

Why did David Cameron call for an in/out referendum on the UK's EU membership just six short years after beginning his leadership of the Conservative Party by calling on it to stop 'banging on about Europe' and just two-and-a-half years after entering Number Ten with absolutely no intention whatsoever of holding such a vote? And why did his decision do him – and his party – so little good?

The explanation, of course, is very long and very complicated (see Rogers, 2017). But a good part of it, politically speaking anyway, lies in populist Euroscepticism – a phenomenon which, in the UK at least, can only be understood, this paper argues, in terms of a twenty-five year, essentially symbiotic relationship between the Tories and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Indeed, vocal hostility to British involvement in 'Europe' had been apparent in both the country in general (see Gifford, 2014a) and the Conservative Party in particular (Crowson, 2007, Lynch and Whitaker, 2013a) ever since Tory Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, authorised the UK's first application to join the EEC back in 1961. It quietened down in the latter part of that decade, only to grow louder at the beginning of the 1970s and again in the late 1980s, after which it never really went away. UKIP, then, founded over thirty years later after that first application, undoubtedly poured even more populist petrol on the flames of British Euroscepticism – especially after 2010 – but it did not start the fire.

This paper undertakes a detailed process tracing of events, derived from documentary and interview material gathered by the author and from secondary sources produced by other experts. It argues, in line with historical institutionalists like Paul Pierson (2004), that path dependence and sequencing – in this case, which party what first – matters both for causal explanation and the attribution of responsibility. Only by reminding ourselves exactly what occurred when can we see clearly that it was the Conservative Party and not its radical right rival that, between 1997 and 2005, achieved the fusion of populism and Euroscepticism with which this special issue is concerned. It was only when, under a new leader, the Tories (albeit, it turned out, temporarily) abandoned that attempt between 2006 and 2007 – a decision which historical institutionalists would label a 'critical juncture' – that UKIP seized the chance to pursue that self-same strategy even more effectively. This afforded it a level of electoral success, especially after 2010, that was one of the major drivers behind the Conservatives then moving back, however ineffectively, onto populist and ever more Eurosceptic territory, culminating in Cameron's fateful decision in early 2013 to commit to a referendum – a decision that did little or nothing to shoot UKIP's fox in the short term and, in the longer term, led directly to the UK's vote to leave the EU.

In arguing this, this paper challenges the assumption (for which there is less evidence than many of us realise – see Rooduijn et al, 2014) that populism, and populist Euroscepticism, always, only, and necessarily spreads from the extreme to the mainstream and do so primarily because the mainstream apparently ignores the concerns of a significant slice of the electorate. In reality, the relationship between parties on the radical fringes and large parties of government, is, or at least can be, a two-way street where, over time, agenda-setting, issue-ownership, votes, and policy influence flow in both directions (see Meguid, 2005; also Lynch and Whitaker, 2016: 129-30). If we fail to fully appreciate this back and forth, and, in particular, precisely

when and where it began, we can all too easily fall into the familiar trap – identified by, among others, Cas Mudde (2010) – of seeing populism as a pathology somehow illegitimately imported into liberal democratic politics by insurgents rather than something that insiders may have been flirting with for years and that is therefore a feature, not a bug.

Unless, in other words, we get the timeline right we will get the story wrong, portraying the radical right as doer and the centre-right as done-to. There may be some truth to that, but it is not the whole truth. In the UK anyway, and possibly in other polities, the centre-right was (at least in part and if one regards populist Euroscepticism as a problematic development rather than a wholly positive one) the author of its own misfortunes. And this was not, initially anyway, because it ignored voters' cultural anxieties but because it sought, deliberately if somewhat desperately, to appeal to them. Existing (and perhaps future) accounts conducted by scholars whose primary interest is in the insurgents rather than the insiders risk missing this and, in so doing, overstating the impact of the former and understating the role played by the latter.

This paper begins by showing that it was the Tories who first fused populism and Euroscepticism and then fatally left the field, allowing UKIP, after 2006, to harvest what they had sown. It then steps back, in the spirit of the special issue, to explore UKIP's Euroscepticism, noting that, in contrast to the Euroscepticism of some 'continental' radical right parties it was always of the 'hard' rather than the 'soft' variety – a reminder that UKIP, perhaps alone among those parties, was sceptical before it was populist. As a result, the paper shows, the economic and migration crises that hit Europe, did little or nothing to harden its scepticism; rather they provided it with an opportunity to emphasise its increasingly populist appeal. The paper then focuses on how, as the public lost confidence in the ability of the government to control immigration, the Conservatives' fear of UKIP helped drive their leader to promise an in/out referendum on EU membership – and on how and why that promise proved incapable by that stage of stopping the insurgency in its tracks.

### **1. Populist Euroscepticism: how the Conservatives created the space for UKIP by trying it, then eschewing it, and then adopting it once again**

UKIP became a populist party (see, for example, Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Gifford, 2014; van Kessel, 2015; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Tournier-Sol, 2015; Usherwood, 2016) even if didn't start out as one when it was founded in the early 1990s. But its transition from an electorally-marginal, single-issue, anti-EU outfit to powerful insurgency cannot be understood purely on its own terms. The Conservative Party, which has a long history of employing populist (and more recently Eurosceptic) frames in its discourse – particularly in its discourse on immigration (Bale, 2013) – was also deeply implicated in its rise.

UKIP's aim from the outset was to help push its much older, much bigger rival on the right in the direction already being urged on it by Tory 'anti-Europeans' (see Usherwood, 2008; Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017: 203). However, its electoral performance was likely to prove limited as long as the Conservatives were themselves

led by a convinced (and, indeed, convincing) Eurosceptic. On the other hand, the fact that, from early 1997 until late 2005, this was the case – as well as the fact that from the beginning of 2006 it most definitely was not – proved hugely beneficial to UKIP in the long run. The first eight years of the thirteen that the Tories spent in opposition after 1997 primed the electorate perfectly for populist Euroscepticism, while the following year and a half – the first flush of David Cameron’s attempt to modernize the party by moving away from it – alienated those voters who had previously welcomed what he now seemed so keen to reject, thereby rendering them highly receptive to UKIP’s message that it was now very much the party for them (see Ford and Goodwin, 2014, *passim*). In short, by marching ‘the people’ up to the top of the hill and then marching them down again, the Conservatives created a vacuum that a skilfully-led, out-and-out populist party could rush in to fill.

At the start of the Tories’ time out of office after 1997, things did not look good for UKIP. That year’s general election afforded it a mere 0.3% of the vote and brought to power a Tory leader, William Hague, who made it his mission to campaign against the potential adoption of the single currency. And that wasn’t all. Under pressure to make more headway against Tony Blair in his pomp, fighting off moves being made against him by disloyal colleagues, and believing he could get no traction on the economy and public services, Hague moved onto unashamedly populist territory (see Bale, 2016: 62-122), resulting in a series of authoritarian and nativist interventions on law and order and immigration. This culminated in the so-called ‘foreign land’ speech of 2001 (penned in part for him by the arch-Eurosceptic Tory, Daniel Hannan) whose pitting of ‘the people’ against a supposedly elitist, liberal government could, in a blind taste-test, could quite easily have come from the leader of a radical right wing populist party (Hague, 2001). And this was in spite of the fact that, given where UKIP was in its life-cycle at the time (namely, around for a few years but still not an electoral threat, let alone a parliamentary presence) it cannot possibly be said to have been pushing him in that direction.

Hague’s strategy – which was not so much a ‘core vote’ strategy as one intended to appeal to voters lost to the Tories on the state-market dimension by pitching to them on the libertarian-authoritarian and (national sovereignty-European integration) dimensions (see Green, 2011) – ultimately grabbed him more headlines than it did votes at the 2001 general election. However, along with the generational replacement of pro-European by more anti-European Tories at successive elections, Hague’s rhetoric had the effect of helping to shift the Conservative Party’s centre of gravity towards the sceptical (on Europe), the authoritarian (on law and order) and the nativist (on immigration) – a shift that continued under his successors Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard (Bale, 2016: 123-235).

Howard, who took over from the hapless Duncan Smith in 2003, pushed hard for a referendum on any EU Constitution – so hard, indeed, that, in April 2004 and in Labour’s 2005 manifesto, Blair felt obliged to match the offer. It was at this stage, in the run-up to the campaign for the 2004 elections to the European Parliament that the Tory high command first began to get seriously worried about UKIP, which, opinion polls suggested, might attract up to a fifth of the vote that June. The results of the 2004 EP elections – the second set to be fought under PR – only served to

increase the Conservatives' anxieties: Howard's 27% was nine points down on Hague's 1999 score, while UKIP put on nearly ten points to finish on 16%, with post-election surveys suggesting that nearly half of those who had voted for UKIP had voted Tory in 2001 (Bale, 2016: 200-1). The fact that in a parliamentary by-election held not long afterwards, UKIP's candidate beat his Conservative rival (albeit for third place in a safe Labour seat) only made things worse. By that autumn's annual party conference season, with an election expected the following spring or summer, Howard was making hard-line speeches on Europe and immigration that borrowed freely – on one occasion almost word for word (Prince, 2004) – from UKIP politicians.

As the 2005 general election approached, Howard, now relying on the services of Australian consultant, Lynton Crosby, was promising in his party's manifesto to turn things around for Britain's 'forgotten majority, the people who make up the backbone of this country', who had been 'neglected and taken for granted'. And he was winning high praise from right-wing tabloids for, in the words of the *Mail*, 'courageously refusing to accept the orthodoxy of our smug liberal elite' on immigration and asylum. This, and the not-unfamiliar tendency of voters in plurality systems to desert minor parties for fear of 'wasting' their votes, arguably did the trick: while not contributing much to the reduction in Labour's majority (the shine coming off Blair in the wake of Iraq was far more to blame), it may well have helped limit UKIP's vote share at the general election to a paltry 2%.

Had the Conservative Party proceeded to elect another thoroughgoing populist Eurosceptic to succeed Howard as leader in 2005, UKIP might then have withered on the vine. But, now desperate to win, it decided instead to go with a much younger, socially liberal 'modernizer', David Cameron (see Bale, 2016: 236-263). And, although the initial, 'liberal Conservative' phase of Cameron's leadership lasted only two years at most before it was complemented (though never wholly replaced) by a return to more traditional emphases (see Bale, 2016: 264-359), that hiatus nonetheless had a profound impact on the symbiotic relationship between UKIP and the Tories. At a time when the massive influx of East Europeans into the UK occasioned by EU enlargement was beginning and as rising concern about that influx began to fuse with anxiety among Eurosceptic voters and politicians about moves towards further integration (see Evans and Menon, 2017: 14-19), the Tories seemed to have their minds elsewhere – more worried about gaining 'permission to be heard' from the cosmopolitan middle classes than reassuring voters concerned about cultural and demographic change, about the decline of traditional values and privileges, and about the erosion of national sovereignty, that it was still very much on their side (Bale, 2016: 266). This created a space that UKIP could almost be designed to fill, as long, that is, as it could find itself an entrepreneurial champion capable of seizing the opportunity and putting its case. In September 2006, it did just that, electing as its leader Nigel Farage.

Farage attempted simultaneously to move UKIP beyond its roots as a single-issue, anti-EU party and to make a deliberate populist play for voters alienated by Cameron: not only was Farage insisting the UK leave the EU forthwith, he was also promising to restore grammar schools, casting doubt on climate change, and, most

importantly, talking about the need to cut immigration (see Dennison and Goodwin, 2015). The parliamentary expenses scandal which broke in May 2009 also saw Farage handed what for a populist must have seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity to criticise Britain's 'political class'. Appearing in the run-up to the 2009 European Parliament elections, they helped UKIP recover to win almost 17% of the vote, matching (indeed, slightly improving upon) its performance in 2004 (see Ford et al., 2012; Whitaker and Lynch, 2011).

The 2010 general election, however, proved a disappointment for UKIP. Farage had resigned as leader in September 2009 in order to focus on winning a seat at Westminster. This, along with the bestselling *Sun* newspaper's endorsement of the Tories, probably eased the pressure on Cameron sufficiently to persuade him that it was worth risking the wrath of his own Eurosceptics by reneging on what he had previously insisted was a 'cast iron guarantee' of a referendum on the now-ratified Lisbon Treaty. This was especially the case since he could now point to the fact that Tory MEPs had left the EPP-ED and formed the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament. The leadership also helped itself by promising, first, to negotiate the 'repatriation' of certain powers (especially on social and employment legislation) from Brussels, second, to reject the Lisbon Treaty's so-called 'ratchet clauses' and, third, to legislate for a 'referendum lock', guaranteeing the electorate a vote on any Treaty which transferred powers or competences to the EU – a move that was predictably pooh-poohed by Farage's successor, Lord (Malcolm) Pearson, who was also busy emphasising his party's hostility to immigration and adding what critics saw as a dash of Islamophobia into the mix. But Pearson proved unequal to the task either of holding Cameron's feet to the fire in the media or of maintaining UKIP's momentum with voters.

True, the 3% UKIP achieved at the 2010 election was an improvement, and its impact on Conservative MPs was greater than it might have been had Cameron managed to secure them an overall majority at Westminster rather than an unwanted coalition with the Lib Dems (Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017: 232-3). But few at that point would have expected that just over two years later, David Cameron would be making his fateful promise to deliver an in/out referendum in the next parliament. Just as few would have predicted that UKIP would come first in the 2014 European Parliament elections and go on to win nearly four million votes (albeit out of a total of 29.6 million) at the general election of 2015 (see Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). Fewer still would have bet on the fact that in not much more than a year after that, Cameron would be resigning as PM, having set the UK on course for leaving the European Union. Playing with populist fire, it seems, can get you badly burned. The sequence which led to that happening is traced in more detail below.

## **2. Euroscepticism – UKIP: hard from the start**

Before doing that, however, it is important to rewind a little and elaborate on the nature of UKIP's Euroscepticism for those who may be unfamiliar with the party. Elaboration, however, may not be the right word since UKIP was from the outset utterly opposed to Britain's continued membership of the EU – a hard Eurosceptic organization (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004) which objected to Brussels undermining the country's national sovereignty, to its lack of democratic and popular

legitimacy, to its determination as a supposed 'superstate' to crush member states' liberties, and to the way membership limited the UK's ability to play the global role for which it was apparently destined (see Tournier-Sol, 2015). UKIP's Euroscepticism, then, has not evolved: it arrived, as it were, fully-formed. The very first line of its very first manifesto (UKIP, 1997) made plain that it was 'committed to withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European Union and replacing membership by a free-trade agreement.' Hardly surprising, given its view that

"Europe"...is not working. It is bureaucratic, not democratic. The overwhelming majority of the people of this country boycott its elections....The European Union represents government by decree, and the bureaucratic waste over which it presides feeds immeasurable graft and corruption. Its symbol is the gravy train. It constitutes institutionalised fraud. None of its policies – agriculture, fisheries, foreign or economic – actually works. The result is that the British people are forced to pay billions of pounds each year to bureaucrats whose only job appears to be to think up new schemes to bankrupt them.

In its second manifesto (2001), UKIP was already outlining the supposed benefits of leaving the EU in a way that directly foreshadows the argument made (not least by Conservative sceptics) for Brexit a decade and a half later:

The UK Independence Party believes, along with most British people, that Britain should be ruled by our own elected parliament...."In the EU" means government by the EU, and experience has repeatedly shown that trying to negotiate a better deal for Britain does not work....The only way to achieve this is for Britain to leave the EU.

....Britain's trade with EU countries does NOT depend on membership of the EU's "single market"....When Britain leaves the EU, our trade with EU countries will continue because we are one of their biggest customers. Also, release from the EU's external trade barriers will enable Britain to develop stronger trading links with countries outside the EU, like the US and the Commonwealth countries.

....When Britain leaves the EU, we shall stop giving £8.5 billion (and to become £11 billion) per year to the EU budget, and the UKIP estimates that at least a further £11.5 billion per year will become available to the Treasury from deregulation and a healthier economy....[T]his £20 billion "Independence Dividend" could be spent on pensions, agricultural assistance, run-down public services, the NHS, defence, schoolteachers and the police.

UKIP's 2005 manifesto mostly said the same in slightly different words

This alien system of government is bad for our economy, our self-respect and our prosperity....[T]he EU is a one-way street towards European government. It is undemocratic, corrupt and unreformable. The only way for Britain is UKIP's way: we must leave. Until this is done, individuals and our businesses will continue to be strangled by...ill-conceived intrusive regulation....

Stressing what was then a much stronger commitment to a small state but employing familiar populist tropes, UKIP called for voters to join it in saying

NO to the culture of paperwork, performance targets and spin, NO to uncontrolled immigration, NO to a society in which everything is regulated and dissent is suppressed by fear and political correctness. Only outside the EU will it be possible to begin rebuilding a Britain which is run for British people, not for career politicians and bureaucrats.

If there was any change over time, it was in a slightly greater emphasis on immigration, with the party declaring its aim to reduce net migration to zero – an emphasis that grew all the stronger (and much more specific and lengthy in terms of

policies suggested) both in its 'straight talking' 2010 manifesto, *Empowering the People* and in its 2015 effort, *Believe in Britain*.

In short, while the party's greater access to funding meant UKIP's election literature became glossier, the message contained within it – hard Euroscepticism rooted in economic and historic cultural concerns, and in a basic desire to regain sovereignty (especially, as time went on, over Britain's borders) – stayed essentially the same. UKIP, in other words, should be seen not as a populist party that turned anti-European but as an anti-European party that became increasingly populist.

### **3. Crisis: confirmation, not transformation, of UKIP's Eurosceptic stance**

Given the unchanging nature of UKIP's Euroscepticism, we would not expect the crises that may have affected the sceptical trajectory of populist parties elsewhere to have had much influence on its attitude to the EU. But those crises of course provided plenty of opportunities for the party to appeal to British voters' concerns about Europe – and in ways that have dovetailed with the signals it was already sending on the economy and on immigration.

The Eurozone crisis, and in particular the bail-outs required for certain member states' economies, especially Greece's, was, notwithstanding the UK government's insistence that it was not financially liable, proof (if proof were needed) that the whole organisation was a proverbial basket-case/money pit – one into which, unless the UK left the European Union, it would eventually end up pouring British taxpayers' money. More generally, the unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) that hit some of the largest EU member states like France, Italy and Spain particularly hard provided yet another reason to argue that the UK, where the labour market remained relatively buoyant despite the downturn, was well off out of it.

Similarly, Europe's migration crisis, symbolised for UK television viewers by tragic shots of desperate people fleeing both war and poverty and attempting dangerous sea crossings to Europe, was merely grist to a mill that UKIP had already been grinding for years. Once again, the effect was not so much to change the party's position or its pitch to the electorate as to dramatize and intensify its appeal. And once again, notwithstanding the government's insistence that the UK's location outside the Schengen zone meant that it was practically unaffected, the argument from Farage was that unless the country extricated itself from the EU, it would inevitably end up sharing the burden, Schengen or no Schengen – an argument leant weight by sometimes nightly news footage of would-be immigrants trying to make their way out of the makeshift 'Jungle' camp near Calais and through the Channel Tunnel.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Crines and Heppell (2017), in their painstaking analysis of Farage's party conference speeches between 2010 and 2014, find little to no evidence that the nature and scope of his rhetoric changed in response to external (and particularly economic) developments; although immigration became a more prominent feature of those speeches over time, it was all of a piece with a familiar, indeed predictable, appeal rooted in (British, non-European, non-immigrant) identity. In other words, the crises that may have pulled or pushed other, continental populist parties towards Euroscepticism merely served to reinforce a pre-fashioned

fusion of anti-EU and anti-migration sentiment among British voters – especially those ‘left-behind’ by both cultural and much longer-term economic change (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 191-5; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015: 78-100). With this in mind, we now return to the sequence of events that led Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron to call for a referendum in early 2013 and to the consequences of his decision.

#### **4. Impact: upping the ante, piling on the pressure, and opening the floodgates**

The Tory leadership’s hopes that they could keep the lid on the issue until they made it into government in 2010 proved – perhaps predictably (see Lynch and Whitaker, 2013b) – unfounded. Whether those Tory MPs who were determined to ‘bang on’ about it were ‘Little Englanders’, obsessed with sovereignty, or ‘hyper-globalisers’, more concerned with ditching the corporatist constraints that were supposedly preventing the country fulfilling its free-trading destiny (see Baker et al., 2002), Cameron in opposition had never dared to confront them head-on, hoping instead that he might be able to shut them up by conceding some of what they wanted – the promise of repatriation of powers, of a referendum lock, of pulling the party’s MEPs out of the EPP-ED (see Bale, 2016: 336-7, 378-382). As a consequence, those members of parliament who wanted Britain out of the EU were confident, despite having lost all faith in their leader after he had ‘betrayed’ them over a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, that they could push him further once he entered Downing Street (Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017: 226ff). They had grown larger in number after the general election, and even those Tory MPs who were not, at least privately, determined to see the UK leave the EU were under pressure from their constituency associations to show that they cared and/or just beginning feeling the heat from UKIP.

On 24 October 2011, the Commons divided on a motion calling for an in/out referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU – one introduced by Conservative backbencher David Nuttall in the wake of a nationwide petition signed by over 100,000 people. Some 81 of Cameron’s own MPs (49 of them from the 2010 intake and two of them serving in government) defied their leader and voted for it, making it one of the two biggest rebellions against a Conservative prime minister on any topic since the War and the biggest ever (Maastricht included) on Europe. 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 25 countries which wanted to go ahead with it to proceed instead with a non-Treaty agreement, the Fiscal Compact. He 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. This was especially the case now that UKIP had begun rising in those self-same polls, not least because the Lib Dems’ entry into coalition meant, on the one hand, they could no longer attract protest voters and, on the other, that they were supposedly preventing Cameron from running a ‘properly Conservative’ government.



Rather than satisfying Tory sceptics, Cameron's face-off in Brussels only left them wanting more of the same. None of them believed (correctly it turned out) that the so-called 'Balance of Competences Review', set up to help the government redraw responsibilities between the UK and the EU, would deliver anything like what they wanted. Moreover, the People's Pledge campaign (co-organized by Tory MEP Dan Hannan and soon-to-be UKIP advisor Chris Bruni-Lowe, and signed by none other than Boris Johnson) had ratcheted up the pressure by holding, in April 2012, its first mini-referendum in the Conservative ultra-marginal of Thurrock, whose voters, on a surprisingly high 30% turnout, voted 90% in favour of leaving the EU. So at the end of June that year, Cameron – already under pressure because of the so-called 'omnishambles' Budget introduced by his closest ally, Chancellor George Osborne, that spring – was handed a letter signed by 100 Tory MPs demanding legislation to pave the way for a referendum in the next parliament. And at the end of October, some 53 MPs voted with the Labour opposition to defeat their own government on an amendment demanding a cut in the EU's budget (Bale, 2016: 378-82).

What those Tory MPs did not know, at least in June, was that Cameron had already all but made up his mind that he would have to go into the next election, due in 2015, with a promise of an in/out referendum in the Conservative manifesto. From what we can glean from the well-sourced accounts (Seldon and Snowdon, 2016, Shipman, 2017, Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017, Oliver, 2016: 9-10) which will need to serve until the former PM's own putatively definitive memoirs are published, his logic – urged on him by his Foreign Secretary and former party leader, William Hague, but opposed by his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne – ran as follows: a combination of principle, pressure from their local associations, and the fear that UKIP (rising in the polls on the back of ballooning immigration from Eastern Europe) might cost them their seats at the next election, meant that Tory MPs were going to carry on undermining his authority and the unity of the party, meaning Cameron might be deposed and/or his party might go down to defeat in 2015; no amount of half-measures (the referendum lock; the Balance of Competences Review; an opt-out here, a veto there) looked likely to placate them; promising an in/out referendum would, in the short-term, buy their cooperation and at the same time shoot Farage's fox and, in the long term, providing it were won (and Cameron was confident that it could be), settle an issue that had been plaguing and poisoning the Conservative Party for decades.

Any last-minute doubts in Cameron's mind were expunged by UKIP helping to push the Conservatives into fourth and fifth place in by-elections, albeit in safe Labour seats in Rotherham and Middlesbrough, in late November 2012. UKIP's decision to 'go after' Labour as well as Tory sympathisers, not least by talking more and more about immigration, piled on the pressure (as it was intended to; see Farrell and Goldsmith, 2017: 212) rather than relieving it since it helped the party pick up even more votes. Meanwhile, a survey in December fielded for Lord Ashcroft suggested that more than one in ten people who had voted Tory in 2010 would now vote for UKIP – a figure so alarming that led many people reading it to ignore Ashcroft's warning that an EU referendum was not necessarily the answer to the Conservatives' UKIP problem (Ashcroft, 2012). Privately, another modernising Tory pollster, Andrew Cooper, advised the PM that, when it came to a referendum, it was 'a

question of when not if, reasoning that UKIP was ‘very likely to win the European elections in 2014. We’d have been in meltdown and ended up being forced into a referendum commitment’ (Shipman, 2017: 10). Better not to give Farage and his own (Tory) Eurosceptics the glory and, just as importantly, risk what some in Cameron’s inner-circle thought would be an inevitable leadership challenge should he try to resist calls for a referendum in the immediate aftermath of a potentially big win for UKIP at the EP elections in June 2014. Osborne disagreed but eventually felt he had to concede: he was a loyal lieutenant and he knew full well that his own ambitions would probably suffer a fatal blow if Cameron were replaced by a rival prepared to promise not only a referendum but to back Britain voting to leave. Ironically, the one insider who tried, right down to the wire, to convince Cameron to pull back from what he saw as an overly-desperate, overly-tactical, and possibly counterproductive attempt ‘to stave off either UKIP’s growth or our backbench problems’ was Michael Gove who feared it might end up seeing him campaign for Leave against his friend and prime minister in forthcoming referendum (see Shipman, 2017: 10-11).

Gove, it turned out, was right on all counts. The Bloomberg speech in which Cameron publicly promised that referendum in January 2013 didn’t prove enough for Tory Eurosceptics, who almost immediately pressed him to legislate for it in spite of the fact that, as they knew perfectly well, his coalition with the Lib Dems made such legislation impossible. The government’s mid-term blues were exacerbated by its split down the middle on same-sex marriage, with rebellions in parliament on that issue as well as Europe accompanied by widespread disquiet and even resignations at grassroots level, where a worrying proportion of those ordinary members who stuck around were threatening to vote for UKIP (Webb and Bale, 2014). Meanwhile Farage was getting a lot of traction in the media by warning of the dire consequences that would follow from the ending in December 2013 of transitional controls on workers coming into the country from Romania and Bulgaria.

Cameron’s close advisor, Andrew Cooper, warned that any attempt to ‘out-UKIP UKIP’ would only backfire. First, it risked putting off voters with different priorities and/or more liberal views. Second, making concessions or ramping up the rhetoric on migration or the EU every time its support rose would send a signal to voters that, irrespective of whether UKIP could win seats at Westminster, casting a ballot for the party was not a wasted vote. Third, doing so would only increase the electoral salience of the issues on which UKIP thrived – an argument which, given the rise in the number of people in polls citing immigration as the most important issue facing the country (albeit not themselves or their families), seems to have been borne out in practice. But he was something of a voice in the wilderness. Even after Bloomberg there was widespread – and by no means irrational (see Mellon and Evans, 2016; Lynch and Whitaker, 2013b) – anxiety within the party at Westminster about the electoral threat posed by UKIP. Farage’s party returned 147 councillors in local elections in 2013 and 163 in 2014 – a stunning total given it won only 8 and 2 council seats respectively when the same areas had been contested back in 2009 and 2010 (Bale and Wager, 2015). UKIP’s membership also began to take off, reaching a high of 40,000 or so in 2015 (Clarke et al., 2017). Meanwhile (and of course helping UKIP all the more), the failure of the net migration figures to move (after some initial

success) in the right direction, pushed Theresa May into coming up with ever more restrictive measures (Partos and Bale, 2015; Hampshire and Bale, 2015), as well as a range of marginally more sensible safeguards were included in May's Immigration Act, which passed into law in the spring of 2014.

As net migration began to rise regardless, May began to raise the possibility of doing something to limit numbers coming in from the EU – perhaps by limiting access to benefits and somehow reducing the number of dependants European citizens could bring with them, or perhaps by setting some sort of cap on unskilled migration from member states. This loose talk had two big drawbacks. First, it created even more expectations that were almost certainly going to be impossible to fulfil given the EU's attachment to free movement of people – although that was evidently not enough to prevent Cameron creating yet another hostage to fortune by suggesting that some sort of reform of the principle should form a part of his renegotiation of the UK's relationship with Europe. Second, it played straight into UKIP's hands, both in the sense of further raising the salience of an issue it had clearly decided to make its own, albeit in language that was strangely familiar, Farage telling the party's conference in February 2014 that mass immigration meant that parts of Britain now seemed 'like a foreign land' (Sparrow, 2014). Third, it allowed UKIP to make the obvious point that any attempt to bear down on net migration was doomed to failure unless and until the country ended free movement – something that could only be done, claimed Farage, perfectly reasonably, if the UK opted for Brexit. Little wonder, then, that his party did so well at the June 2014 European elections (Vasilopoulou, 2017). And little wonder that the announcement by Conservative MPs Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless that they were defecting to UKIP created such a splash.

By March 2015, fewer than 20 per cent of voters were telling the pollster YouGov that the Conservatives were the best party to handle immigration – down from 45 per cent at the 2010 general election. Among the British Election Study's panel of voters, questioned in March 2015, only 8 per cent thought that the Coalition was handling the issue well and, while 34 per cent considered the last Labour government responsible for current levels of immigration, 60 per cent put the blame on the Conservatives. UKIP, now the most trusted party on the issue, took 12.6% of the votes at the 2015 general election – four times what it achieved in 2010 even if it only delivered the party just one seat at Westminster (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015: 269-287).

## **Conclusion**

Had it not been for the fact that the Tory-supporting press made up its mind not to bother with immigration during the 2015 general election campaign lest it damage the Conservatives' chances against Labour, the damage done to Cameron and his party by UKIP might have been even greater than, much to their relief, it turned out to be (Lynch and Whitaker, 2016: 134). By that time, however, UKIP had, at the very least, helped push the Conservative Party into holding an in/out referendum: all Nigel Farage had to do by that point was to help win it, which, with more than a little help from Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn, some handsomely-financed and ruthlessly effective campaigning from both leave campaigns, and, of course, the underlying

antipathy of many voters towards the EU, immigration and the ‘political class’, he duly did (Clarke et al., 2017).

This paper makes clear that UKIP’s achievement cannot be understood without taking into account both the populist interventions and the internal politics of its mainstream centre-right competitor. We cannot, in other words, understand populist Euroscepticism in the UK unless we appreciate that, as this paper has shown, the Conservatives, not UKIP, were the UK’s first populist Eurosceptic party – something that followed from their deciding, at the turn of the century, to bolt together two weapons that had been their armoury for some considerable time in the (ultimately vain) hope that it might improve their chances against what, at the time anyway, was an all-conquering adversary, namely Tony Blair’s New Labour. It was only when David Cameron became Tory leader at the end of 2005 and insisted that such a strategy was counterproductive, in effect leaving voters who had responded positively to the efforts of his predecessors high and dry, that – thanks in no small part to Nigel Farage – UKIP realised that, at a time of rising anxiety about immigration and anger with the political class, it too could profit from fusing populism and Euroscepticism. That hiatus proved to be a critical juncture: by the time the Tories tried to return to that strategy after 2007, they had lost their monopoly on it. When, in government after 2010 they also lost public confidence on immigration, in part because they made promises on the issue they were unable to keep, the pressure from UKIP and backbench MPs who were convinced anti-Europeans and/or beginning to panic about Farage’s party.

That said, UKIP should be credited with swiftly seizing the opportunities thus presented to it. Crises in the Eurozone and over migration into Southern Europe had relatively little direct impact on the UK. Nor, since UKIP already wanted out of ‘Europe’, were they likely to harden its stance on the EU. But its populist leader Nigel Farage nevertheless proved adept at exploiting those crisis in order to press home the hard Eurosceptic message to which he and his party had stuck faithfully since its foundation a quarter of a century ago. In spite of its being obliged to operate in a plurality electoral system which has only ever enabled it to win two constituencies in a 650-seat legislature, UKIP, by becoming a populist as well as an anti-European party, has played a crucial part in precipitating what most observers assume is the inevitable departure from the European Union of one of its biggest member states. That, by anyone’s standards, constitutes impact – and on a truly historic scale.

However – and this is the main insight of this paper, as well as one that may be worth exploring in other countries, too – we need to recognise far more than we have done so previously that its achievement is not simply a case of a more extreme party pushing its more mainstream counterpart towards a populist Euroscepticism that it would never have otherwise contemplated. As political scientists of the new institutionalist school who stress path dependence argue, sequencing matters: mainstream actors are indeed influenced by more extreme actors (as per Meguid, 2005 and Bale et al. 2010); but, just as importantly, they may, by their own earlier words and deeds, have helped those actors flourish in the first place. And once they flourish, there is very little evidence, either from our case or from other parts of

Europe, that the centre-right's 'good populism' can ultimately (as opposed to temporarily) defeat the 'bad populism' of its more radical counterpart (Mudde, 2017).

In the UK at least, the symbiosis between the two sides of the right has impacted on both their respective fortunes, sometimes negatively, sometimes positively – and it continues to this day. UKIP's success did indeed help Tory Eurosceptics to persuade David Cameron into holding a referendum. But the result of that referendum, combined with the 'hard Brexit' line pursued by his successor, Theresa May, has seen UKIP's support drop precipitately since. On the other hand, May's relentless pursuit of its voters during the 2017 election may ultimately have backfired by alienating rather more middle-class, educated Remain voters than she thought would be the case (Cowley, 2017). Worse, if the consequent loss of her party's parliamentary majority at that election then makes it impossible to deliver the seemingly 'hard' Brexit (leaving the customs union and the single market as well as the EU) that she initially promised, then UKIP (or perhaps a successor party) may turn out to have more life left in it than many of us currently imagine.

**About the author**

Tim Bale is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London and has published widely on British and European party politics. Email: [t.bale@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:t.bale@qmul.ac.uk).  
Twitter: @proftimbale. Blog: <https://proftimbale.com/>

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