To be or not to be in Europe: is that the question? Britain's European question and an in/out referendum

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'It is time to settle this European question in British politics.'
David Cameron, 23 January 2013.[1]

Britain's European question

It came as no surprise to those who follow the issue of the European Union in British politics that David Cameron's January 2013 speech on Europe excited a great deal of comment. The EU is among the most divisive issues in British politics. Cameron himself drew on this to justify his committing the Conservative Party, should it win the general election in 2015, to seek a renegotiated position for the UK within the EU which would then be put to the British people in an in/out referendum. Growing public frustrations at UK–EU relations were, he argued, the result of both a longstanding failure to consult the British people about their country's place in the EU, and a changing EU that was undermining the current relationship between Britain and the Union. As a result, he argued, 'the democratic consent for the EU in Britain is now wafer-thin'.

Cameron's speech was met with both criticism and praise from Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans alike.[2] In a speech at Chatham House backing Cameron's plan, the former Conservative prime minister Sir John Major best captured some of the hopes for a referendum: 'The relationship with Europe has poisoned British politics for too long, distracted parliament from other issues and come close to destroying the Conservative Party. It is time to resolve the matter.'[3] In part as a

[1] David Cameron, 'The future of the EU and the UK's relationship with it', London, 23 Jan. 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[2] For a positive pro-European reaction, see Timothy Garton Ash, 'A referendum on Europe? Bring it on, for all our sakes', *Guardian*, 20 Dec. 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/20/referendum-europe-bring-it-on; for a negative Eurosceptic reaction, see Esther Addley, 'Nigel Farage ridicules David Cameron's EU referendum speech', *Guardian*, 23 Jan. 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jan/23/ukip-nigel-farage-david-cameron-eu-referendum-speech, both accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[3] John Major, 'The referendum on Europe: opportunity or threat?', Chatham House, London, 14 Feb. 2013, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Meetings/Meeting%20Transcripts/140213Major.pdf, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

result of Cameron's announcement, Ed Miliband has committed the Labour Party to legislating for a referendum lock 'that guarantees that there will be no transfer of powers without an in/out referendum'.[4] With the Liberal Democrats having also promised to hold a referendum in the event of a transfer of new powers, all three of the UK's main parties are now committed in some way to the idea of an in/out referendum. This does not guarantee that a referendum will happen. Cameron needs to form a majority government, and both Miliband and Clegg have hedged their commitments with caveats.[5] Nevertheless, the idea of an in/out referendum has become established in British politics.

   This is the latest development in Britain's often difficult relationship with European integration.[6] The history is a well-documented one of aloofness, vetoes and opt-outs, with a political and media debate that has been largely negative, even hostile, and sometimes xenophobic. Yet at the same time British governments have actively engaged in European integration in order to secure British interests, albeit in ways often unbeknown to the British people. This two-faced approach has not only caused governments problems at home when Britain's involvement in the EU has moved ahead of public understanding; it has also often caused the rest of the EU to become frustrated at Britain's unwillingness to engage wholeheartedly. With the EU now facing further integration to deal with the fallout from the eurozone crisis, a growing Euroscepticism in the UK means that of all the EU's member states it is Britain that has moved furthest from what was once a permissive consensus over European integration towards a 'constraining dissensus'.[7]

   Supporters of a referendum see it as the way forward in dealing with the situation, whether by keeping Britain inside the EU on renegotiated terms and/or a renewed democratic mandate, or taking it outside the Union altogether. Yet the European question in British politics is a multifaceted one, with many more aspects than whether the UK wishes to be in or out of the EU. Cameron himself touched on this when he noted underlying tensions that have long characterized Britain's relationship with the EU: an insular mentality, a history of strained relations, a pragmatic—rather than ideological or visionary—approach, and frustrations at the EU's apparent lack of ability to respond to global events. And yet he failed to consider whether these underlying tensions, many present in Britain's debate about Europe long before the UK joined what was then the European Economic Community, can be resolved through a referendum. He also failed to connect the question to an even wider set of issues which, taken together, more accurately capture the European question. Had he done so, Cameron would have had to

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[4] 'Ed Miliband's speech on Europe: full text', *Spectator*, 12 March 2014, http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffee-house/2014/03/ed-milibands-speech-on-europe-full-text/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[5] Philip Stephens, 'Ed Miliband has closed a route to Britain's EU exit', *Financial Times*, 12 March 2014, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/151eb972-a9f3-11e3-8bd6-00144feab7de.html#axzz2zZA4xfz6, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[6] See Stephen George, *An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Rennie, *The continent of the open sea? Does Britain have a European future?* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2012).

[7] Ian Down and Carole Wilson, 'From "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus": a polarizing union?', *Acta Politica* 43: 1, 2008, pp. 26–49.

admit that to have any hope of answering the European question—or bringing stability to the European debate in Britain—that debate would need to go far beyond the in/out question to encompass the UK's constitutional arrangements, identity, party politics, political economy, responses to globalization, and place in a changing wider Europe. If the question is confined simply to the narrow choice of whether or not the UK should remain in the EU, then this risks disappointing all sides. To so constrict the debate would be to assume, wrongly, that a vote to stay in the EU could kill off Euroscepticism and remove the factors that trouble Britain's sometimes awkward relationship with the EU; or that a vote to leave could end the EU's involvement in British life and dismiss underlying questions about Britain's future, many of which connect to Europe.

An in/out referendum and the debate that would precede such a vote can address some of these issues; but to address them in a way that would come close to settling the question would require a more wide-ranging debate, similar to that which took place in Scotland leading up to the independence referendum of September 2014.[8] The Scottish debate was far from perfect, with nuanced discussion at the national level often cast aside in favour of simple juxtaposition of opposing statements and meta-narratives. Nevertheless it did include a vibrant debate in homes, businesses and public spaces about a range of social, political, identity, constitutional and economic questions, informed by an awareness that these questions were likely to persist after the referendum, whatever the result. Just as the 'Scottish question' cannot be settled once and for all, whether Scotland remains inside or removes itself from the UK, so too the European question in British politics will persist, changing with each generation, requiring constant renegotiation and management. This article, therefore, does not argue against a referendum, nor does it argue that such a vote cannot address some of the problems in UK–EU relations. It could be a significant step. But if the European question is to be better managed in British political life, then a referendum must be seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. To demonstrate this, the article examines the limits to four widespread expectations of a referendum: that it can provide fresh public consent; that it can tackle Euroscepticism; that it can sanction and secure a new UK–EU relationship; and that it can settle the question by sanctioning withdrawal.

The uses and misuses of referendums

That Britain's first nationwide referendum in 1975 was on the issue of membership of the then European Economic Community (EEC) serves as a reminder of how long Europe and referendums have been connected in British politics. Since that date the referendum has come to play an increasing role in British politics, albeit

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[8] A full comparison of Scotland's referendum with the proposed EU referendum is outside the purview of this piece, but detailed comparisons are likely to emerge. For a good comparison written in the run-up to Scotland's referendum, see James Mitchell, 'The two unions and the Scottish and European questions', in Adam Hug, ed., *Renegotiation, reform and referendum: does Britain have an EU future?* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2014), http://fpc.org.uk/publications/rrr, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

almost entirely at regional or local level—the only other UK-wide referendum being held over electoral reform in 2011.[9] The idea of an increasing role for direct democracy in UK-wide politics has often been discussed. It is therefore worth recalling what referendums can and cannot do.

The pros and cons of referendums have been analysed extensively elsewhere, so it will suffice here to provide a short overview.[10] On the positive side they can confront an issue, prompting thorough debate and the provision of in-depth information, in contrast to the shallower level of debate characteristic of a general election campaign which necessarily addresses a wide range of issues. As a result, decision-makers are prevented from exploiting public ignorance and space is provided for neglected arguments. By promoting direct involvement in decision-making a referendum can enhance the democratic process and entrench the decision as the direct will of the citizenry. As a result, referendums can settle issues. As Sir John Major stated in declaring his support for a UK in/out referendum: 'It can be cathartic. It can end 40 years of political squabbles.'[11]

But referendums also have negative aspects. Their use in Britain currently depends on political decision-makers, and as such can be used as a tactical device by governing parties and leaders. Political elites and well-funded interests are better placed to exploit them, especially at a national level. Minority groups can be isolated, and indeed their isolation can be exacerbated, if a referendum highlights the weakness of their position. The debates can lead to oversimplification of complex issues, with few referendums offering more options than 'yes' or 'no'. Even when a referendum asks a 'yes' or 'no' question the answer given can be about something other than the question asked, with referendums turning into opportunities for voters to make clear their feelings about other issues, or about the incumbent government. Despite often vocal support among voters for the calling of a referendum, actual turnout rates can be low. When they do vote, voters tend to come out in support of the status quo rather than change. Taking the decision away from a representative institution such as a parliament does not change the fact that the political elite will still need to implement the result. This can be difficult, given that divisions among decision-makers will persist whatever the result of the vote, and indeed may even be deeper as a result of individuals having publicly campaigned on opposing sides.

The UK is not the only state where referendums have been held or promised on issues relating to the EU. While some member states are constitutionally required to hold a referendum on certain EU matters, such as a new treaty, the UK is one of a number of states that have held discretionary referendums. There have been 28 such referendums promised or held over the course of European integration, with most happening since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Kai Oppermann argues

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[9] See House of Lords, *Referendums in the United Kingdom*, 12th Report of Session 2009–10, HL Paper 9 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010), p. 53, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldselect/ldconst/99/99.pdf, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[10] See Matt Qvortrup, *A comparative study of referendums: government by the people* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Stephen Tierney, *Constitutional referendums: the theory and practice of republican deliberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); House of Lords, *Referendums in the United Kingdom*.

[11] Major, 'The referendum on Europe', p. 10.

that most were driven by the strategic political considerations of governments who used referendum pledges for domestic, defensive reasons.[12] This is especially true of states with active Eurosceptic movements, where the aim has often been to depoliticize the European issue. It is not just the UK, then, that has wrestled with domestic tensions over Europe, and other EU states are likely to use referendums in the future to manage such tensions. That said, the UK is the only member state where there is currently a realistic prospect of an in/out referendum.

Will it secure fresh public consent?

Supporters of an in/out referendum argue that it offers the chance for a much-needed debate to refresh the British people's understanding of European integration so that they can then either renew Britain's commitment to the Union or bring it to an end. Either outcome would allow the British government to focus on the relationship sanctioned by the vote. The experiences of Denmark and Ireland have been held up as examples of two states where use of referendums each time there is a new treaty have helped create a more settled relationship with the EU.[13] This may be so, but we should not overlook the wider and less polarized political debates about the EU in those countries; or that to come close to replicating their experiences Britain would need to hold more than one referendum. Without the possibility of further referendums the pressures of domestic politics and low voter appetite for hearing about Europe could lead Britain's political class to fall back into a habit of avoiding the topic. Sir John Major himself backed a referendum so that attention could thereafter be turned to more pressing domestic concerns.[14]

A referendum does not necessarily lead to a growth in support. As Simon Usherwood has pointed out: 'Although referendums have historically been viewed as a means of bringing EU citizens closer to the EU, the stark reality is that they have served to further embed Euroscepticism in terms of the perception of EU citizens.'[15] For all the improved understanding and regular campaigns in Ireland and Denmark, those two states—Denmark especially—have Eurosceptic movements that have been especially evident during referendum campaigns, and their publics have either rejected or come close to rejecting several EU treaties. Britain's 1975 referendum reportedly saw a rise in understanding about the EU;[16] even so, by March 1980 opinion polling showed 71 per cent of the public supporting withdrawal.[17] Voting to remain in the EU now will not stop the British saying no in any later referendums on EU matters.

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[12] Kai Oppermann, 'The politics of discretionary government commitments to European integration referendums', *Journal of European Public Policy* 20: 5, 2013, pp. 684–701.

[13] Evidence from Unlock Democracy to House of Lords, in House of Lords, *Referendums in the United Kingdom*, p. 18.

[14] Major, 'The referendum on Europe', p. 10.

[15] Simon Usherwood and Nick Startin, 'Euroscepticism as a persistent phenomenon', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 51: 1, 2013, p. 8.

[16] House of Lords, *Referendums in the United Kingdom*, p. 53.

[17] See Mori European Union membership trends, https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2435/European-Union-membership-trends.aspx?view=wide, accessed 31 Oct. 2014.

Nor should we assume that an in/out referendum is primarily about renewing democratic consent, given that it is more likely that such a vote will be called to address a problem of party politics—more precisely, the politics of the governing party or coalition. Under Britain's uncodified constitution the power to call a referendum rests with the government, and especially the prime minister. It is they who largely set the timing and the choices that are put to the public. Unlike in some other EU states, there are no binding constitutional requirements to hold a referendum on EU matters. Even the coalition government's 2011 European Union Act, which triggers a referendum if ministers consider there is to be a transfer of significant powers to the EU, can be repealed by a future parliament.[18] While the running of any referendum would be the responsibility of the Electoral Commission, it is not in the powers of any such independent body to decide when, or on what topic, a referendum is to be held. Any such body might have called a referendum before now and offered the public a wider choice, such as several versions of an 'out' UK–EU relationship, a new renegotiated internal relationship, the status quo or further integration. The final option might sound strange, but reminds us to ask who has the right to rule this out when Britain's relationship with the EU could be one of several types.[19] But referendums in the UK are not called by impartial bodies or intended to offer nuanced choices.

It should therefore come as no surprise that commitments to hold referendums have been used to manage tensions within a governing party or, more recently, a governing coalition. Cameron's own commitment was made in the attempt to pacify growing disquiet among Conservative backbenchers alarmed at the growing threat from the UK Independence Party and frustrations at being in government with the more pro-European Liberal Democrats.[20] This tension long predates the rise of UKIP, Europe having played a part in the downfall of Margaret Thatcher and bedevilled the premiership of John Major. William Hague, Foreign Secretary from 2010 to 2014 and former leader of the Conservative Party, once described Europe as a 'ticking time bomb' in the party.[21] It was quickly apparent that Cameron's commitment had failed to defuse the bomb. Pressure from Conservative Eurosceptics has continued, as has the rise of UKIP.[22]

Cameron's tactic, and his predicament, are not new. Previous commitments to holding a referendum on EU matters—John Major on membership of the euro in 1992; Tony Blair on the euro in 1999; Blair on the European constitution in 2005;

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[18] Jo Eric Khushal Murkens, *The European Union Act 2011: a failed statute*, LSE Law, Society and Economy Working Papers, 3/2013 (London: LSE, 2013), http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/law/wps/WPS2013-03_Murkens.pdf, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[19] For an overview of the possible options open to the UK, albeit largely from a perspective of trade, see Stephen Booth and Christopher Howarth, *Trading places: is EU membership still the best option for UK trade?* (London: Open Europe, 2012), http://www.openeurope.org.uk/Content/Documents/2012EUTrade_new.pdf, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[20] Richard Hayton, 'Euroscepticism and the dynamics of party competition in Britain', in Hug, ed., *Renegotiation, reform and referendum*.

[21] Tim Montgomerie, 'The bomb in the living room', *Spectator*, 10 Dec. 2011, http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/7460353/the-bomb-in-the-living-room/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[22] Jonan Ganesh, 'Cameron's EU referendum gamble has failed', *Financial Times*, 13 Jan. 2014, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4f459e84-7bc4-11e3-84af-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2zZA4xfz6, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

the coalition government's European Union Act of 2011—each dealt largely with internal tensions within the parties in government.[23] Cameron's commitment echoes that of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, whose 1975 referendum was called following a renegotiation of Britain's membership and as a way of managing Labour Party divisions over Europe. With ministers freed of collective cabinet responsibility, the referendum did allow Wilson's government to continue. But it exposed divisions and merely delayed a split. By the early 1980s that split had occurred, Labour was campaigning to withdraw from the EU, and the British people had become more Eurosceptic. That Cameron risks repeating Wilson's experiences has not passed unnoticed.[24]

This is not to argue that the issue is confined to the Conservatives. Labour's past travails could return to trouble the party, with Miliband's own commitment to an in/out referendum designed to manage party unease over the loss of support among some working-class voters who have switched from Labour to UKIP.[25] He also remains wary of commitment to a referendum that a Labour government, possibly with a slim majority or in coalition, might have to fight mid-term when the popularity of most governments is at their lowest. The Liberal Democrats, despite their longstanding pro-European outlook, have also committed themselves in the recent past to an in/out referendum to manage party tensions.[26] Given this history, it is likely that any referendum will be about managing short-term party political issues and not born from a desire to renew the British people's democratic consent for EU membership.

Will it tackle Euroscepticism?

Hopes that a vote to remain in the EU will put an end to Euroscepticism, or so undermine it as radically to reduce its impact, overlook how entrenched, well organized and well funded it has become as a political force. One study found that in 1999 at least 30 groups were focusing on a Eurosceptic agenda.[27] The number may have declined slightly since then (although it would surge if a referendum were triggered), but today's British Eurosceptic groups have also to be seen as part of a growing network of Eurosceptic groups across the EU. The most prominent group in Britain, the UK Independence Party, has seen a substantial growth in support, coming first in the UK's 2014 elections to the European Parliament. Its

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[23] For a history of the many calls for referendums in the UK, see 'Timeline: campaigns for a European Union referendum', *BBC News*, 25 Oct. 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15390884, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[24] Dominic Sandbrook, 'Beware the ghost of slippery Harold: David Cameron's European referendum speech was hailed as a masterstroke, but we've been here before', *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 2013, http://www.dailymail. co.uk/news/article-2268426/Beware-ghost-slippery-Harold-David-Camerons-European-referendum-speech-hailed-masterstroke-weve-before.html, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[25] John McDermott, 'How to read Miliband's Europe policy', *FT blogs*, 12 March 2014, http://blogs.ft.com/off-message/2014/03/12/how-to-read-milibands-europe-policy/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[26] George Eaton, 'When Clegg supported an EU referendum', *New Statesman*, 22 Oct. 2011, http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/10/referendum-membership-lib, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[27] Usherwood and Startin, 'Euroscepticism as a persistent phenomenon', p. 8.

success and influence can be overplayed.[28] Nevertheless, its growth has helped push the Conservatives towards a more Eurosceptic position and taken votes, especially within England, from all three of the main parties.[29]

UKIP's success is in part fed by a longstanding British preference for maintaining a distance from Europe and the EU. As Oliver Daddow notes of British attitudes towards Europe: 'The sense of "belonging" is always in doubt.'[30] This has been fostered by Britain's media, especially that section under Murdoch ownership, which has led the way in transforming 'a long established and not intrinsically unhealthy British suspicion of "things continental" into an alarmist call to arms against "Europe" through tabloid sensationalization and scare stories about the "Brussels" effect on everyday life in Britain'.[31] A press beset by declining sales is likely to continue to play to such populist agendas whatever the result of a referendum. As Daddow goes on to argue: 'Tabloid outrage against "Europe" has become the stock national style of debating European affairs in Britain, and this is unlikely to change in the near or distant future—bar some radical changes in media ownership or ideology.'[32] Attempts to label Eurosceptics 'Little Englanders' overlooks the tendency of many Scots—often seen as more at ease with the EU—to be strongly Eurosceptic.[33] Nor is it confined to the right: Euroscepticism was once the norm on the left in the UK, and could become so again as a result of anger at the EU's agendas of austerity, neo-liberalism and deregulation.[34]

UKIP's growth, and Euroscepticism more generally, arise in part from issues that connect to the EU but have wider application. Immigration has been a key driver of UKIP support, but the issue was a sensitive one before the UK joined the EU, with immigration from around the world, especially the non-white parts of the former British empire, regularly provoking political arguments and social tensions. Given England's population density, the highest of any country in Europe, it is likely to remain sensitive on this topic for the foreseeable future.[35] UKIP's support in England also has strong links with Britain's changing identity politics and constitutional arrangements. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research into English national identity found a link between those who feel strongly English and Euroscepticism.[36] Euroscepticism may therefore reflect

[28] Ben Acheson, 'Doomed: Nigel Farage, UKIP and the battle for Brussels', *Huffington Post*, 15 April 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ben-acheson/nigel-farage-european-union_b_5150946.html, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.
[29] Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, *Revolt on the right: explaining support for the radical right in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[30] Oliver Daddow, 'The UK media and "Europe": from permissive consensus to destructive dissent', *International Affairs* 88: 6, 2012, p. 1221.
[31] Daddow, 'The UK media and "Europe"', p. 1235.
[32] Daddow, 'The UK media and "Europe"', p. 1236.
[33] Daniel Kenealy and Jan Eichhorn, '(Mis)understanding the public? An independent Scotland and the EU', *LSE EUROPP blog*, 29 March 2014, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/03/29/25009/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.
[34] Mark Wallace, 'Where are all the leftwing Eurosceptics?', *Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/17/leftwing-eurosceptics-eu-british-left, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.
[35] Urmee Khan, 'England is most crowded country in Europe', *Telegraph*, 16 Sept. 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/2967374/England-is-most-crowded-country-in-Europe.html, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.
[36] Richard Wyn Jones, Guy Lodge, Charlie Jeffery, Glenn Gottfried, Roger Scully, Ailsa Henderson and Daniel Wincott, *England and its two unions: the anatomy of a nation and its discontents* (London: IPPR, 2013), pp. 17–23, http://www.ippr.org/publication/55/11003/england-and-its-two-unions-the-anatomy-of-a-nation-and-its-discontents, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

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anger in some areas of England at a UK constitutional status quo perceived as unfairly beneficial to particular areas, such as Scotland or London. Finally, UKIP and Eurosceptic arguments encapsulate a more general move towards a politics of protest by an electorate that for more than 30 years has shown decreasing trust and engagement in traditional politics and a declining willingness to support two-party politics.[37]

Given the Eurosceptic movement's strength, and the likelihood that it will continue to be fuelled by a range of issues, it is probable that a large proportion of Eurosceptic campaigners would refuse to accept a referendum result supporting Britain's membership of the EU. They would likely see it as a tactical rather than a strategic defeat, and, as so often with referendums, any number of developments could be cited to cast doubts on the result. A slim majority or low turnout, both highly plausible, would leave Eurosceptics in no mood to concede defeat. Similarly, there would be—as in the case of the 1975 referendum[38]—allegations of unfair spending, media bias and/or vague or misleading campaign information; allegations that a surge of support was manufactured and so fails to reflect the underlying mood, that the vote was on another issue, or that it was swung thanks to personalities rather than facts. Eurosceptic groups are also unlikely to face any organized opposition after a referendum. Britain's pro-EU campaign groups have often been fragile coalitions, and any 'in' group formed to fight a referendum will probably disappear quickly following the result. Subsequent acceptance of an 'in' referendum vote would be short-lived as events obscure it, Eurosceptics regroup and unaddressed underlying issues refuel the debate.

Will it embed a new relationship?

Eurosceptics may find they need not wait long before the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU returns to the fore. Euroscepticism in Britain has been aided by uncertainty about the direction both of the EU itself and of Britain's relations with the Union. Memories of voting for a 'common market', as opposed to some form of political union, can still be found in British debates.[39] Cameron's response has been to argue that Britain needs a new relationship with the EU, one then endorsed by referendum. As Sir John Major put it: 'We need an end point, and we need to know what it is. And we need to be confident that it will not be breached.'[40]

Whether this can be achieved depends on how the EU evolves and whether it can do so without breaching any British 'end-point'. It may be that the EU has now developed in such a way—in part thanks to British efforts to make the union wider and more brittle—that either it will be unable to make many concessions or those that it does make will be insufficient to meet the demands of British

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[37] Philip Lynch, 'Party system change in Britain: multi-party politics in a multi-level polity', *British Politics* 2: 3, 2007, pp. 323–46.
[38] See Christopher Brooker and Richard North, *The Great Deception: the secret history of the EU* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 158–73.
[39] Brooker and North, 'The Great Deception', pp. 158–73.
[40] Major, 'The referendum on Europe'.

Eurosceptics.[41] Concessions alone, indeed, will be insufficient. Without sufficient flexibility in the new relationship, Britain and the EU could alike find themselves frustrated by a self-imposed straitjacket. From the EU's perspective, it is worth recalling that the 1975 referendum followed a token renegotiation that did not address underlying problems, such as Britain's budgetary contributions. This issue was resolved only following acrimonious negotiations with Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, a time when the emergence of the single market, and Britain's pivotal role in it, provided a sufficient incentive to keep Britain engaged.

More fundamentally, Britain's relationship with the EU cannot be settled until there is some form of fixed end-point for wider European integration—a prospect that seems elusive, given the ambiguous nature of 'ever closer union'. Further political union beyond that proposed to deal with the eurozone crisis may become necessary, especially if another crisis emerges. If such steps encroached on Britain's 'end-point', then defence of it would become the benchmark against which a British prime minister's success at EU summits was judged. The UK's behaviour might also lead to a situation where the UK does not leave the EU, but the rest of the EU leaves the UK behind by creating institutions and arrangements that bypass the UK. This runs the risk, for both the UK and the EU, that Britain is pushed towards another referendum as its isolation becomes clearer.[42] The referendum will have thus created a degree of inflexibility in policy positions, the breaching of which would provoke calls for another referendum. Every possible future treaty or transfer of powers would become a potentially paralysing in/out vote. Britain would have fallen into a cycle of 'neverendums'.

The UK–EU relationship is also shaped by factors that go beyond either public opinion or the details of any formal relationship. A referendum and/or a renego-tiated relationship cannot change Britain's majoritarian political system and use of common law, as opposed to the more consensual political and Roman legal systems found throughout most of the rest of the EU—systems which defined the EU's institutional structure before Britain joined. It is in respect of Britain's identity politics that a referendum vote to stay in the EU faces its biggest challenge. Britain's national identity draws heavily on memories of empire and global power, victory in the Second World War, a sense that separation and independence—mixed with a commitment to the Atlantic alliance and the 'English-speaking peoples'—have served Britain well: a context in which joining the EU was seen as an abdication of a wider role. The euro crisis has increased that sense that separation is in Britain's interests, even if the UK has also struggled economically. Europe has long been the 'other' against which British—and notably, but by no means exclusively, English—identity is cast.[43] This impulse is so strong that the

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[41] For further discussion of the problems facing the EU, see Paul Taylor, *The end of European integration: anti-Europeanism examined* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[42] Tim Oliver, 'The five routes to a Brexit: how the UK might leave the European Union', *LSE EUROPP blog*, 27 June 2014, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/06/27/the-five-routes-to-a-brexit-how-the-uk-might-leave-the-european-union/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014. Also, for further discussion of a core group pushing ahead of the rest of the EU, see Taylor, *The end of European integration*.

[43] William Wallace, 'Foreign policy and national identity in the United Kingdom', *International Affairs* 67: 1, 1991, pp. 65–80.

British can easily overlook their European identity; and yet even Cameron, in his Europe speech, made clear that 'ours is not just an island story—it is also a continental story'. Whether this opinion is shared sufficiently in the wider political class, media or public is another matter. Having long avoided invasion, occupation, catastrophic defeat or revolution, Britain has not faced any critical juncture in its history that forced a re-evaluation of its identity, especially in relation to Europe. In consequence, any such re-evaluation has been slow and incremental. A referendum could boost this process, but given that the debate has been going on for most of the post-1945 era, we should not expect it to suddenly prompt the British political elite and public into deconstructing and reconstructing the givens of Britain's national identity.

Indeed, rather than changing Britain's attitude and debate about the EU, a referendum could entrench accepted views. Membership of the EU has been seen, as Cameron admitted in his Europe speech, as 'a means to an end … not an end in itself'. A renegotiated or renewed engagement would allow Britain to sustain a relationship that it tries to balance with that sought with the United States. But this is a balancing act that has caused successive prime ministers no end of problems.[44] It would also be largely dependent on how the US and EU change and relate to one another. Domestically, any victorious pro-European campaign is likely to win on an agenda stressing practical, pragmatic, utilitarian involvement in the EU that benefits Britain's economy, security and power. The idea of political union is likely to be played down.[45] An 'in' vote on this basis will be an endorsement of a relationship that remains more of a means to an end than an end in itself. Britain will have voted for the maintenance of a status quo of ambivalence.

Nor should we overlook developments beyond Europe. In 1973, when Britain joined the then EEC, it was seen as the economic future. Today the EU is viewed in Britain, but also to some extent around the world, as riven by crises and in relative decline. The emergence of a multipolar world has led to a resurgence in debates about the merits of relations between Britain and other countries and groupings.[46] In perhaps the most telling comment of all, Douglas Carswell, a Eurosceptic Conservative MP who defected to UKIP, declared that in joining the EU, 'we shackled ourselves to a corpse'.[47] A refusal to see Britain as part of the body Europe—as something to which Britain has attached itself and as something that holds Britain back—might be checked by a referendum campaign. Nevertheless,

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[44] William Wallace and Tim Oliver, 'A bridge too far: the United Kingdom and the transatlantic relationship', in David Andrews, ed., *The Atlantic alliance under stress: US–European relations after Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[45] For a discussion of how this could have happened in a referendum on the euro, see Mark Gill, Simon Atkinson and Roger Gowan, *The referendum battle* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), http://fpc.org.uk/publications/referendum-battle, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[46] Even the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership could tip Britain away from the EU. If it fails, it will reinforce allegations that the EU holds the UK back; if it succeeds, it is predicted to shift a proportion of the UK's trade away from the EU towards a more transatlantic marketplace. See Tim Oliver, 'The British problem facing a transatlantic trade deal', *Huffington Post*, 25 Oct. 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-oliver/the-british-problem-facin_b_4164712.html, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[47] Douglas Carswell, Hansard (Commons), 26 Oct. 2012, col. 1257, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm121026/debtext/121026-0002.htm, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

the growing appeal of emerging powers and markets, a trend that is also attracting the attention of other EU members such as Germany, will increasingly raise questions about the EU's utility for achieving British ends.

Will voting to leave settle the question?

For its supporters, a vote to withdraw would democratically reassert Britain's sovereignty, putting it in a position to build lasting relationships of its own choosing with both the EU and the rest of the world. However, it is unlikely that a vote to withdraw would end Euroscepticism as a political issue, or create a fixed 'end-point' in UK–EU relations, and doubts would remain about public consent.

A vote to leave the EU could not produce a fixed UK–EU relationship because relations with the EU would remain contested. No party, not excepting UKIP, is clear about what an 'out' relationship would mean or cost. Any 'out' campaign faces the challenge of articulating a united view of an 'out' relationship with the EU, an almost impossible task because it would rest in large part on what the EU is willing to grant, not simply what Britain wants.[48] A number of options present themselves, such as the Swiss or Norwegian models. Each has pros and cons that would continue arguments about the role of the EU in British life and the meaning of sovereignty.[49] Whatever 'out' means, the relationship with the EU—as the dominant political and economic organization in Europe—would remain the most important of all Britain's external relationships. Neither continued membership of the Council of Europe (and therefore of the European Convention on Human Rights and its Court, both also viewed by Eurosceptics as an affront to British sovereignty) nor that of NATO could act as a substitute for Britain's relations with the EU. While Britain would remain an important European power and the EU's relationship with the UK would be among the Union's most important, the imbalance between the two would be more wide-ranging than that between Britain and the US. Britain would find itself shut out of any formal role in EU decision-making; and in building a relationship that addresses this loss of participation, British governments would face problems not only in the EU but also at home. Having won a referendum, Eurosceptic groups would be sensitive to any arrangement that undermined their fight to reclaim British sovereignty. At the same time, the EU would remain a powerful 'other' in UK political debate, one often accused of interfering in British life and blamed for Britain's problems.[50] Britain would struggle with its inability either to detach itself from Carswell's European 'corpse' or to help bring it back to life. Just as anti-Americanism has beset the UK–US relationship, so too anti-Europeanism would continue to strain UK–EU relations.

[48] John Bruton and Tim Oliver, 'Consent of a majority of the rest of the EU will be needed if there is to be a new UK–EU relationship', *LSE British Politics and Policy blog*, 16 Jan. 2014, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/39020, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.
[49] Booth and Howarth, *Trading places*.
[50] Sarah Wolff, 'If not the EU, who will Britain blame for its democratic deficit?', *OpenDemocracy*, 12 Feb. 2013, http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/sarah-wolff/if-not-eu-who-will-britain-blame-for-its-democratic-deficit, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

Britain's international position would also be unclear. For the US and other powers, Britain would remain a valuable partner, but one reduced by its inability to influence the EU.[51] A British exit would change the EU itself, possibly in ways detrimental to Britain's interests—it might become more inward-looking, more divided and less interested in British or transatlantic agendas; or it might become a more united and powerful actor, from which Britain had excluded itself.[52] Britain will share its relative decline in the international order with Europe and the wider West, and will continue to face the same kind of risks and opportunities as the EU and its members. In facing these it will remain a power able to affect change to a certain degree, but compared to the EU and those within it, more than ever before it would be at the mercy of decisions by other powers.

Public consent would also remain a contested issue. Tensions within Britain that underlie the Europe question would remain unresolved, perhaps exacerbated by its exit. If some areas of Britain voted to stay in, then the EU could become a powerful point of contention in Britain's intergovernmental politics. While Scotland is a concern here, polling shows London and Wales as equally likely to vote to stay in.[53] Complaints from London—the heart of the British economy—that the rest of Britain was undermining its wealth generation would grow stronger, as would calls to limit this. Scottish and Welsh separatism could be reinvigorated.[54] Even if Scotland had voted to leave Britain, Euroscepticism in the remaining UK would have continued to play a central part in the emergence of English nationalism.[55] An 'out' vote could also be a vote to punish an incumbent government rather than about the issue of EU membership. Calls for further referendums could emerge if a withdrawal won only a slender majority. There could also be calls for a second referendum to approve the withdrawal agreement negotiated with the EU, for example over Britain's membership of the European Free Trade Area or the European Economic Area.[56]

While globalization has caused anxiety elsewhere in the EU, in Britain the controversy has centred on Europeanization. Yet in some respects these are two sides to the same coin. Leaving the EU would not stop British businesses facing regulations agreed on at European, transatlantic and international levels.

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[51] Jeff Lightfoot and Tim Oliver, 'A UK–EU divorce: bad news for America', *The National Interest online*, 3 Dec. 2013, http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/uk-eu-divorce-bad-news-america-9487, accessed 31 Oct. 2014; House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Government foreign policy towards the United States*, Eighth Report of Session 2013–14, HC 695 (London: The Stationery Office, March 2014), pp. 38–40, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmfaff/695/695.pdf, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[52] Tim Oliver, *Europe without Britain: assessing the impact on the EU of a British withdrawal*, SWP Research Paper 2013/RP 07, Sept. 2013, pp. 18–26, http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-papers/swp-research-paper-detail/article/europe_without_britain.html, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[53] Tim Oliver, 'Londoners are not Little Englanders', *LSE British Politics and Policy Blog*, 17 March 2014, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/40452, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[54] Philip Stephens, 'When Britain leaves Europe, Scotland will leave Britain', *Financial Times*, 24 Oct. 2013, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8eff7a1e-3bf4-11e3-9851-00144feab7de.html#axzz2zZA4xfz6, accessed 30 Oct. 2014.

[55] Tim Oliver, 'If Scotland leaves the UK, will England leave the EU?', *E!Sharp*, May 2014, http://esharp.eu/big-debates/the-uk-and-europe/202-if-scotland-leaves-the-uk-will-england-leave-the-eu/, accessed 30 Oct. 2014; Ben Wellings, 'Losing the peace: Euroscepticism and the foundations of contemporary English nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism* 16: 3, 2010, pp. 488–505.

[56] Oliver, *Europe without Britain*, pp. 13–15.

The pressure to remain open to the global economy and attract workers means immigration will remain a contentious issue. European and international investment in Britain would mean increased dependence on and control from other markets. Leaving the EU would not end the interdependence binding Britain and the rest of Europe together in a globalized economy, or the tensions this brings.

Finally, the idea of sovereignty would remain contested. The debate has long been a confused one, filled with a multitude of terms such as popular sovereignty, economic sovereignty, legal sovereignty and parliamentary sovereignty.[57] Most discussion of restoring parliamentary sovereignty essentially means restoring powers to 'the elected dictatorship' of an executive operating largely unchecked through domination of the House of Commons. It says something of Britain's democracy and the idea of parliamentary sovereignty that Eurosceptic calls for a referendum highlight how difficult it is to constrain the executive in the British system of government.[58] Successive governments have been able to cede powers to the EU thanks to the existing system underpinning parliamentary sovereignty. Leaving the EU will not change this unless it is accompanied by reforms of the parliamentary system, the royal prerogatives and the uncodified constitution. Debates about sovereignty, then, cannot be confined to the relationship with the EU or settled by leaving it.

Conclusion

Britain's European question is more than a question of whether to be or not to be in Europe. It is a question about party politics, Britain's changing constitution, identity politics, political economy, globalization and a changing Europe. An in/out referendum that includes debate about these topics can be a means to the end of managing them, but not an end in itself, if by that is meant a settlement of the European question. A referendum campaign and debate could challenge many of the myths that surround the UK–EU relationship, and so start to cleanse British politics of the poison which so often infects the issue of Europe. But whether the decision is to stay in or leave the EU, in order not to raise false expectations in both Britain and the EU the referendum must then be followed by better management of the European question. Failure to do so would allow the poison to return, meaning the referendum would have been nothing more than a placebo.

So how can Britain's European question be better managed? Here we might look to the debate in Scotland about its relationship with the rest of Britain. As James Mitchell has argued, the 'Scottish question'—one of party politics, identity, constitution and political economy—can never be entirely answered,

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[57] William Wallace, 'What price interdependence? Sovereignty and independence in British politics', *International Affairs* 62: 3, 1986, pp. 367–89; Wellings, 'Losing the peace'.
[58] Referendums in the UK raise questions about the very idea of parliamentary sovereignty. If parliament is sovereign, then the question arises whether it must abide by a referendum result. In theory, parliamentary sovereignty allows parliament to ignore the result. Reality tells us otherwise. For a discussion of the politics of parliamentary sovereignty and referendums, see Vernon Bogdanor, *The new British constitution* (Oxford: Hart, 2009).

either through independence or through remaining in the United Kingdom.[59] In a similar way to the European question, the Scottish question will be reframed with each generation, something that is now happening following the vote in September 2014 to remain in the UK. As with the Scottish question, the obstacles to Britain answering its European question are considerable, but they can be managed through a wider debate about the type of country Britain is and wants to be. It is also worth remembering that Britain is not the only European state to have difficulties in its relations with the EU. It is perfectly in keeping with the politics of the EU that a member state pursues its national interests. The key lies in ensuring that the relationship remains more congenial and stable over the longer term. The EU has its part to play in this by maintaining its appeal.

For its part, British politics needs to avoid presenting the issue of UK–EU relations in terms of false choices that distract attention from underlying issues. This will require sustained effort to counter misleading and inflammatory anti-European rhetoric, and openness on the part of pro-Europeans about the powerful role of the EU in British life. It would be wrong to assume that opting for life outside the EU will make for an easier relationship between Britain and the Union; it could be just as acrimonious as now, presenting difficulties for both sides. A referendum cannot by itself resolve this complex issue, which will require longer-term political management in a Britain where both Euroscepticism and the EU are deeply embedded parts of national life; where a vote to stay in the EU can't kill off Euroscepticism and Britain's awkwardness in the EU, but a vote to leave can't kick the EU out of Britain.

[59] James Mitchell, *The Scottish question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).