

Brexit will not mean an end to Tory divisions on Europe

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Divisions within the Conservative Party were one of the key underlying reasons behind David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on EU membership. As [Sean Swan](#) writes, however, the decision to leave the EU on 23 June is unlikely to put the issue to rest. He argues that even once disagreements over how to implement Brexit have been resolved, there will be a continued divide within the party over how the UK should engage with the rest of Europe in the coming decades.

Until Brexit, referendums had gone fairly well for David Cameron. The Lib Dems entered coalition in 2010 on the promise of a referendum on electoral reform. What they got was a referendum offering the Alternative Vote, something which being neither First Past the Post nor Proportional Representation was loved by nobody and failed to pass.

Cameron was also successful with regard to the Scottish independence referendum. He got the Scottish government to agree to the [two option](#) ballot rather than the three options favoured by the Scots – which polls indicated was likely to produce a pro-independence result. In both these cases Cameron was on safe Conservative ground and could deliver a united party. More importantly, he won. Europe was a different matter.

Brexit: A history of Tory divisions

Tory divisions on Europe first became serious under John Major and his difficulties with the Eurosceptic '[bastards](#)' in his Cabinet. Political euroscepticism was confined to the Conservative party until the mid-1990s and the founding of first UKIP and then the Referendum Party. The Referendum Party's contesting of the 1997 general election played some part in the defeat of the Conservatives in that election – which was probably one of the reasons James Goldsmith founded the party in the first place. Goldsmith died in 1997 and the Referendum Party failed to outlive him, but UKIP endured.

Euroscepticism was part of what made the Tories unelectable for the following decade. Perhaps significantly, it was Theresa May who, [in 2002](#), coined the term 'the nasty party' and condemned the Tories' 'demonising' of minorities. When Cameron was elected leader in 2005, he embarked upon a Blair-like effort to rebrand the Tories as environmentally friendly and socially liberal. But external events were providing fertile ground for an upsurge in popular Euroscepticism. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the invasion of Iraq made Islamophobia semi-respectable, facilitating the resurgence of the far-right. The Labour Government's decision to allow immediate free movement for the ten new EU member states in 2004 also caused large scale EU migration; and the Great Recession of 2008 onwards turned economic conditions arctic.

The BNP won two seats in the 2009 European Parliament elections and UKIP surged to second place behind the Tories. UKIP also performed unexpectedly well in a string of by-elections in 2011 and 2012. In the February 2013 Eastleigh by-election, the Conservatives were beaten into third place behind the Lib Dems and UKIP, leading to [Cameron's leadership](#) being called into question.

In January 2013 following the failure of a Tory Private Members Bill on holding a referendum on EU membership, Cameron announced that if the Conservatives were elected in 2015 they would renegotiate Britain's relationship with the EU then [hold a referendum](#) on this new relationship by 2017. Despite this, two Tory MPs defected to UKIP in 2014 and in the 2015 general election UKIP's share of the popular vote jumped to 12.7% having been only 3.1% in the previous election. Meanwhile the fuel for xenophobia and thus broad Euroscepticism kept mounting – the refugee crisis, the terrorist attacks in Paris and Belgium, the New Year sex assaults in Cologne, and ongoing economic austerity.

The promised negotiations with the EU yielded only some **limited reforms**. But Cameron declared himself satisfied, set a date for the referendum and urged a Remain vote. Had Cameron won the referendum he would have shot UKIP's fox and largely silenced his own Eurosceptic wing. But Cameron **failed**. Ultimately he could deliver neither his party, Tory voters (**58% of whom** voted for Brexit) nor, more importantly, the country.

Squaring the circle

The substantive Eurosceptic issue, British membership of the EU, UKIP's very *raison d'être*, is now resolved and Nigel Farage, **mission accomplished**, has resigned. Even many Tories who had supported Remain have accepted the referendum result and now **loudly proclaim** themselves to be Brexiteers. The problem is that EU membership was largely symbolic of other issues such as migration – aggravated by **austerity** – and sovereignty. And, as will begin to dawn on Eurosceptic voters, Brexit provides no easy resolution of these issues.

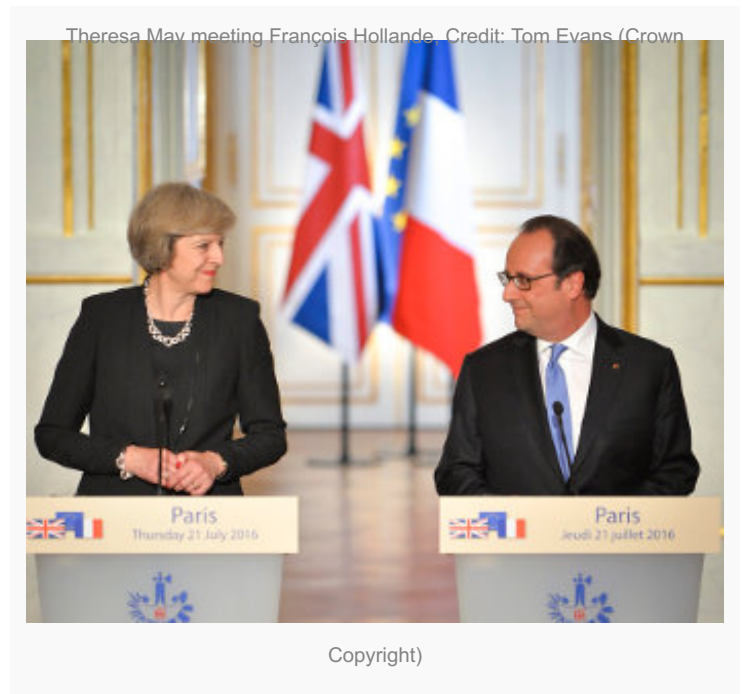
Britain needs access to the single market. The obvious solution is some form of continued membership of the EEA – the 'Norway model'. However, membership of the EEA, or any form of access to the single market, means accepting the 'four freedoms' of free movement of goods, capital, services and labour. This means continued migration. It also means abiding by the rules of that market – and those rules are set by the EU. This is what Norwegians call '**fax democracy**'.

Cameron knew the circle that must be squared: Britain needs access to the single market, but the Brexit vote was driven largely by anti-migration sentiment. On 28 June at the first post-Brexit meeting of the European Council, Cameron stated that in any new deal Britain would have to be given **more control** over migration. The previous day Jeremy Hunt had **argued** for a 'Norway plus' deal – "full access to the single market with a sensible compromise on free movement". Hunt also advocated not invoking Article 50 until a deal had been reached. This is wise because getting EU agreement for such a deal will not be easy. Mere days after Cameron argued for more control over migration the **EU told** the Swiss they could not have access to the single market without free movement – despite their own referendum result on this topic.

A long leadership battle would have been divisive. That danger has now passed and Theresa May claims to have taken on board the lessons of the referendum. She has been adamant that Brexit means Brexit, that Article 50 will **not be** triggered until Britain has a clear sense of what the deal to leave will consist of **and that** "free movement cannot continue as it has done up till now".

Her intent is to unify the country and the party. Her comments on policies such as introducing worker directors are intriguing, but will not pacify an alienated working-class unless there are real material improvements in job security, services and employment. Nor will her commitment to Brexit reconcile pro-EU Scotland. Even Tory party divisions may reopen when it comes to negotiations on access to the single market. The potential future fault line within the Conservatives is between pragmatists who have accepted the referendum result but want a Brexit that is less damaging to the British economy, and fundamentalist Brexiteers who just want an end to EU migration – regardless of the economic consequences.

Donald Tusk has **made it clear** – it is a choice between access to the single market *or* controls on free movement. The UK cannot have both. Brexit or no Brexit, Europe – and the question of British relations with it, including



migration – has not gone away.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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