

Five minutes with Peter Kellner: “History could repeat itself in a British referendum on EU membership”

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If there were to be a referendum held on the UK's membership of the European Union, how would British citizens vote? EUROPP's Managing Editor Stuart Brown spoke to [Peter Kellner](#), President of YouGov, about current polling trends, the lessons from previous UK referendums, and the factors, such as David Cameron's plan to renegotiate the UK's membership, which might have a significant impact on the result.



The general consensus is that if a referendum on Britain's EU membership were to be held today, the UK would vote to leave. Is there any reason for optimism for those who support staying in?

Our latest YouGov poll, conducted earlier this month, actually found it split – 39 per cent in favour of staying in the EU and 39 per cent in favour of leaving. This is the third time in two years that this question, which we ask every three to four weeks, has been tied. Normally, we find that more people say they would vote to leave than to stay in the EU.

There are two interesting observations about what's happening now. The first is that the two previous occasions where the 'leave' camp lost its lead were a short-term response to very specific events. One was just less than two years ago where, at a dramatic European Council meeting in Brussels, David Cameron vetoed an EU-wide deal to help tackle the Eurozone crisis. The other was earlier this year, when he delivered his speech saying that there would be a referendum on the UK's EU membership, should he win a majority at the next election. However, as soon as those stories were no longer at the top of the news agenda, the 'leave' camp resumed their lead.

This time, it's different. There's no one specific short event that's moved public opinion. There's also, therefore, no particular reason why it should revert back. It could have been sample fluctuation and it may well be that the next poll will show a narrow lead for the 'leave' camp, but it does look as if there's been a slight sustained decrease of support for leaving the EU.

This leads on to the second point. If you look at the polls we conducted last year, in every single poll the 'leave' camp led by 10 points or more – a double-digit lead. The average over the year was 48 per cent saying that the UK should exit the EU, 32 per cent saying it should stay in, and 20 per cent saying they wouldn't vote or didn't know. Now, if you move past David Cameron's January speech and look at the figures since February, the majority of the polls since then have only had a single-digit lead for the 'leave' camp. Since August, we haven't had any polls with a double-digit lead, so it does look as if there is a slight, slow underlying trend towards staying in the EU as opposed to getting out.

The other reason for optimism for pro-Europeans comes out of a question we started asking last year. It's a conditional question, along the lines of: "Supposing David Cameron renegotiates Britain's terms in the EU, comes back and says he feels he has secured Britain's interests and recommends a vote to stay in, how would you then vote?" When we ask this question we get a pretty consistent two to one majority for staying in the EU.

That is of course precisely what happened in the EU referendum in 1975. Some months before the referendum, there was a slight majority for leaving, but during the campaign Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who advocated staying in, 'renegotiated' Britain's terms of membership. When the vote finally came, there was a two to one majority for staying in. So it looks like history could (and I emphasise *could*) repeat itself.

An assumption in this discussion is that the referendum would only be held under a Conservative government. However it's possible that Labour could win the next election and choose – due to public pressure or some other factor – to hold their own referendum on EU membership. Would this have the potential to completely change the result?

There would be a big difference between the outlook of a Conservative-held referendum recommending a 'yes' vote (i.e. to stay in) and a Labour-held referendum. Let's think through the politics of the two scenarios. If there's a Conservative-held referendum, it would be because David Cameron has won the election and the leaders of Labour and the Liberal Democrats will recommend a 'yes' vote – so all three main parties will say 'stay in'.

The CBI and big business will say 'stay in'. And I think, with the exception of *The Daily Express*, the main Tory papers (*The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*) will either go along with this or be fairly muted in their objections. There certainly won't be a raucous newspaper campaign to leave the EU in those circumstances. And, in my judgement, people will either fear the consequences of leaving or take their direction from the party leaders and vote to stay in.

Now, the politics of a Labour referendum would be completely different. At the moment, the Labour leadership is saying that a proper case hasn't been laid out for a referendum, or that they wouldn't hold one in the way that the Conservatives would. This is a holding position and we don't really know where Labour will end up. Suppose however, for whatever reason, that Ed Miliband says that if there is a Labour government then it will also hold a referendum.

If they match the Conservative timetable, that would mean having it two years into the parliament in mid-term 2017. First, the very fact that Labour has won the election means the Conservatives have lost. If the Conservatives lose, David Cameron will either resign or be forced to step down. The new Conservative leader may well be a firm Eurosceptic, given previous experiences with Conservative leadership contests following an election defeat, such as the victory of Iain Duncan Smith in 2001.

In such a referendum the Conservative party may well tell its supporters and the country to leave. The Tory press will then, along with the Tory leadership, also swing behind the campaign to leave. What's more, my guess is that a Labour government, or indeed any government in this circumstance, will have to take some pretty tough decisions on taxes and public spending. So it may well be that a Labour government, by 2017, will be very unpopular.

What you then have is a referendum in which people are fed up with the government and there is a surge of Conservative party and press support for the 'leave' option. You will still see the business community saying it's a risk to leave, but I wouldn't be nearly as confident of a 'yes' majority. I think it's a real chance that, with a Labour-held referendum in 2017, there would be a majority for leaving the EU.

There is another possibility, which is that Ed Miliband could say that there will be a referendum, but that the country can't afford two years of uncertainty so it will be held straight away. There is a precedent for this in the referendum on devolution in Scotland held in 1997. Labour won the 1997 election in May and the Scottish vote was held in September. This is about as short a campaign as would be possible, as you would need some weeks to get the legislation through parliament and the summer break would be right in the middle.

So with a September 2015 referendum, Labour would still be in the 'honeymoon' period after the election, and would probably have not had to take any difficult economic decisions by that stage. The Conservatives might still be in the process of appointing a new leader, and could be experiencing a period of internal turmoil. In those circumstances, I think there's a much higher chance of a referendum producing a majority for staying in the EU.

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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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Peter Kellner is the President of the polling and market research agency YouGov. He was previously a journalist and political commentator for the *Sunday Times*, *Independent*, *New Statesman*, *Evening Standard*, *BBC Newsnight*, BBC election programmes, and *Channel 4 News*. He has been a member of the British Polling Council's Committee on Disclosure and an advisor on polls and public opinion to a range of public organisations and private enterprises.



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