

## UK'S POPULATION SWINGING POSITION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

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**B**y the time of the arrival of the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher, UK business and finance elites were quite positive towards EC membership, and many of them came from the Conservative rows. However, with a very anti-European Speech of Mrs Thatcher in Bruges, in 1988, the first serious cleavages towards European matters appeared among Conservatives.

Since then, an average of UK population and its leaders have continued to welcome economical advantages but abhorred a more political Europe, and opposed decisions taken by the EU in fields of education, culture, social welfare, defense and foreign policy and on immigration or currency. All fields where Britons think that their country might lose sovereignty. However, fighting terrorism, protecting the environment, scientific and technological research, support for other regions of Europe and energy matters, are fields where they agree willingly that decisions be taken jointly among Member States within the EU.

Positive opinions towards EEC policies was at its highest (EB-average of 57% thinking that UK membership is a good thing) when the preparation and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, at the beginning of 1992, by John Major's government, ruined definitively the support. Despite the UK opt outs on the social dimension and common currency, the EU was only considered onwards as the "super-state trying to exercise a new dominance from Brussels", mostly because the larger important decisions susceptible to be taken at the majority. The Murdoch press, obsessively anti-European, contributed much to this state of affairs.

The year 1991 is a breakdown point for support of the EU among citizens of all Member States. The "diffuse consensus" was damaged in several sectors of the population and it has not yet been fully recovered since then. Besides the shock of the Gulf War, several of the twelve Member States of the time, entered an important economical crisis. European citizens were scared and reported their fears on the European Community. The Single Act of 1987 had been largely accepted and a deeper economical market was announced for the end of 1992, but the insisting proposals by some countries for a more political Europe and the preparations for the implementation of the euro, originated mistrust. The Maastricht Treaty, did not reverse these attitudes in the UK, on the contrary, negative trends increased highly and positive feelings decreased to 35% (EB data) until 1996. However, positive opinions in the other eleven member countries started to recover.

At the end of the nineties, the change to a Labor Government led by Tony Blair,

made think that a larger support to the EU could be attained in the UK. The Prime Minister itself made a "point d'honneur" to reverse opinion on the EU and even to reach a consensus on the adoption of the euro.

This was without counting with the deadly effects of the Murdoch's popular tabloid's press (and to a certain extent the tabloids of the Mirror Group) which had much influence on British public opinion. During the electoral campaign, Murdoch, who had been supportive of the Conservatives and Mrs. Thatcher, switched his support to the Labour party and its leader. The closeness of his relationship with Blair and their secret meetings to discuss national policies was to become a political issue in Britain. But this later changed completely, with *The Sun*, the *Sunday Times* and even *The Times*, publicly renouncing the ruling Labour government and fighting with all kinds of fallacious arguments the European Union policies and the European common currency, the euro. Lately, the support of the Murdoch anti-European press to the Conservatives contributed greatly to the election David Cameron.

On January 2013 (positive feelings are now held by only 26% in the EB), pushed by the hardest wing of the Tories, despite the coalition with the moderate pro European UK Liberal Democrats, and also because the increasing success of the UKIP, the openly declared right wing anti-European party, the British Prime Minister said he wanted to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU and give people the "simple choice" between staying in under new terms, or leaving the EU. He would then convene a referendum in 2017 if he was reelected in 2015.

What has changed now from the situation in Mrs Thatcher's times ?

- The Conservative party, with a relative majority one must say, won the elections with European skepticism and a membership referendum on its electoral program. The party has now a competitor on the right, the UKIP, that wins electors with anti-European arguments. David Cameron had to take some action to calm down his own party and stop the raising of the UKIP.
- The Murdoch press, as well as the Mirror Group, have got thin on top after the heavy scandals that have led to the closing down of one title, *News of the World*, for the first and to the arrest of four of its executive members for the second. The issue of the referendum is perhaps less dependent on the choices of the tabloids.
- British economical and financial affairs sector, traditionally EU supportive, are now more likely to be skeptical or unsure about whether the current level of integration in the European Union (EU) is beneficial to their company's prospects. Support for the UK entry into the eurozone is now at its lowest among business. They have better far reaching prospects in non-EU Members. A simplest "European Free trade Area" becomes more attractive.
- In November 2012, surveys showed around 56 % wanting to quit the EU. But in January 2013, exactly 50% said they favoured a UK exit, but of those 43% said they would consider switching to the "yes" camp if significant powers were returned.
- Last, but not least: shall David Cameron be reelected in 2015? On a partial election in Eastleigh, on March 1st, the Conservatives who had many cards to win, were relegated to 3rd rank after the UKIP. The Conservatives have been creating discontent with austerity measures and major budget cuts. Polls give the Tories 33% of the votes if an election was hold now, with Labour at 39%, the Liberal Democrats up two at 11%. UKIP, which has registered significant advances in recent months, fell back four points to 10%.

All in all, public opinion in the UK, as elsewhere, can swing according to domestic policy agendas that are increasingly volatile, and it is a risky exercise to take one position for granted. This is why, among other reasons, calling for a referendum asking the Britons if they prefer to stay or quit the EU, with conditions, can become a tricky exercise.