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“BREXITOLOGY”: A STORY OF RENEGOTIATIONS, REFERENDUMS AND “BREGRETS”?

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Abstract: *The United Kingdom's path inside the European Union can be defined as a roller-coaster ever since its first years as a member state. As BREXIT talks are touching key issues such as the unity and prosperity of the European Union, this article seeks to analyze BREXIT through a comparison between the two referendum campaigns UK held, first in 1975 - two years after joining the Union – and then in 2016. Although not entirely a mirror image of Wilson's strategy, Cameron's decision to hold a referendum followed the same line of thinking but within a completely different political and economic context.*

Keywords: Brexit, United Kingdom, referendum, “brexitology”, “bregrets”.

Introduction

Starting with Kalergi's Pan European Union and continuing with Churchill's United States of Europe, the European Union project and its architects had sought to secure peace and prosperity on the continent through the concept of unity. This drive for unity manifested itself very differently from one country to another and there were many differences of opinion regarding the principles that might help internalize it. As argued by Tombs, Britain has never quite succeeded to internalize the European project due to its very particular history during the 20th century. Thus, this might constitute the main reason why Britain was less concerned with the consequences brought by Brexit. (Tombs, 2018)

Moreover, Britain appeared to detach itself from post-war efforts to foster European unity and did not perceive it as a necessary requirement for obtaining peace and progress. On the contrary, its application for membership of the European Economic Community was a tacit and convenient agreement, a move determined by obvious financial concerns rather than an expression of attachment to European goals or a decision made out of concern for Europe's future. This lack of enthusiasm was reflected in political discourses and British media prior and post accession. Although Churchill played a great role in Franco-German post-war reconciliation that later led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community, he did not cease to emphasize the British national sovereignty by stating that "...we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed." (Churchill, 1930)

The fact that the British EC accession had a very practical dimension that contained almost no emotional commitment can be clearly seen from the way in which the accession subject was treated in the British press at the time. On January 1st 1973 *The Guardian* wrote with uncanny detachment "We're in-but without the fireworks. Britain passed peacefully into Europe at midnight last night without any special celebration. It was difficult to tell that anything of importance had occurred, and a date which will be entered in the history books as long as histories of Britain are written, was taken by most people as a matter of course." (Mckie and Barker, 1973)

The British long march towards Europe included two failed attempts in 1963 and 1967 and was marked by Britain's inability to decide whether it should keep its close ties with USA or join the European bloc. When eventually Britain decided to join the EEC, it retained its special connection with the USA. According to Churchill, maintaining this tight connection should represent a priority for the British government in foreign affairs and this position has been later adopted by Thatcher, Blair and to a certain degree even by the current PM, Theresa May. (Troitino, 2018)

Keeping its pragmatic stance, Britain sought to secure for itself a privileged position within EEC and later within EU by managing to opt out of the European Monetary System, the Eurozone and Schengen, enjoying several opt-outs in the areas of justice, security and freedom as well. Moreover, Britain's opt-outs were never simple demands that emanated from its member state position but elaborated conditioning plans as it was the case in 1992 when its decision to opt out

of the third stage of the European economic and monetary union was conditioned by its adoption of the Maastricht Treaty. (D'Addona, 2013)

The current study attempts to identify the reasons why the state with the most opt-outs in the EU, to which the EU legislation applies selectively, would leave all its privileges in the hands of a popular vote. Why would Britain trade its “special status” gained through decades of exceptional diplomatic efforts for a public decision heavily influenced by brutal domestic politics and “Leave” campaigns that took advantage of a very unfortunate EU context?

In order to answer this question we will focus our analysis on emphasizing the differences and similarities between the two British referendums (1975, 2016) while drawing parallels between the arguments that the two Prime Ministers at the time (Harold Wilson and David Cameron) used for granting the British citizens the right to decide upon leaving or remaining within EU.

Contrasts and similarities between the 1975 and 2016 British referendums on membership

Although a latecomer to the European club, Britain has immediately displayed a rather transactional attitude towards it. This had led many to believe that its EC membership was nothing more than a practical method of imposing its own will from within. In February 1974 the Labour's election manifesto asked for a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of entry:

“Britain is a European nation and a Labour Britain would always seek a wider co-operation between the European peoples. But a profound political mistake made by the Heath Government was to accept the terms of entry to the Common Market, and to take us in without the consent of the British people. This has involved the imposition of food taxes on top of rising world prices, crippling fresh burdens on our balance of payments, and a draconian curtailment of the power of the British Parliament to settle questions affecting vital British interests. This is why a Labour Government will immediately seek a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of entry.” (Politicsresources.net, 2018)

Britain did not organize a referendum when it decided to join NATO and EEC or when it became the third state in the world to gain the atomic bomb. All these foreign policy decisions were safely delegated to the Cabinet government answerable to Parliament and were not

considered to be issues that should be submitted to a popular vote. Yet, after only two years of joining EEC, Britain decided to organize in 1975 its first referendum on membership.

By this time, many Brits were dissatisfied with different aspects of Britain's EEC membership which in their opinion marked the erosion of national sovereignty and an inescapable road towards federalism. At the same time, Britain had been severely hit by the 1973-1974 oil crisis coupled with a double-digit inflation and the coal miner's strike which led to the so called "three day week", a government measure meant to drastically reduce power consumption. However, the result of the 1975 referendum was clearly in favor of remaining within the Common Market with seventeen million votes for "Remain" and only eight million votes for "Leave". Even Margret Thatcher, which would be later considered the "spiritual mother" of British euroscepticism, was in favor of remaining within.

Back in 1973-1975, the unfavorable domestic economic and political conditions had a double-edge effect on the referendum vote and analyzing them is crucial for understanding the outcome of the 1975 British referendum. On the one hand, the fact that the country was experiencing its worst crisis since the Second World War, triggered discontent among numerous British political figures that easily blamed EEC membership for this economic decline. The Labour's left wing (which included the current famous Brexiter Jeremy Corbyn), led at that time by Tony Benn saw the EEC as a capitalist club that would increase the level of unemployment and would destroy British economy. (Wheeler, 2016)

On the other hand, the anxiety created by this crisis warned that leaving the EEC might have disastrous repercussions for the British economy which will no longer have access to the market. Therefore, probably one of the loudest arguments in favor of remaining during the 1975 referendum was the fact that Britain had no other viable alternative to stop its economic decline but to continue its redevelopment plans within the European economic environment. Although there was no certainty that British economy will prosper within EEC, remaining inside the community appeared to be for many Brits the only rational choice. Moreover, after experiencing only two years of membership the British population could not draw yet a conclusion on whether continuing as a member would be beneficial or not for them and had to rely on the information provided by the political elite.

Since 1973 British electorate remained the most Eurosceptic electorate in the EU. In the early 1980s, Labour pledged once again for withdrawal. During the 1990s Margaret Thatcher, already a

well-known figure in British politics, reinforced the British Euroscepticism by stressing (in her now famous Bruges speech) EU's extreme interference in Britain's domestic policy. It was during this time that Tories pledged for a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty replacing Labour as the main British eurosceptic party. Starting with 2000 a new generation of eurosceptic Conservative MPs is elected to Parliament while political campaigns and petitions are asking for an in-out referendum to be organized. By this time, the level of British euroscepticism had significantly increased and when PM David Cameron delivered his famous Bloomberg speech on January 2013, he promised to finally settle the EU membership question by promising a renegotiation and a referendum given his party will triumph after the elections. Thus, over a forty-year period there has been considerable continuity regarding Britain's position within EU and in 2016 the level of British Euroscepticism reached again a critical stage opening the possibility of a new referendum.

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and Cameron entered the history as the prime minister who took Britain out of EU. Although there was a narrow margin between the two votes, "Leave" won by 51.9% to 48.1%. Immediately after the vote the British Prime Minister announced his resignation, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced that Scotland intends to pledge for a second independence referendum and the pound fell to its lowest level against the dollar since 1985. Although it should have not, the Brexit result came as a surprise even for the "Leave" side which admitted not having a post-Brexit plan. As Troitino observed, "The Brexit vote was clearly a vote against the status quo. What is less clear is what it was a vote for." (Troitino, 2018)

Looking back at the British history, we can observe how opinions based on past experiences were tempered or accentuated by different on-going crises and by the manner in which they were interpreted by trusted political leaders. (Towel, 2017) The 2016 referendum occurred during a period when EU was facing numerous crisis: the financial crisis that started in 2008, the Eurozone crisis that started in 2010, the Ukrainian crisis that started in 2014, the "Greek crisis" and the "refugee crisis" both since 2015, the rising tides of Euroscepticism within the member states coupled with the growing popularity of the extremist parties. (Wodak, 2016) It is thus safe to assume that all the insecurity experienced within this time frame had a strong impact on the British referendum vote.

As argued by Smith, comparing the 1975 referendum with the 2016 one is a very difficult task since the political and economic transformations that happened during this time frame have placed Britain on a totally different position. In 1975 the European Community was less prominent as a global actor and less institutionalized. EU has drastically changed meanwhile and so did the other UK's spheres of interest. A "Leave" vote back then would have meant a returning to a known alternative whereas now Britain has literally stepped into unknown. (Smith, 2016)

Analyzing the 1975 referendum we cannot help but wonder whether it indeed set a dangerous precedent serving as an inspiration for Cameron's decision. There is also the question whether the actual result of the 2016 referendum would have been the same if this was the first national plebiscite regarding EU membership in the British history. Furthermore, Brexit itself created a dangerous precedent within the EU and this prompts the question of whether there would be other countries that would like to leave EU in the future. In other words, who is to be blamed for fighting this expensive battle? Would this remain in the British history as a terrible miscalculation, a historical deception or as the day when British people took Britain back?

In order to answer these questions, we will center our analysis on several pivotal elements that came into play at the time when the two referendums were held. Firstly, this comparative synthesis would look at the motivation that each PM had in order to initiate renegotiations and later pledge for referendums. Secondly, we will compare the two referendum campaigns by examining several forces that shaped the decisions of the British voters such as: the immigration issue, the national sovereignty issue and the role played by the media during referendum campaign.

Renegotiation of EEC/EU Membership and referendums

According to Butler and Kitzinger, "referendums are imperfect devices for making basic decisions about the direction in which a country should move." (Butler and Kitzinger, 1996) When there is a great disagreement within a party coalition regarding the desired direction, this "imperfect device" becomes a political tool that mediates between parties assuring an instant boost of popularity and legitimacy. Thus, as Dennis Kavanagh concluded, "referendums have more to do with political expediency than constitutional principle or democracy". (Dennis, 1996)

The Labour administration that replaced Heath's government in 1974 had very heterogeneous views regarding EEC membership, a fact that determined the newly elected PM at that time, Harold Wilson, to promise his colleagues that he will renegotiate the terms of membership and make them

the subject of a national referendum. More than four decades later, David Cameron would repeat the same offer but with a very different outcome. (Saunders, 2018) The renegotiation process initiated by Prime Minister Harold Wilson had very clear objectives (see Table 1). Namely, he wished not to reform the EC but to create an opportunity for his Eurosceptic party members to reconsider their opinions. (Saunders, 2016) His demands were focused mainly on economic issues that were considered to be disadvantageous for UK.

Table 1. Britain’s renegotiation agenda under Harold Wilson and David Cameron

Harold Wilson’s areas of reform	David Cameron’s areas of reform
The Common Agricultural Policy	Powers flowing away from Brussels, not always to it
The UK contribution to the EEC Budget	National parliaments able to work together to block unwanted EU legislation
The goal of Economic and Monetary Union	Businesses liberated from red tape
The harmonization of VAT	UK police forces and justice systems able to protect British citizens without interference from the European institutions
Parliamentary sovereignty in pursuing regional, industrial and fiscal policies	Free movement to take up work, not free benefits
	Removing the concept of “ever closer union”

Note. Data compiled by authors from David Cameron’s Bloomberg Speech in January 2013 and from Vaughne Miller, *The 1974-75 UK Renegotiation of EEC Membership and Referendum*, Briefing Paper, Number 7253, House of Commons Library, 13 July 2015.

Almost a mirror image of Wilson’s action, Cameron’s promises shared the same “party salvation” ideal but unlike his predecessor he put forward a set of objectives that were less specific and touched several areas: welfare and free movement, competitiveness, sovereignty and economic governance. (Williams Lea Group, 2016) As Sanders concluded, “where Wilson sought practical improvements that targeted specific grievances, Cameron was driven back onto the ‘theology’ of the EU, negotiating an opt-out from a commitment to ‘ever closer union’ that governments had always insisted was meaningless.” (Williams Lea Group, 2016, p.2)

Additionally, replicating Wilson's outcome proved to be a harder task for Cameron now with the development of the EEC with nine member states to today's EU of 28 states and the rise of social media. Hence, Cameron had to handle a much more hostile environment at home and abroad and could not afford to approach the renegotiation with Wilson's detachment.

Following negotiation in Brussels, both Prime Ministers returned home claiming that they have secured better deals for Britain hoping this will convince people to vote for remaining but this tactic had little success. Then as now, the economic issues were at the heart of the debate. However, in 2016 Britain was more prosper unlike EU, which was experiencing numerous crises that severely affected its economy.

If in 1975 at the heart of the referendum debate was people's fear of losing national sovereignty and their jobs coupled with the fear of increased prices, in 2016 there was a lot more to be feared. Probably one of the most salient issues that were debated during the 2016 debate was the immigration issue which was almost non-existent in 1975. The net migration from the EEC in 1975 was the equivalent of one-week migration from the EU in 2016. Leave campaigners and their media supporters have strongly exploited the issue describing this flow of persons as an uncontrollable invading force. Moreover, whereas Wilson's campaign was taking place in press and at the television, Cameron had to conduct the referendum campaign in a much more hostile media context with a higher level of engagement coming from the social media environment.

While the 2016 "Remain" campaign set its agenda on stressing the potential damaging effect on the British economy brought by a "Leave" vote, the "Remain" campaign started questioning the campaign leader's honesty and their actual motivation "by presenting the whole economic narrative as a cynical strategy to frighten people into voting for the status quo." (Moore and Ramsay, 2017) The British national mood has thus "gone from being worried about the future to being angry about the present." (Comfort, 2018)

Conclusions

The UK's relationship with EU has always been rocky and characterized by a series of shifting attitudes which gradually morphed into a contagious surge of Euroscepticism. Although not entirely a mirror image of Wilson's strategy, Cameron's decision to hold a referendum followed the same line of thinking but within a completely different political and economic context characterized by a myriad of issues that back in the 1970s. Wilson did not have to address.

Although comparison can be drawn between the 1975 and 2016 campaigns, the debate during 2016 campaign was far more complex and the decision to leave more consequential. As Brexit talks are touching key issues, the tensions during negotiations are increasing also suggesting that Britain will most probably have to leave the EU on rather acrimonious terms.

More than two years after Brexit, the British cabinet still has no clear direction regarding the deal it wants with EU but the general message both parties are conveying seems to tell us that at the moment there is definitely no time for “bregrets”. Additionally, all the hope that was invested in May’s ability to negotiate a convenient trade agreement with the EU seems to slowly fade away especially after the recent EU summit in Salzburg. May’s refusal to give up on her Chequers Brexit plan coupled with the intransigency of the European side had deepened the gap between the two sides which most probably will result in a hard Brexit with no deal reached until the October EU summit. The pressure that came from the trade unions and left-wing activists determined Jeremy Corbyn, Labour leader, to commit to a second referendum focused on the deal rather than on repeating the 2016 question of remaining or leaving the EU. The question of organizing new elections that would change entirely the British negotiation team has been also brought into discussion as an alternative preferred by Corbyn (Heffron, 2018). On the 12 September the State of the Union address, President Jean-Claude Juncker stressed that “the remaining EU member states ask the British government to understand that someone who leaves the Union cannot be in the same privileged position as a Member State. If you leave the Union, you are of course no longer part of our single market, and certainly not only in the parts of it you choose.” (Juncker, 2018) The only sensible alternative to a no deal Brexit is no Brexit at all. Similarly, there cannot be more or less Brexit, it can only be done or undone.

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