

Conservative Euroscepticism: The Etiology of an Obsession

Written by Tim Bale

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TIM BALE, NOV 15 2012

Certain politicians, even after they are long gone, carry on attracting reverence and revulsion in equal measure. The British politician, Enoch Powell, is definitely one of them. On the economy he was a Thatcherite before Thatcher. On Europe, he was a Eurosceptic before the term was ever invented. But it wasn't his stances on those questions that made him a hero to some and a villain to others.

What guaranteed Powell a place in the history books were his forthright views on multiculturalism and mass immigration, particularly as they were expressed in his so-called Rivers of Blood speech that saw him summarily sacked as a member of the Conservative Party's Shadow Cabinet in the spring of 1968 and effectively ensured that his own political career conformed to the rule that he himself made famous, namely that 'All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs' (Powell, 1977, p. 151).

In the course of that (in)famous speech, Powell employed an aphorism often (if wrongly) attributed to the Greek playwright, Euripedes. 'Those whom the gods wish to destroy,' he intoned, 'they first make mad.' His intention was to warn his fellow countrymen that, by failing to pull up the drawbridge to new arrivals from their former colonies, they were virtually guaranteeing that the racial tensions then exploding across the Atlantic would eventually explode – to even more devastating effect, he claimed – back in Britain. Getting on for half a century later, however, that same phrase can be dusted off and pressed into service in order to highlight the existential risk posed to the Conservative Party by its obsession with 'Europe'.

In some ways, of course, to do that would be to beg the question. So consuming is that obsession that we now take it for granted – as a given. Yet, it wasn't always thus. True, the Tory Prime Minister who in 1973 first took the UK into what is now the EU, Ted Heath, was forced to rely on the votes of Labour MPs in order to pass the legislation required to make it happen. Yet once entry was secured, and for over a decade before it was secured, the Conservative Party was – for the most part proudly – the 'party of Europe'. Even Margaret Thatcher, speaking as Prime Minister in 1983, made it clear that, although her government would always 'fight tenaciously for British interests' in Brussels, 'we are not half-hearted members....We are in, and we are in to stay.'

The slippery slope to addiction

Things changed for several reasons – some to do with the Conservatives themselves, some to do with the way the EU itself developed, and some to do with both. Underlying everything, however, is the fact that, after a period in the seventies and early eighties where nothing much happened, European integration started to accelerate once again just as the Conservative Party was falling hopelessly in love with a distinctly American, liberal model of capitalism whose stress on deregulation and creative destruction has long stood in stark contrast to the supposedly sclerotic version popular on 'the continent' – an entity to which Britain, apparently, has never really belonged.

Perhaps it wasn't so blindingly obvious back in the early-to-mid-1990s. But maybe we should still have realised what was happening. Thatcher, after all, had already turned on Major – the man she had originally settled on as a worthy

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successor. Meanwhile, nostalgia (both at Westminster and at the Party's grassroots) for the ideological certainties she supplied, and the electoral successes she delivered before her defenestration in 1990 by her own parliamentary party, was already beginning to ensure that the latter would – eventually anyway – be populated almost entirely by true believers rather than the prosaic pragmatists who had previously constituted its centre of gravity. That transformation, when combined with the eurozone's increasingly urgent need to make economic and monetary union a tangible reality rather than a simple aspiration, has seen Euroscepticism assume an unstoppable logic all its own.

Part of the pragmatism that previously pertained in the Conservative Party was a loyalty to leaders, albeit one qualified by the sure and certain knowledge that they would rapidly pay the price should they fail to achieve electoral success. Although that loyalty had been eroding since the seventies – challenged not just by Heath's European vocation but also by his u-turns away from the proto-Thatcherite agenda on which the Party had fought the 1970 election – it had actually held up reasonably well throughout the 1980s. All that changed with the Maastricht Treaty. When it was first brought back to Britain by the then Prime Minister, John Major, it was hailed as a Tory triumph, but then came the UK's ignominious exit from the ERM and the seemingly endless rebellions on its ratification. Voting against Maastricht, it turns out, was the political equivalent of cannabis – a soft 'gateway' drug that set the Conservative Party on the road to the hard stuff to which it is now utterly addicted.

Of course there are some who still think they can handle it – there always are. But the evidence is beginning to build up that this is no longer the case. More and more Tories who started out objecting to specific aspects of the UK's membership of the EU are now convinced that the country should stop paying its subs altogether. All they can think of now is where they're going to get their next fix and some of them, as they proved a couple of weeks ago in a vote on the EU's budget, are even prepared to rob their party leader and prime minister, if only (for the moment at least) of his dignity, in order to score.

The problem is, like many addicts, the more they use, the more they need. What would have guaranteed them a high a few years back – a pat on the back in the constituency the weekend after a sceptical speech in the House, an approving mention or maybe even an op-ed piece in a Tory-supporting newspaper, and a dissenting vote on a symbolic but ultimately inconsequential parliamentary motion – no longer does the business. Now they need a bigger hit.

Voting with the Labour opposition against their own government in sufficient numbers to embarrass it and supposedly strengthen its negotiating stance in Brussels will only satisfy them temporarily. Sooner or later, they will be looking to inflict a defeat on a piece of legislation – possibly budgetary, possibly something else – in order to satisfy their constant craving. Eventually, unless the leadership gives way and gives into their demand for an in-out referendum, some of them may even go so far as to fail to support it on a confidence motion. Hard to believe, of course. But it wouldn't be the first time that what began as a cry for help accidentally resulted in actual suicide.

Why the shenanigans are serious

From the outside, and especially to those who are more interested in international relations than day-to-day politics, all this parliamentary game-playing can seem myopic, pathetic even. But sometimes domestic violence can be deadly serious. Had David Cameron faced down those in his party who believe that Britain would be 'better off out' before he became Prime Minister, things might – just might – have been different. But, partly because he himself is a Eurosceptic and partly because picking big fights with his own supporters has never been his style, he didn't and they aren't.

Consequently, we now have a fundamental mismatch between the ideology of one of the UK's two main parties – the one that happens to run the country at the moment – and what for decades has been assumed to be in the national interest, namely continued (if somewhat grudging and wary) participation in a collective European project to institutionalise and spread democracy, the rule of law and market capitalism from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the Barents to the Balkans and the Mediterranean Sea.

Unless that mismatch is confronted, or unless that confrontation can somehow be avoided by the election of a less

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ideologically-driven, Labour government in (or before) 2015, the UK will cease to play an active part in that project. Previously, that possibility might have worried some of its fellow member states sufficiently to give them pause for thought about the speed and the scope of their plans. Not many of those who are well-connected in Berlin, Paris and other European capitals now believe that any more.

Germany, France and the rest have been prepared to put up with the lectures from Blair and Brown in order to keep Britain on the bus. But the idea that they will let it ride for free – essentially the argument of those Tories who, like Cameron, are convinced that they can renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU – seems increasingly far-fetched. Fine, say the Conservative better-off-outters. We'll get out and walk for a bit, maybe catch up with Norway and Switzerland, and then hitch a ride with our old friends the Americans and our new friends, China, and India, and Brazil.

A hundred or so miles down the road – a hundred or so years into the future – maybe. But, right now, it still looks pretty cold and wet and dark out there. In their heart of hearts most British voters probably realise this, even if they don't like it very much. There are still some Conservatives who, more or less reluctantly, realise this and think that an in-out referendum risks ripping the Party apart for no good reason. But there are many others who do not.

Whether that blinkered attitude really qualifies as madness, or simply means that they are misguided, is a moot point. But the coming conflict between the two groups – between those Conservatives who will push things to the limit but then pull back at the last minute and those for whom no such limit now exists – could indeed destroy, or at least disable, the Party they both purport to love. How much damage it could also do to the country is anyone's guess.

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Tim Bale is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. He specialises in both British and European Party Politics. He is the author of *The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron* and his new book, *The Conservatives since 1945: the Drivers of Party Change* has just been published by Oxford University Press. He has written for the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times* and occasionally tweets @ProfTimBale.

Reference

Powell, J. E. (1977). *Joseph Chamberlain*. Thames and Hudson.

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