame their plight and insecurity on neo-liberalism or the Conservatives’ austerity policies, many Brexiters have identified other ‘enemies’ against whom to target their anger and frustrations – liberals, the Left, feminism, Muslims, universities (Marxist academics indoctrinating innocent young people, allegedly via ‘soft’ degrees), civil servants, the House of Lords, BBC, political-correctness, Black Lives Matter, environmentalists, experts, and ‘the Establishment’. In scapegoating these people and institutions, Brexiters have received enthusiastic encouragement from Conservatives eager to deflect attention from their own ideological bankruptcy and policy failures.

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