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The ideological evolution of the Conservative and Labour parties of the United Kingdom with respect to european integration (1970–2016): a comparative analysis

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Abstract.

This article provides *a comprehensive analysis of the ideological evolution of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party of the United Kingdom concerning European integration over the period 1970–2016 and seeks to explain the causes of their diametrically opposed transformations.* ***The methodology*** *is grounded in general scientific principles of historicism, objectivity, scholarly rigour, and systematic analysis. The study employs civilisational, socio-historical, institutional, and micro-historical approaches. The source base comprises doctrinal party documents, speeches by leading political actors, statistical reports, public opinion data, and the results of referendums.* ***The article's original*** *contribution lies in its analysis of the process of ideological evolution of the Conservative and Labour parties of the United Kingdom with respect to European integration from 1970 to 2016. It also characterises the key stages of this process, which led to a reversal of positions: from the pragmatic pro-Europeanism of the Conservatives and the radical Euroscepticism of the Labour Party in the 1970s to the deeply entrenched Euroscepticism of the former and the moderate pro-European stance of the latter on the eve of the 2016 referendum.* ***Conclusions.*** *The ideological evolution of the Conservative and Labour parties of the United Kingdom regarding European integration during 1970–2016 was shaped by two principal factors. First, the European issue was systematically instrumentalised to address domestic political challenges. Second, the evolution of the European Union from an economic to a political union elicited contrasting responses, alienating Conservatives while attracting Labour. Additionally, the article demonstrates that the consequences of this ideological evolution were markedly different for each party: for the Labour Party, the shift towards pro-European positions became an integral part of its modernisation and consolidation processes, whereas for the Conservatives, the deepening of Euroscepticism became a source of chronic internal division.*

Keywords: *Euroscepticism, Conservative Party, Labour Party, European integration, Brexit, Margaret Thatcher.*

Ідеологічна еволюція Консервативної та Лейбористської партій Сполученого Королівства щодо європейської інтеграції (1970–2016): компаративний аналіз

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Анотація.

Метою статті *є комплексний аналіз ідеологічної еволюції Консервативної та Лейбористської партій щодо європейської інтеграції у 1970–2016 рр. та пояснення причин їхньої діаметрально протилежної трансформації.* ***Методологія дослідження*** *базується на загальнонаукових принципах історизму, об'єктивності, наукової критичності та системності. У статті використано методологічні підходи: цивілізаційний, соціоісторичний, інституційний, мікроісторичний.* ***Джерельну базу*** *становлять доктринальні партійні документи, виступи провідних політичних діячів, статистичні звіти та дані опитувань і результати проведених референдумів.* ***Наукова новизна*** *полягає в аналізі процесу ідеологічної еволюції Консервативної та Лейбористської партій Великої Британії щодо європейської інтеграції у період з 1970 по 2016 рік. Також у характеристиці ключових етапів процесу, що призвів до зміни позицій: від прагматичного проєвропеїзму консерваторів та радикального євроскептицизму лейбористів у 1970-х рр. до глибоко євроскептичної позиції перших та поміркованого проєвропеїзму других напередодні референдуму 2016 р.* ***Висновки.*** *Ідеологічна еволюція Консервативної та Лейбористської партій Сполученого Королівства щодо європейської інтеграції у період 1970–2016 рр. була зумовлена двома ключовими чинниками. По-перше, європейське питання систематично інструменталізувалося для вирішення внутрішньополітичних завдань. По-друге, еволюція самого ЄС від економічного до політичного союзу викликала протилежні реакції, відштовхуючи консерваторів і приваблюючи лейбористів. Крім того, у статті доводиться, що наслідки цієї ідеологічної еволюції для кожної з партій виявилися кардинально різними: для Лейбористської партії перехід на проєвропейські позиції став невід'ємною частиною процесу модернізації та консолідації, тоді як для консерваторів поглиблення євроскептицизму стало джерелом хронічного внутрішнього розколу.*

Ключові слова: *євроскептицизм, Консервативна партія, Лейбористська партія, європейська інтеграція, Брекзіт, Маргарет Тетчер.*

Problem Statement. The history of the United Kingdom's relationship with the European project is inextricably linked to the ideological evolution of its leading political parties. Between 1970 and 2016, the ideological positions of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party with regard to the European Union underwent a profound transformation, resulting in a complete inversion of their initial roles. Whereas at the beginning of this period the Conservatives acted as the principal advocates of the country's accession to the European Economic Community and Labour emerged as its principal opponent, by 2016 the situation had reversed. Conventional explanations of this phenomenon often amount merely to stating the fact of reversal, without elucidating the deeper causes underlying such a fundamental transformation.

Thus, the scholarly problem lies in identifying and comparatively analysing the key driving forces that underpinned this ideological evolution. The study seeks to determine the respective roles played by both domestic and foreign policy factors in shaping this process.

Review of Recent Research. The attitudes of Britain's principal political parties towards European integration have been the subject of substantial scholarship within Western historiography. Foundational works that outline the broader context include those of H. Young (Young, 1998) and

S. George (George, 1998), who explain the historical reasons why Britain became an "awkward partner" in Europe and emphasise the distinctive character of its Euroscepticism. The theoretical foundations for analysing party positions were laid by P. Taggart, who developed a typology of Euroscepticism.

The evolution of individual party positions has likewise received considerable attention. Transformations within the Conservative Party have been examined by C. Tugendhat (Tugendhat, 2022) and N. Crowson (Crowson, 2007), who interpret the European question as a source of chronic internal conflict that gradually contributed to the party's ideological radicalisation. Conversely, the process of the Labour Party's "Europeanisation" has been analysed in detail by K. Featherstone (Featherstone, 1999) and E. Delaney (Delaney, 2002), who link Labour's ideological reorientation to its response to Thatcherism and to the evolution of the European Union towards the concept of a "Social Europe". The manifestations of Euroscepticism within both parties have also been explored by A. Forster (Forster, 2002) and J. Smith (Smith, 2012).

In recent Western historiography, emphasis has shifted towards analysing the long-term preconditions of Brexit through the prism of party transformations. In particular, A. Altiparmakis and A. Kyriazi (Altiparmakis & Kyriazi, 2024), employing manifesto analysis, substantiate the "exceptionalism" of the Conservatives, whose Euroscepticism was distinctive in its depth and served as an instrument of intra-party struggle. This thesis is further developed by P. Dorey (Dorey, 2017), who argues that the principal line of division within the party shifted from a conflict between "Europhiles and Eurosceptics" to a confrontation between "soft" and "hard" Eurosceptics, reflecting the gradual "Thatcherisation" of party cadres following the Maastricht Treaty. The Czech scholar O. Doležal (Doležal, 2021), likewise drawing upon manifesto analysis, demonstrates that on the eve of the 2015 general election both parties exhibited elements of "soft Euroscepticism", albeit for different reasons. The work of R. Hayton (Hayton, 2022) is also significant. Although focused primarily on the post-referendum period, his conclusions retrospectively corroborate the central thesis that the triumph of radical Euroscepticism within the Conservative Party was made possible by the prolonged ideological erosion of the party's centrists, a process that had been underway since the Maastricht era.

A significant contribution to the conceptualisation of this issue has been made by Polish scholars, who interpret British Euroscepticism not merely as an isolated phenomenon but as the outcome of long-term historical and institutional processes. In particular, H. Ronek (Ronek, 2015) characterises British policy through the prism of an "instrumental approach", arguing that London has consistently been guided by pragmatism, accepting integration only when non-participation threatened national economic interests. In more recent studies, P. Biskup (Biskup, 2024) analyses Brexit within the framework of the *longue durée*, pointing to the fundamental incompatibility between the British tradition of sovereignty and European federalism. He also draws parallels between the referendums of 1975 and 2016, interpreting them as similar instruments for resolving intra-party crises.

The evolution of individual political forces has been examined in detail by A. Nitschke (Nitschke, 2016), who focuses on the keynote speeches of Conservative leaders as indicators of ideological shifts, and by S. Pająk (Pająk, 2017), who argues that the radicalisation of the Tories was a direct response to the electoral challenge posed by the UK Independence Party. The impact of party ideologies on the territorial structure of the state has been explored by B. Toszek (Toszek, 2024), who contrasts the pro-European approach of "New Labour" to devolution with the centralising tendencies of Conservative governments after 2010. The theoretical framework is further enriched by the work of R. Riedel (Riedel, 2018), who defines Britain's withdrawal from the European Union as a structural challenge and an example of "differentiated disintegration", arising from attempts to secure a status of "privileged non-membership". Methodologically significant is also the approach proposed by D. Dakowska (Dakowska, 2010), who suggests analysing Euroscepticism not as a stable ideological attribute but as a strategic instrument employed by parties to differentiate themselves from their opponents in domestic political competition.

Within Ukrainian historical and political science scholarship, the issue of the ideological transformation of British parties has likewise received considerable attention. A substantial contribution to the systematic analysis of the party dimension of foreign policy has been made by A. Hrubinko (Hrubinko, 2010), who examined the evolution of Conservative and Labour strategies within the dichotomy of "Atlanticism versus Europeanism" and assessed the impact of this factor on the security architecture of the European Union. The specific features of the Conservative approach during the premiership of John Major and the intra-party struggle surrounding the Maastricht Treaty have been thoroughly analysed in the works of L. Yampolska (Yampolska, 2003; 2008). She has also explored the phenomenon of "New Labour", emphasising Tony Blair's attempts to reconcile the defence of national interests with a constructive European policy.

The evolution of the Labour Party's programme foundations has been the subject of a specialised study by D. Ivanov (Ivanov, 2018), who, on the basis of an analysis of electoral manifestos from 1992 to 2010, traced the party's abandonment of left-radical ideas in favour of pragmatic

multilateralism. The role of the personal factor and Tony Blair's leadership model in rethinking the foreign policy course has been elucidated in the works of M. Prykhnenko (Prykhnenko, 2018). The political manoeuvres of Labour on the eve of the 1997 general election and its strategy of engaging business through "pragmatic Europeanism" have been examined by O. Neprytskyi (Neprytskyi, 2002). The final stage of the period under study, in particular the development of the public and political "Leave" and "Remain" movements in the media sphere prior to the 2016 referendum, has been analysed in the works of M. Tomashevska (Tomashevska, 2023).

Thus, historiography has generally examined discrete aspects of the evolution of each party. However, such studies tend to focus either on a single political force or on particular chronological periods. Consequently, there remains a need for a synthetic study which, drawing upon an analysis of party manifestos, traces the complete and diametrically opposed evolution of both parties as an integral historical process. Addressing this lacuna constitutes the objective of the present article.

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ideological evolution of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party with regard to European integration in 1970–2016 and to explain the reasons for their diametrically opposed transformation. Achieving this objective entails the fulfilment of several research tasks: analysing the domestic political factors that influenced changes in party positions, in particular the instrumentalisation of the European question in the struggle for power; examining external factors, notably how the evolution of the European project itself from an economic to a political union affected the attitudes of Britain's leading parties; and conducting a comparative analysis of the nature and consequences of ideological evolution for each party.

Research Findings. Historically, Great Britain's attitude towards European integration was characterised by ambivalence, which rendered the country an "awkward partner" for its continental neighbours. While the six founding states in the 1950s laid the foundations of what would later become the European Union, London remained aloof, preferring a global role grounded in its ties with the Commonwealth and the "special relationship" with the United States. This position, articulated by Winston Churchill in his concept of the "three circles" (the Commonwealth, the United States, and Europe), became deeply embedded within the Conservative establishment, for whom Europe constituted merely one of three theatres of action and not always the priority (Crowson, 2007, p. 72).

Only in the 1960s, confronted with the realities of economic decline, did both leading parties attempt to join the European Economic Community: first, the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan in 1961, and subsequently the Labour government of Harold Wilson in 1967 (Tugendhat, 2022, p. 78). Both applications were vetoed by the French President Charles de Gaulle, the principal external opponent of British integration. His resignation in 1969 (Tugendhat, 2022, p. 82) removed the key external obstacle, and by the early 1970s the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community became, for the first time, a realistic prospect.

Initial Positions (1970–1979): Pragmatic Pro-Europeanism of the Conservatives and Ideological Division within Labour. For the Conservative government led by Edward Heath, accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) was прежде всего a project of economic and geopolitical modernisation. Following the loss of empire and amid the economic difficulties commonly referred to as the "British disease" of the 1970s, membership in the "Common Market" (as the European project was frequently termed at the time) was perceived as an opportunity to redefine the country's role in the world and to stimulate economic growth. The 1970 Conservative Party manifesto (Manifesto, February 1970) clearly articulated this economic logic, asserting that "economic growth and a higher standard of living will result from having a larger market" and that the opportunities offered by membership were "immense". Presenting the European Communities Bill to Parliament, the principal governmental architect of European integration, Geoffrey Rippon, explicitly linked the acceptance of European rules to national interests: "We are undertaking these obligations… in the interests of the security and prosperity of our people… [in order] to play our proper part in building a united Europe" (Hansard, 15 February 1972).

This pragmatism enabled Heath's government successfully to guide the country through the complex accession process in 1973, despite opposition from a small but vocal group of "anti-marketeers" within the party, such as Enoch Powell (Crowson, 2007, p. 157). Even after electoral defeat in 1974 and the transition into opposition, the Conservative Party remained the most pro-European political force (Crowson, 2007, p. 45). Its October 1974 manifesto described the idea of withdrawal from the EEC, advocated by Labour, as a "catastrophe" and a "retreat into isolation" (Manifesto, October 1974).

During the 1975 referendum, the party, under its newly elected leader Margaret Thatcher–despite her later Euroscepticism–presented a united front in support of continued membership. Speaking in parliamentary debates, she contrasted her party's consistency with Labour's hesitations, declaring: "We have consistently voted for Britain in Europe by large majorities and would not dream of making U-turns on this issue" (Hansard, 08 April 1975). As N. Crowson notes, during this period the anti-European wing within the party appeared marginalised in the aftermath of the decisive victory of

the “Yes” campaign (Crowson, 2007, p. 45). Thatcher herself approached the issue in utilitarian terms, regarding the EEC primarily as a bulwark against communism and as an instrument of free trade. Thus, in the 1970s Conservatism was closely associated with the European project, perceived as necessary for the country’s national interests.

The situation within the Labour Party was fundamentally different. In contrast to Conservative pragmatism, for Labour the European question became a catalyst for deep internal conflict, structured along an ideological divide between the party’s left and right wings. As vividly demonstrated by P. Whiteside (Whiteside, 1984, p. 22) the left wing–led by figures such as Tony Benn and Michael Foot–viewed the EEC as a “capitalist club” that threatened socialist transformation, nationalisation, and workers’ rights. Their arguments were grounded in the conviction that the Treaty of Rome, with its emphasis on the free market, was incompatible with a planned economy and state control.

This position was reflected in the party’s 1974 manifesto (Manifesto, February 1974), which described accession to the EEC as a “profound political mistake” that had resulted in the “imposition of food taxes”, “crippling new burdens on our balance of payments”, and a “draconian curtailment of the powers of the British Parliament”. A central element of Labour’s electoral programme in 1974 was the decision to submit the question of continued membership in the EEC to the people. This demand rested on the deeply held conviction within the party elite that accession without a direct electoral mandate was constitutionally illegitimate. During parliamentary debates on the accession bill in 1972, the Labour opposition spokesman Peter Shore emotively characterised the process as a betrayal of democracy: “For the first time in our history, we are being subjected to a written constitution which we did not write and did not even help to write… The Government is unwilling to submit this issue to the test… [without] the wholehearted consent of the British Parliament or the British people” (Hansard, 15 February 1972).

The February 1974 manifesto codified a two-stage approach: first, a “fundamental renegotiation of the terms of entry”; second, granting the people the right “to decide the issue through a General Election or a consultative referendum” (Manifesto, February 1974). This position was reinforced in the October manifesto, which promised to give the British people the “final say” on membership (Manifesto, October 1974).

This formula was not merely a political proposal but a manoeuvre designed to preserve party unity. Nevertheless, the internal conflict that reached its apogee during the 1975 referendum publicly exposed the depth of division at every level of the party. The government was compelled to suspend the principle of collective responsibility, allowing ministers to campaign against one another; the parliamentary party voted against the terms of membership (145 votes to 137) (Delaney, 2002, p. 133), forcing the government to rely on opposition support; and a special party conference overwhelmingly condemned continued membership (Saunders, 2018, p. 94). This situation created a unique political paradox: the Labour government officially recommended a “Yes” vote, while the party organisation at both grassroots and parliamentary levels remained predominantly Eurosceptic.

Even after 67.2 per cent of British voters supported remaining in the EEC, ideological opposition within the party did not disappear. As E. Delaney observes, for the party’s left wing the EEC remained an ideologically alien project, and the referendum result did not alter this fundamental conviction (Delaney, 2002, p. 133). By the end of the 1970s, therefore, the Labour Party was not merely divided but ideologically predisposed towards continued confrontation, laying the foundations for its radical Euroscepticism in the early 1980s.

Thus, by the close of the 1970s the Conservative and Labour parties occupied opposing positions with regard to European integration. The Conservative approach was characterised by pragmatism and broad internal consensus, with EEC membership regarded as an instrument for resolving national economic problems. For Labour, by contrast, Europe became an arena of ideological struggle that not only revealed but deepened the party’s fundamental internal division. This initial distribution of roles, however, proved unstable, as it rested upon external circumstances and intra-party balances of power that were destined to shift in the more turbulent decade that followed.

The Ideological Shift of the 1980s: The Genesis of Thatcherite Euroscepticism and the Beginning of Labour’s “Europeanisation”

The 1980s constituted a turning point in the history of the Conservative Party’s relationship with the European project. Although Margaret Thatcher’s accession to the office of Prime Minister in 1979 did not immediately signify a rupture with the pro-European course of her predecessors, it laid the ideological foundations for the future development of Conservative Euroscepticism. The first major battleground for Thatcher was the issue of the United Kingdom’s budgetary contribution to the European Economic Community (EEC). The 1979 Conservative manifesto pledged to “restore Britain’s influence” in Europe and to “reduce the burden which the Community budget places upon the British taxpayer” (Manifesto, 1979.). Her famous demand to “get my money back” (Tugendhat, 2002, p. 68) coupled with her uncompromising negotiating style, which persisted until 1984, forged a new and more confrontational image of Britain within Europe. Although financially successful, this struggle reinforced,

both in public opinion and in Thatcher's own perception, the view of the EEC as an antagonistic structure to be contested rather than cooperated with.

Initially, however, her approach remained pragmatic and even constructive. She firmly supported the expansion of the common market, perceiving it as an instrument for promoting neoliberal principles of free trade and deregulation. This policy found its principal expression in the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, which was to a significant extent a British initiative and aimed at removing barriers to trade (Crowson, 2007, p. 51). The 1987 Conservative manifesto reaffirmed this role, declaring that "Britain has led the way in creating a genuine common market, with free movement of goods and services across national frontiers".

Yet the very success of the single market became a catalyst for the growth of Thatcher's own Euroscepticism (Crowson, 2007, p. 52). For her, the market represented the final objective; for many continental leaders, including the President of the European Commission Jacques Delors, it constituted merely a stage towards deeper political and social integration. This divergence in vision became increasingly apparent as Delors advanced proposals for a "social dimension" and monetary union. For Thatcher, such initiatives were unacceptable, as they threatened both national sovereignty and her domestic neoliberal revolution (Thatcher, 2002, p. 94).

This ideological conflict found its most explicit articulation in Thatcher's celebrated Bruges speech of 20 September 1988 at the College of Europe (Thatcher, 1988). In that address, she delineated the limits of her Europeanism, asserting: "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level, with a European superstate exercising a new dominance from Brussels." By the "rolling back" of the state, she referred to her domestic policies of privatisation, deregulation, and the weakening of trade unions. Thus, Thatcher directly linked her struggle against what she perceived as "socialism" in Britain to the perceived danger of intensified supranational regulation emanating from the European Community. The speech became a manifesto of a new, ideologically charged Conservative Euroscepticism. It mobilised a small but influential faction within the party and transformed the European question from a technical issue into a fundamental debate about sovereignty and national identity, thereby sowing the seeds of future internal division.

While ideological Euroscepticism was taking root within the Conservative Party, the Labour Party embarked upon a gradual reassessment of its stance towards the EEC. The early 1980s marked the peak of Labour's hostility to European integration. This period culminated in the 1983 general election manifesto (Manifesto, 1983), which contained an explicit commitment to withdraw the United Kingdom from the EEC, asserting that "British withdrawal from the Community is the right policy for Britain" and that this objective should be achieved within the lifetime of the Parliament. Reflecting the dominance of the party's left wing, which regarded membership as incompatible with socialism, the manifesto contributed to a devastating electoral defeat. That defeat, in turn, became a catalyst for a fundamental revision of party policy.

Under the leadership of Neil Kinnock–himself previously associated with the "anti-market" wing–the party initiated a gradual process of "Europeanisation", driven by both pragmatic and ideological considerations.

First, at the domestic level, the leadership recognised that the radical commitment to withdrawal had been one of the principal factors contributing to the electoral defeat of 1983 and therefore required moderation in order to restore voter confidence (Featherstone, 1999). This process was cautious and incremental. In its manifesto for the 1984 European elections, the party retained a formal "withdrawal option", while simultaneously acknowledging that "Britain will remain a member of the EEC during the lifetime of the next European Parliament". This tactical compromise was necessary for Kinnock to consolidate his authority and to confront the far-left "Militant Tendency" within the party (Featherstone, 1999). The revision of European policy thus became an integral component of a broader strategy of modernisation and repositioning towards the political centre (Smith, 2012, p. 1278).

Second, the European project itself was undergoing transformation. It was evolving from a predominantly economic association into a structure with an increasingly pronounced social dimension (Delaney, 2002, p. 121). The neoliberal policies of the Thatcher government–aimed at weakening trade unions and dismantling elements of the welfare state–prompted Labour and its allies to seek alternative mechanisms for the protection of workers' rights. The concept of a "Social Europe", actively promoted by Jacques Delors, offered such a mechanism. His address to the Trades Union Congress in 1988 proved particularly influential, presenting the European Community not as a "capitalist club" but as a supranational space capable of guaranteeing social rights and standards, thereby constituting an effective counterweight to Thatcherism (Featherstone, 1999, p. 7).

On the eve of the 1987 general election, Labour had already abandoned its explicit commitment to withdrawal, and its manifesto declared: "We shall work constructively with our EEC partners to promote economic expansion" (Manifesto, 1987). These ideas resonated strongly within the Labour movement. As K. Featherstone observes, the trade unions themselves, feeling increasingly vulnerable

at the national level, began to encourage the party to adopt a more constructive attitude towards the EEC (Featherstone, 1999, p. 9). Thus, party members who had long regarded the Community as an ideological threat gradually began to reinterpret its role, perceiving in the European project a potential ally.

In sum, the 1980s constituted a decade of profound ideological realignment for Britain's two principal parties. While the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher moved from pragmatic Europeanism towards ideologically grounded Euroscepticism, the Labour Party, by contrast, took its first steps from radical opposition towards constructive engagement. The driving forces behind these changes were essentially the same processes, interpreted in contrasting ways. For Thatcher, the deepening of integration after the Single European Act represented a threat to national sovereignty; for Labour, Delors's vision of "Social Europe" offered a means of protection against Thatcherism.

The Maastricht Factor (1990–1997): Crisis in the Conservative Government and Pro-European Consolidation of the "New Labour"

The early 1990s saw internal disagreements within the Conservative Party over European integration escalate into an open political conflict. The key catalyst was the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which established the European Union and introduced a common economic and monetary policy. For many Conservatives, this confirmed earlier fears, articulated by Margaret Thatcher national sovereignty (Crowson, 2007, p. 55).

Thatcher's successor, John Major, attempted to reach a compromise by negotiating opt-outs for the UK–from the monetary union and the Social Chapter, which extended workers' rights–but this failed to satisfy the increasingly Eurosceptic faction (Crowson, 2007, p. 57). Although the government presented these concessions as a diplomatic success (Manifesto, 1992), ratification of the treaty in the House of Commons (1992–1993) became a protracted struggle with a group of rebel MPs (Smith, 2012, p. 1283).

The effectiveness of these rebels was amplified by the slim parliamentary majority held by Major's government–only 21 votes after the 1992 election–which gave a small faction disproportionate leverage over legislation (Cracknell, Uberoi, Burton, 2023). As Major later acknowledged, "The hard core of rebels barely reached forty, but all were united by the fact that our tiny parliamentary majority meant... they carried weight when it came to passing legislation through the House. In effect, they held the government in an armlock" (Major, 1999, p. 116).

The systematic opposition of these rebel MPs generated political instability and significantly weakened Major's position (Crowson, 2007, p. 60). The situation worsened following the "Black Wednesday" crisis in September 1992, when the UK was forced to humiliatingly exit the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. This event undermined confidence in the government's economic competence and provided Eurosceptics with a compelling argument that monetary integration with Europe was doomed to fail and harmful to British interests (Gottschalk, 2021, p. 2844).

According to N. Crookson (Crowson, 2007, p. 57), this conflict had two far-reaching consequences for the ideological evolution of the Conservative Party. First, it marginalised the pro-European faction, whose views increasingly appeared inconsistent with core Conservative values. Second, Euroscepticism became the dominant ideological current, though it did not consolidate the party but rather shifted the internal division: the conflict now ran between different shades of Euroscepticism–from pragmatists seeking reforms to radicals advocating withdrawal from the EU. Any future Conservative leader would be compelled to navigate between these factions to maintain party unity. This period thus marked a point of no return, transforming the Conservatives from a pragmatic "party of Europe" into a party deeply divided by Euroscepticism.

Amid the Conservatives' internal turmoil, the Labour Party completed its ideological transformation, turning a pro-European stance into a central element of its strategy for returning to power. The Europeanisation process, initiated under Neil Kinnock, was institutionalised during the late-1980s Policy Review (Shaw, 1993, p. 114). By 1992, the Labour manifesto contained no references to withdrawal, instead promising to "use our influence in Europe to ensure necessary policies for coordinated growth" (Manifesto, 1992). This course was continued under John Smith and, with the arrival of Tony Blair, became a defining feature of "New Labour," signalling modernisation and a break from the old left associated with the failures of the 1980s. (Featherstone, 1999, p. 8).

For New Labour, a pro-European stance was not merely a foreign policy position but also a strategic tool. It allowed the party to present itself as modern, pragmatic, and ready for leadership, providing a stark contrast to a divided Conservative Party preoccupied with internal disputes. The 1997 manifesto explicitly declared the intention to make the UK an active player in the EU rather than a passive observer. Unlike the Conservatives, who viewed the Maastricht Treaty as a threat to sovereignty, Labour emphasised its social and economic potential (Manifesto, 1997). The Social Chapter, rejected by Major's government, was to be signed immediately (Delaney, 2002, p. 138) enabling Labour to appeal both to traditional constituencies (trade unions and workers) and to present itself as competent in engaging effectively with European institutions for British interests.

This approach represented the logical culmination of the process initiated by Delors's vision: the EU was now officially considered an instrument for protecting and extending social rights. While the Conservatives fought a "civil war" over Maastricht, Labour leveraged the same treaty to demonstrate unity and readiness for constructive policy. As K. Tugendhat notes, this helped Labour appear as a credible and attractive alternative amid the chaos in the ruling party, contributing significantly to their 1997 election victory, despite the country's stable economic indicators (Tugendhat, 2022, p. 104).

In conclusion, the 1990s marked the completion of the ideological divergence between the Conservative and Labour parties on European integration. The Maastricht Treaty served as a critical catalyst, accelerating asymmetric processes within both parties. For the Conservatives, it triggered a deep internal split, consolidating Euroscepticism and contributing to their electoral decline. For Labour, the treaty became a tool to consolidate a new pro-European identity within the modernising project of New Labour. By the end of the decade, the Conservatives were a party paralysed by internal Eurosceptic divisions, whereas Labour emerged as a united and constructive pro-European alternative, reshaping the political landscape of the UK.

Dilemmas of Government and Opposition (1997–2010): Limits of New Labour's Pro-Europeanism and Conservative Consolidation

The victory of New Labour in 1997 initially seemed to inaugurate a decisively pro-European era in British politics. The Tony Blair government promptly fulfilled its pledge to sign the Social Chapter and pursued a policy of European leadership, aiming to position the UK not as an "awkward partner" but as a key player within the European Union (Blair Urges, 1997). Yet, this initial enthusiasm quickly gave way to a cautious and pragmatic approach.

Despite pro-European rhetoric, Blair's government never pursued entry into the Eurozone. The introduction of Chancellor Gordon Brown's famous "five economic tests" effectively deferred any decision indefinitely (EMU study, 2003). Blair later explained the political logic behind this hesitation: "My problem with the euro was very simple… In principle, I was 'for' it… But I also knew that… If it wasn't obviously economically beneficial for Britain, it simply couldn't be sold politically… The problem was that the economic case was at best ambiguous, and certainly not unassailable" (Blair, 2010, p. 212). This duality—a pro-European external rhetoric coupled with internal caution—became the defining feature of New Labour's European policy.

Another clear illustration of this caution was the situation surrounding the EU Constitution in 2004. Initially, Blair's government planned parliamentary ratification, in line with tradition for most EU agreements. However, under pressure from the Conservative opposition and Eurosceptic media demanding a public referendum, the government, after prolonged hesitation, promised a referendum (Smith, 2012, p. 1287). This move revealed the limits of New Labour's pro-Europeanism: even at the height of its power, the government was unwilling to confront society and the media directly on the European question. Ultimately, the referendum never took place, as the Constitution project was rejected in France and Netherlands, allowing the government to avoid a potentially destructive campaign (France and Netherlands', 2005, p. 61).

The caution of the Labour Party stemmed from several factors. First, the pressure of the Eurosceptic press–most prominently Rupert Murdoch's media empire–actively opposed further integration (White, 2014). Blair, seeking to maintain tabloid support, avoided any steps that could trigger a full-scale media campaign against his government. Second, the government recognized the ambivalent attitude of the British public toward European integration. As noted by I. Hertner and D. Keet, even at the peak of its pro-Europeanism, Labour emphasised the protection of "national interests" and the need for reforms rather than the ideals of a "closer union." Scholars describe this stance as "soft Europhilia": principled support for membership combined with constant caveats and a pragmatic approach (Hertner & Keith, 2017, p. 66). Notably, in establishing a pro-European stance, New Labour increasingly adopted rhetoric previously associated with Conservatives, emphasizing the protection of Britain's national interests in Europe, echoing the pragmatic arguments of 1970s Conservatives.

While New Labour consolidated its pragmatic pro-Europeanism, the Conservative Party in opposition entrenched Euroscepticism as its central ideology. Following the crushing defeat of 1997, largely stemming from internal wars over Maastricht, the party elected William Hague as leader. To unify the fractured ranks and mobilize the base, Hague pursued a hardline anti-integration stance (Crowson, 2007, p. 66). A central element of this strategy was the "Save the Pound" campaign. The 2001 manifesto declared: "The next Conservative government will protect the pound. We will retain our national veto over European legislation," under the slogan, "In Europe, but not under Europe."

Although ineffective in the 2001 general election, where domestic issues dominated, this strategy had a decisive impact on the party's ideological evolution. Euroscepticism transitioned from a factional position to a necessary condition for any Conservative leader (Crowson, 2007, p. 67–69). This trend continued under subsequent leaders I. Smith and M. Howard but was tactically adjusted after a third consecutive electoral defeat in 2005, leading to the election of David Cameron. Cameron

initiated a party modernization project to remove the toxic image of Conservatives. His call to "stop banging on about Europe" aimed to shift focus from secondary issues for many voters to more salient concerns such as healthcare and the environment (Tugendhat, 2022, p. 98). At the same time, to maintain leadership and appease the powerful Eurosceptic wing, Cameron made symbolic concessions. Most notably, he pledged to withdraw Conservative MEPs from the centrist European People's Party (EPP), which the Eurosceptic faction viewed as a symbol of a "federalist" Europe. This pledge was fulfilled in 2009 (Cameron, 2014). The move vividly illustrated a dilemma intrinsic to any Conservative leader, mirroring the situation within Labour in the 1970s: pragmatic leadership had to constantly maneuver to satisfy the demands of the party base.

In summary, 1997–2010 was a period of stabilization of new ideological positions on European integration for both parties. Labour in government practiced pragmatic pro-Europeanism, combining rhetorical commitment with caution in practical measures, particularly regarding Eurozone entry—a stance scholars describe as "soft Europhilia," shaped by complex domestic political considerations. Meanwhile, the Conservatives in opposition institutionalized Euroscepticism as the core of their ideological platform, using it to consolidate the party internally and clearly distinguish themselves from New Labour.

Final Stage of Ideological Inversion (2010–2016): Tory Party Management Crisis and Opposition's Pragmatic Pro-Europeanism

The formation of the coalition government in 2010 under David Cameron marked the final act in the ideological evolution of the Conservative Party, reflecting in many ways the situation faced by the Harold Wilson-led Labour government forty years earlier. Like Wilson in 1975, Cameron personally supported EU membership but led a party deeply divided by ideological Euroscepticism. This internal pressure was amplified by two external factors: the Eurozone crisis, which provided new arguments for Eurosceptics, and the rapid rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), posing a direct electoral threat to the Tories (Smith, 2012, p. 1290).

Under these circumstances, the European issue for the Conservatives became less a matter of foreign policy and more an instrument of internal party management. Attempting to appease the Eurosceptic wing and neutralize the UKIP threat, Cameron in his Bloomberg speech on 23 January 2013 promised a referendum on the UK's EU membership—a tactic reminiscent of Wilson's strategy in 1974 (Prime Minister David Cameron, 2013). In his memoirs, Cameron justified the decision as one of historical necessity and political pressure: "I could not foresee a possible future for the United Kingdom without a referendum – and I considered it right to hold one and try to win the argument… The risks of inaction were greater than the risks of action" (Cameron, 2020, p. 77).

Cameron's strategy fit into a broader pattern of using referendums to resolve complex constitutional questions. Previous successes with the 2011 electoral system referendum and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum demonstrated his ability to win nationwide campaigns, neutralizing political threats (Connelly, 2018, p. 32). The Conservatives' victory in 2015 (Cracknell, Uberoi, Burton, 2023) made the referendum pledge unavoidable, initiating the process that culminated in the 2016 vote. Cameron's key move was to renegotiate the terms of membership, securing an EU agreement in February 2016 granting the UK "special status" and protection from further political integration. However, Cameron later admitted the futility of these efforts: "I have to acknowledge that the deal was a failure, because it did not pass its primary test: helping convince the British electorate to remain in the EU." Losing this argument forced him, like Wilson decades earlier, to allow cabinet members to campaign for Brexit (Cameron, 2020, p. 217).

Meanwhile, the Labour Party in opposition faced the strategic dilemma of defending a pro-European position without alienating Eurosceptic voters (Hertner, & Keith, 2017, p. 87). Under Ed Miliband, Labour continued its "soft Europhilia" strategy, emphasizing pragmatic, economic arguments for membership–particularly the importance of access to the Single Market–while deliberately rejecting deeper political integration. The 2010 manifesto (Manifesto, 2010) stressed that "a strong Britain is in a reformed Europe" and criticized Tory shortsightedness as a false choice "between an alliance with the United States or an alliance with Europe." Miliband repeatedly framed EU exit as "a betrayal of national interests," emphasizing economic risks.

This balancing strategy was operationalized through concrete proposals. To counter charges of unconditional Europhilia and respond to Cameron's referendum pledge, Labour introduced a "referendum lock" (The Labour Party Manifesto, 2015), guaranteeing a nationwide vote on any future transfer of powers from Westminster to Brussels. This measure demonstrated Labour's commitment to national sovereignty while maintaining a pragmatic stance (Hertner, & Keith, 2017, p. 72): Miliband explicitly rejected idealistic rhetoric, asserting that "under Labour, Britain will not be part of an unstoppable march toward ever-closer union."

By the eve of the 2016 referendum, Labour had consolidated a position of cautious, pragmatic support for EU membership, sharply contrasting with its radical Euroscepticism in the 1970s.

In conclusion, the final stage before the 2016 referendum illustrated the logical culmination of both parties' ideological trajectories. The Conservatives, back in government, were hostage to their entrenched Euroscepticism, reinforced by UKIP's external pressure. Cameron's referendum decision served a dual purpose: resolving long-standing internal party conflict and addressing the UK-EU relationship. Previous referendum victories gave him confidence in this high-stakes maneuver but created an illusion of full control over the outcome. Labour, in contrast, had firmly established its pragmatic pro-Europeanism. This configuration–where the ruling party had to question EU membership to manage internal divisions, while the main opposition offered cautious, consistent support–set the political stage that made the 2016 referendum possible.

Conclusions.

1.Internal political dynamics as a key driver of ideological evolution. The study shows that positions on the European Union were systematically used by both parties as tools to address pressing internal challenges. For the Labour Party in opposition during the 1980s, "Europeanization" became part of a modernization strategy that allowed the party to consolidate and offer a constructive alternative to Thatcherism. For the Conservative Party after the 1990s, Euroscepticism became a tool for internal leadership struggles and a tactical means to neutralize electoral threats. Thus, EU positions often reflected not foreign policy priorities, but the internal state, ideological conflicts, and power struggles within the parties.

2.The link between party transformation and EU development. The evolution of both parties' positions was inseparably connected to changes within the European project itself. The transition of the EU from an economic union (the "Single Market") to a more integrated political and social union acted as a catalyst for ideological rethinking. For the Conservative Party, deeper integration after the signing of the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty was perceived as a direct threat to national sovereignty, reinforcing their Euroscepticism. For the Labour Party, the social dimension of EU policy in the 1980s transformed the EU from a "capitalist club" into a potential ally, facilitating their pro-European course and party modernization.

3.Diametrically opposed ideological trajectories of the parties. Comparative analysis shows that the transformations followed opposite paths. The Labour Party moved from radical Euroscepticism to pragmatic pro-Europeanism, which contributed to internal consolidation and modernization. The Conservative Party, by contrast, shifted from pragmatic Europeanism to deeply entrenched ideological Euroscepticism, generating prolonged internal divisions and political instability.

These conclusions highlight that the history of European integration in the United Kingdom is not only an external political process but also a complex dynamic of internal party transformations, where strategic positions on the EU served as markers of ideological consolidation or division.

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