

Why we are all Eurosceptic now

Richard Rose admires the clarity in which Europe's growing antipathies to integration are outlined



Understanding Euroscepticism
By Cécile Leconte
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Britain is no longer alone in being Eurosceptic, as this important book by a French political scientist demonstrates. Indeed, in one way or another, every country is Eurosceptic nowadays. This does not mean that there is a desire to break up the European Union. Instead, there is a demand to look before taking another leap towards greater European integration.

In the original Greek sense, scepticism is a way of thinking that does not accept a priori the validity of any belief or opinion; all claims should first be subject to critical examination. With the EU in existence for more than half a century, there is lots of experience that can be examined in order to

see how well its different policies and institutions work. Euroscepticism is not only the opposite of endorsing policies because of an ideological commitment to an ever-closer union; but also of the dogmatic rejection of every new EU policy because of faith in a notion of sovereignty that is no longer practicable in a world of interdependencies.

With French clarity, Leconte distinguishes the main types of Euroscepticism. Utilitarian Euroscepticism involves a national government asking whether a proposed EU policy brings greater benefits than costs to the country. Political Euroscepticism rejects symbols of integration, such as placing the EU flag on national documents, and regards the “democratic deficit” arising from the power of unaccountable Eurocrats as an argument against further integration. Identity-based or cultural Euroscepticism stresses

the fact that member states of the EU differ in their histories and in many values and interests. “Soft Euroscepticism” has much in common with British empiricism and, among other things, justifies the UK’s decision not to become a founder member of the Eurozone because of the lack of advance information about its benefits and costs.

Experience to date supports political Euroscepticism: the Eurozone lacks the sanctions to maintain an effective monetary and fiscal policy. In contrast, “hard Euroscepticism” threatens to ossify into dogmatic opposition to all further steps toward integration. Value-laden statements such as “We won the war” become justifications for refusing to make utilitarian and political evaluations on the basis of 65 years of post-war experience. The statement that “they are not like us” can be supported by reference to history, but is hardly relevant to assessing EU directives about what information must appear on a box of cornflakes.

The relevance of Euroscepticism is ongoing, but it varies with the context. Leconte uses her familiarity with debates in France and Germany, as well as in Britain and Brussels, to demonstrate this point, and considers how elites first became converted to Europe as an ideal and subsequently incorporated utilitarian and political Euroscepticism in their approach to Brussels. Public opinion, the media and civil society have also played a part.

Support for Euroscepticism has also varied over time. The Benelux countries were the original Eurosceptics, fearful that the Schuman Plan and the founding of the European Community would lead to Franco-German dominance.

Charles de Gaulle sought to limit the supranational power of the Community through the French boycott of its councils in the 1960s. In the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher strongly supported the single European market on value-laden and utilitarian grounds. This was followed by her Bruges speech, a rejection of moves to promote a European polity in parallel with a European economy. Today, the German Constitutional Court indicates that in case of conflict, German laws should be superior

to EU directives because the EU is insufficiently democratic, while German Social Democrats question decisions of the European Court of Justice that challenge their social market rules and regulations. Concurrently, French president Nicolas Sarkozy promotes EU initiatives when it suits his political interests, while effectively vetoing Turkey’s membership by threatening to subject it to a French referendum.

The mainstreaming of Euroscepticism in governing parties has strengthened anti-integration sentiments in the EU Council of Ministers, while draining single-issue parties such as UKIP of support. Concurrently, the tricks used to secure endorsement of the Lisbon Treaty have left the pro-integrationists with little political capital to sustain further integration.

This book does more than demonstrate that, when it comes to the EU, “we are all Thatcherites now”. It also shows that Thatcher is, like it or not, now a citizen of the EU as well as Britain, because the failure of hard Eurosceptics to come up with a viable alternative to the EU means, to use one of her favourite phrases, “There is no alternative.”

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