

'Banging on about Europe': how the Eurosceptics got their referendum

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23/06/2016

*Brexit would be a 'self-inflicted wound', David Cameron declared this week. He should know about those, writes **Tim Bale**. He traces the Conservative rebellions that extracted successive concessions from the PM, to no avail – until he finally tried to appease his party's Eurosceptics by promising them a referendum.*



On Tuesday, we heard the Prime Minister give his final plea on why we should remain in the European Union, but if David Cameron ever truly believed he could stop his party 'banging on about Europe' when it finally got back to government, his hopes were dashed just months into his premiership. The first real sign of trouble began as early as October 2010 when there was a mini-rebellion by 37 Tory MPs on the UK's financial contribution to the EU, and things just went downhill from then on.



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Europe was always going to be an iceberg issue. Whether those Conservatives who continued to wind themselves up over it were Little Englanders, obsessed with 'sovereignty', or 'hyper-globalisers', more concerned with the corporatist constraints that were supposedly preventing the country fulfilling its free-trading destiny, Cameron in opposition had never dared to confront them head-on, hoping instead that he could shut them up by conceding some of what they wanted. As a consequence, those members of parliament (and of the party in the media) who wanted Britain out of the EU were pretty confident they could push him further when he got into Downing Street. They were absolutely right.

Cameron had hoped that the swift implementation of his pledge in opposition to legislate for an automatic referendum on any EU agreement which involved a 'significant' transfer of powers to Brussels would be enough to appease his Eurosceptics for the rest of the parliament. He could not have been more wrong. They had grown larger in number after the election, and grown more worried because of the evident and seemingly endless crisis in the Eurozone. And even those Tory MPs who, privately at least, sometimes wondered what all the fuss was about were under pressure from their constituency associations to show they cared.

On 24 October 2011, the Commons divided on a motion calling for an in–out referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, by which time the government had already faced 22 rebellions on Europe, involving over 60 Tory backbenchers in total, the biggest one attracting 37 dissenters. Still, no-one predicted quite how big the trouble

would be. After Cameron insisted on a three-line whip, arguing (not unreasonably) that without it the number of Tories voting for a referendum could go as high as 150, some 81 of his own MPs (49 of them from the 2010 intake and two on the government benches) defied him. This was, as Phil Cowley and Mark Stuart swiftly noted, 'double the size of the largest Maastricht revolt', and 'aside from the gun control rebellions faced by John Major in early 1997, ... the largest rebellion to hit a Conservative Prime Minister since 1945'.

The pressure eased a little a couple of months later when Cameron, at the December 2011 European Council meeting, vetoed the 'Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance', thereby forcing the vast majority of member states that wanted to go ahead with it to proceed instead with a non-Treaty agreement labelled the Fiscal Compact. The PM returned as some sort of hero, with the (temporary) boost the party received in the opinion polls further convincing Eurosceptics (assuming that they needed convincing) that ratcheting up the anti-Brussels rhetoric was the key to electoral success. Ultimately, however, instead of satisfying them, Cameron's stand only left them wanting more of the same.

This was especially the case after it became apparent that there was possibly less to his veto than met the eye and in the light of a ruling in January 2012 by the European Court of Human Rights (later circumnavigated) that Home Secretary Theresa May could not deport terrorist suspect Abu Qatada to Jordan. The ECHR was not, as sceptics knew full well, an EU institution, but its ability to override British sovereignty was, as far as they were concerned, all of a piece with Brussels and therefore grist to their mill – particularly once it became obvious that the leadership, pleading resistance from the Lib Dems, had booted their idea of a 'British Bill of Rights' well into the long grass. Meanwhile, the so-called 'Balance of Competences Review', supposedly set up to help the government redraw responsibilities between the UK and the EU, would, they predicted (rightly as it turned out), lead absolutely nowhere.

So it was that, by the spring of 2012, David Cameron, although not at that stage George Osborne, had all but come round to the idea – first mooted by William Hague – that, since the pressure from the parliamentary party for a referendum would sooner or later become unstoppable, it might be better to announce one pre-emptively. Such an announcement would also, it was hoped, spike UKIP's guns well before the next European Parliament elections. This was something everyone in the Party was desperate to do for fear that success for Nigel Farage in June 2014 – a success that transpired anyway, it turned out – would set him up nicely for the general election the following year.

So hints were dropped during the summer of 2012, but any commitment was still studiously avoided – even in the wake of a letter signed by 100 MPs at the end of June that year demanding legislation to pave the way for a referendum in the next parliament. The equivocation did nothing to improve the mood among Eurosceptics, 53 of whom decided at the end of October to send Cameron a crystal-clear message by defying a three-line whip and ganging up with Labour to defeat the government on an amendment demanding a cut in the EU's budget – something which, ironically, Cameron was able, with the help of other member states, to go on to deliver in early 2013.

Still, it was now patently obvious that the rebels would stop at nothing until they got what they wanted. In the third week of January 2013, having warned his European allies and key players in the business community, and taking care to make a strong, even optimistic, case for a reform rather than Brexit, Cameron made what became known (as a result of its being given in the company's HQ) as his Bloomberg Speech. The government would renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU before putting the outcome to the people in an in-out referendum which, as we all know now, was later set for June 23 2016.

David Cameron now tells us that Britain leaving the EU would be 'a self-inflicted wound'. It's hard not to retort that he should know all about those. The holding of a vote on the UK's membership may well have been inevitable from the moment that this particular Prime Minister assumed office. But maybe he should ask himself just whose fault that was.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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