



## Worried Nationalists, Pragmatic Nationalists and Progressive Internationalists – Who might win a British referendum on Europe?

*By Peter Kellner – October 2012*

In a democracy, public opinion always matters; but British attitudes to Europe matter more than usual. This is partly because a referendum on Britain and the EU in the next few years is a distinct possibility; partly because Europe is an especially divisive issue on the political Right, with the United Kingdom Independence Party threatening to overtake the Conservatives at the European Parliament elections in 2014; and partly because any major change in the way the EU works requires the consent of all EU members, so Britain has a veto – and all the main parties have promised that they will wield the veto unless they have public consent.

YouGov has conducted fresh research for ECFR into the roots of British attitudes to Europe. It finds that the attitudes of millions of voters to the EU are intimately linked to their view of Britain itself, to their view of how our society is evolving, and extent to which they want Britain to engage with the rest of the world generally.

However, before we examine these results, two initial points should be made.

The first is that Britons are consistently more Eurosceptic than the people of any other major EU country. For example in the Eurobarometer survey conducted earlier this year only 27% of Britons were very or fairly attached to the EU, last by a significant margin out of all member states (the EU average was 46% with the other five largest members registering between 60% and 45%). 72% of Britain were ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ attached (the EU average was 52% with the other five largest states between 34% and 53%). Even though enthusiasm for the EU has waned in the countries hardest hit by the economic crisis (such as Spain, Italy and even Greece), they still remain keener Europeans than the British.

The second point is that millions of Britons think the issue of Europe matters a lot to Britain – but not to them and their families. Again, this is supported by polling. In a YouGov poll in August 2012 Britons named Europe as the fourth most important issue facing the country (of twelve that were listed, behind the economy, immigration and asylum, and health), but only the tenth most important for them and their families.

These two points raise important practical questions about the way public opinion might evolve in a referendum on Europe – either a straight in/out referendum on British

membership of the EU, or a vote on revisions to the EU treaties, or a general election in which Europe were a central issue. Such a contest would almost certainly raise the saliency of Europe in voters' minds, probably a lot. Would our national scepticism weaken, or persist, or become more intense?

History provides one direct comparison – the referendum held in June 1975 on whether Britain should stay in the Common Market (as it then was). Then, as now, the Prime Minister, then Labour's Harold Wilson, had a problem managing party divisions. Then, as now, most voters wanted to leave the Common Market (as it then was). Then, as now, polling (specifically, a Gallup Poll in November 1974) suggested that if the Prime Minister renegotiated the terms of Britain's membership and recommended acceptance of the new terms, opinion would swing in favour of British membership.

Wilson did talk to his European partners, and did claim a great victory (though dispassionate observers could find very little change in Britain's membership terms). And voters duly rewarded him with a 2-1 majority for staying 'in Europe'.

Suppose that this time, a referendum were held after the Eurozone crisis fades, and David Cameron were able to say that he has been able to negotiate a deal that protects Britain's interests. What then?

In July this year, YouGov asked this question: *'Imagine the British government under David Cameron renegotiated our relationship with Europe and said that Britain's interests were now protected, and David Cameron recommended that Britain remain a member of the European Union on the new terms. How would you then vote in a referendum on the issue?'*

This time, 42% say they would vote to stay in, while 34% would vote to leave. Tory voters swing right round, from 58-29% for leaving the EU when we ask the conventional in-out referendum question, to 55-34% for staying in, if that is what the Prime Minister recommends.

This suggests that now, as in 1975, public opinion is not completely fixed. However, we tested just one hypothesis. The precise nature and context of any vote is hard to predict; and in any event, people are not always good predictors of their own attitudes two or three years ahead. Our results indicate the potential for volatility, not the certain outcome of an intensely-fought referendum campaign.

What we CAN do is explore the sources of public attitudes to Europe. Why do people think as they do about Britain and the EU? This is what YouGov's fresh research for ECFR has sought to find out. We asked people to consider eight pairs of statements and say, in each case, which they agreed with more. Two pairs explored attitudes to Britain; another two, recent and future trends about life in Britain; two looked at attitudes to the world as a whole; the final two specifically considered Britain and Europe. The main table shows the results.

**The roots of British attitudes to Europe**

Here are some pairs of statements. For each pair, please indicate whether you agree more with Statement A or statement B. %

**Traditions v values**

Statement A - 'The best things about Britain are to do with its history, geography and traditions – things like the monarchy, the countryside, warm beer and cricket on the village green, and our history of standing alone against Hitler in the Second World War.'

44

I agree with both statements to the same degree

25

Statement B - 'The best things about Britain are to do with its values of tolerance, democracy and fair play – things like free speech, the right to protest, and the way we have welcomed people from all over the world who wish to settle here.'

21

Neither / Don't know

10

**Has Britain been going to the dogs?**

Statement A - 'Taking everything into account – especially modern technology (such as the Internet and mobile phones), rising life expectancy, more interesting jobs, the huge choice of food, clothes, culture and leisure opportunities that previous generations could only dream of – life in Britain today is generally better than it was 30 or 40 years ago.'

40

I agree with both statements to the same degree

16

Statement B - 'Taking everything into account – especially large-scale immigration, high unemployment, unruly schools, drug pushing, drunken hooligans, lax moral standards and gang wars in many cities – life in Britain today is generally worse than it was 30 or 40 years ago.'

37

Neither / Don't know

7

**Optimism v pessimism**

Statement A - 'Despite Britain's current economic problems, I am basically confident about the long-term future. Our children's generation is likely to end up enjoying a better standard of living than our generation, just as our generation has broadly been better off in material terms than our parents' generation.'

23

I agree with both statements to the same degree

9

Statement B - 'I am not at all confident that the pattern will continue, of each generation being better off than its parents' generation. I fear that our children's generation will find it harder throughout their lives than ours to enjoy a reasonable standard of living.'

59

Neither / Don't know

9

**British exceptionalism?**

Statement A - 'It's understandable that people throughout the world are patriots who are proud of their own country. But Britain's history and character make our country special. We really do have more reason to be proud of our country than people in most other countries have reason to be proud of theirs.'

25

I agree with both statements to the same degree

15

Statement B - 'It's natural to be proud of one's own country, but if we are honest we should recognise that no country is fundamentally superior to any other. People in much of the world have just as much reason to be proud of their country as we have to be proud of ours.'

52

Neither / Don't know

8

**Can Britain go it alone?**

Statement A - 'In today's world, with global trade and global companies, there are severe limits to what Britain can achieve on its own. We must work closely with other countries and with global institutions such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the World Trade Organisation if we are to maximise our influence and prosperity'	40
I agree with both statements to the same degree	13
Statement B - 'The case for global rules and institutions is often overstated, and their so-called benefits an illusion. Britain is perfectly able to decide for itself how best to run its affairs and relate to other countries. Britain should seek to control its destiny without worrying about the rest of the world.'	35
Neither / Don't know	12

**For or against overseas aid?**

Statement A - 'It is in Britain's interests to help the world's poorer countries to become better off. This would be good for British exports and British jobs – and reduce the danger of conflict and terrorism. For these reasons there is a strong practical as well as moral argument for maintaining our spending on international development.'	32
I agree with both statements to the same degree	11
Statement B - 'Money spent on international aid is largely wasted. It supports corrupt regimes and ends up doing little or nothing to support development or reduce conflict or terrorism. There is neither a moral nor a practical case for such spending. Britain should look after itself, and leave poorer countries to sort themselves out.'	48
Neither / Don't know	9

**A special relationship with Europe?**

Statement A - 'Whether we like it or not, Britain must work especially closely with the rest of Europe if it is to prosper in the 21st century. That does not necessarily mean accepting the European Union as it is. Nor does it mean that Britain must work for a 'United States of Europe'. It does mean that, inside or outside the EU, we must recognise that we are a European nation.'	38
I agree with both statements to the same degree	14
Statement B - 'As an island with a long history of connections with the rest of the world, a major role in the Commonwealth and a 'special relationship' with the USA, Britain has no need to give extra weight to its links with the rest of Europe. Britain is most likely to prosper if it treats the rest of Europe as no more important to us than any other part of the world.'	35
Neither / Don't know	13

**Pro-EU v anti-EU**

Statement A - 'For all its faults, the European Union is a pioneering example of the way different countries can work together for mutual benefit. Over the past half century, the EU has helped Europe to become more peaceful, democratic and prosperous than at any time in the continent's history.'	25
I agree with both statements to the same degree	8
Statement B - 'The EU has failed. It is expensive, inefficient and overbearing. It stops the governments of member states from doing the things they need to do improve the lives of their citizens. The EU has had nothing to do with Europe being more peaceful, democratic and prosperous than it used to be.'	52
Neither / Don't know	14

Source; YouGov; sample 1,743; Fieldwork: August 20-21, 2012

Different people will find significance in different findings: the widespread pessimism about the prospects for the next generation, for example, or the popularity of British traditions, or the divided views about whether Britain should work especially closely with the rest of Europe; or – most relevant to this analysis – the two-to-one majority regarding the EU as fundamentally a failure rather than a success.

However, the main reason for asking these questions together is to explore the connections among these attitudes. How far, if at all, do our attitudes to the EU flow from specific concerns about the way Brussels works, and how far from views about the state of Britain itself and/or our optimism or pessimism towards the future and/or our wider sense of whether Britain should engage with the rest of the world or try to keep it at bay?

Two statistical techniques help us to answer these questions. One is bivariate correlation analysis, the other cluster analysis. Let us consider these in turn.

With correlation analysis we count how frequently answers to different questions coincide. Suppose we conducted poll on television and asked whether people like or dislike (a) Doctor Who and (b) the X factor. If everyone who liked one programme liked the other, then correlation analysis would yield a coefficient of plus one. If, on the other hand, all Dr Who viewers hated the X Factor, and vice versa, then we would have a coefficient of minus one. If there were no link between the two views, then the regression coefficient would be zero.

Now let's apply this to the data in our survey. The strongest correlations with attitudes to the EU concern Britain's general place in the world. Supporters of overseas aid tend to be pro-EU; opponents of overseas aid are overwhelmingly anti-EU. The correlation coefficient between the two is 0.5 – which statisticians consider a high figure. It's a similar story, with almost exactly the same coefficient, when we compare attitudes to the EU with those to Britain's place in the world generally. The more strongly people agree with the view that Britain must work closely with global organisations such as the United Nations, the more likely they are to be pro-EU.

There is also a clear, though lesser, correlation between how we view the EU and whether we think Britain has grown better or worse in the past 30-40 years. By three-to-one, pro-EU respondents think Britain has improved, while by five-to-three, those who regard the EU as a failure think Britain has got worse. The correlation is 0.3. A similar figure applies when we compare expectations for the future, and whether or not our children's generation will be better off than ours: Those who are pro-EU divide evenly between optimists and pessimists, while those who are anti-EU are overwhelmingly pessimistic.

This correlation analysis takes us some way down the track of understanding the different forces at work on public attitudes to Europe. But we need to delve further, for these forces are not wholly independent of each other. For example, supporters of overseas aid are more likely than opponents to be optimists. One way to analyse these factors together is to do cluster analysis. The computer examines the pattern of responses, and creates clusters of broadly like-minded respondents. When we do this, we find that most Britons belong to one of three groups:

**Worried nationalists (WNs):** 42%. They tend to have a traditional view of Britain, are pessimistic about the future and, were Britain a castle surrounded by a moat, would want the drawbridge up most of the time, in order to keep the rest of the world at bay. They tend to dislike overseas aid and think Britain should not bother too much with the global bodies such as the United Nations. The vast majority of them think the EU has been a failure.

WNs divide evenly between Labour and Conservatives. 15% of them support UKIP (twice the national average) and just 5% are Liberal Democrats (half the national average). They are slightly more likely than the general population to be women and to read the Sun or the Mail, and less likely to have a university degree.

**Pragmatic nationalists (PNs):** 23%. Like the WNs, PNs tend to have a traditional view of Britain, but tend to be less pessimistic about the way Britain is heading. They are divided about the merits of overseas aid, but tend to think Britain does need to co-operate with global institutions. Were Britain a castle, they would lower the drawbridge more often than the WNs, to allow more contact with the outside world. They are divided on whether the EU has been successful, but tend not to have strong feelings either way.

PNs also divide evenly between Labour and Conservative. The share of Liberal Democrats is in line with the national average; but only 3% would vote UKIP. Otherwise, their demographic profile is similar to that of Britain as a whole.

**Progressive internationalists (PIs):** 25%. Here, “progressive” is used not so much as a left-of-centre label, but in the sense of holding a view that history tends towards greater prosperity and enlightenment. Their view of Britain tends to be rooted in values more than tradition; they generally think Britain is a better place today than was a generation ago but are less certain about the future. Overwhelmingly, PIs think Britain must play a full role in global institutions, most support our international aid programme and, by three-to-one, they think the EU is a success story. They are happy for the drawbridge linking Britain to the rest of the world to stay down.

Two-thirds of PIs would vote Labour (52%) or Lib Dem (14%); just 23% would vote Conservative. They are more likely than the national average to be men, to have university degrees and to read the ‘broadsheet’ newspapers.

It should be stressed that these groups are not completely homogeneous; and there are another 10% of the electorate that don’t fit any of them (though this last group tends to have no clear views of these issues, and few of them are likely to vote in any election or referendum). Even within each group, there are some people who fit most but by no means all of the descriptions given. For example, there are internationally-minded optimists who reject the traditional view of British life and approve of overseas aid, but still dislike the EU. However, there aren’t very many of them.

The broader lesson is that those who seek to persuade Britons either to love or to hate Brussels by stressing the precise wording of EU treaties, or the details of the Common Agricultural Policy, or the merits of the Working Time Directive, are wasting their time. Few people think about the EU in these terms; and the few who do are probably committed

enthusiasts for, or utterly hostile to, the whole project; so their votes are locked up. For most people, attitudes to the EU are shaped by two broad things: their view of Britain itself, and how far they are at ease with the direction in which our society is heading. As with so much else in politics, fear is a big driver of public attitudes. At the moment, the fear factor is working hard for the EU's opponents.

This analysis suggests two big implications.

First, Worried Nationalists comprise by far the biggest single group. In a referendum on whether to leave the EU, Worried Nationalists give the anti-EU lobby a head start. Although they could be outvoted if virtually all the Pragmatic Nationalists lined up against them with the Progressive Internationalists, I find it hard in practice to see how the British would vote to stay in the EU unless a fair number of nationalists could be lured from the "worried" to the "pragmatic" column.

Although we don't have this kind of data for 1975, there can be little doubt that this is a big part of what happened 37 years ago. Many voters who started out both disliking the Common Market and fearful of Britain's future, ended up fearing that Britain would be worse off out in the cold. They decided on pragmatic grounds to swallow their dislike of "Europe" and vote to stay in. If an in-out referendum is held in the next few years, the pro-EU lobby will need to achieve the same shift and change the way the fear factor works.

Secondly, if the WN column can be reduced to, say, 35% or less in a referendum campaign, then the PNs will become the swing group. Their votes will decide whether Britain leaves the EU or stays in. As in 1975, the fear factor will loom large. But this is part of a wider point. By its nature, pragmatism is concerned more with practical and often short-term outcomes, rather than big visions and long-term dreams. PNs are unlikely to be swayed either by those who summon the spirits of Shakespeare, Agincourt and Elizabeth I – or by those who wax lyrical about peace in Europe and the continent's shared cultural heritage. "Rule Britannia" and "Ode to Joy" might stir the partisans, but they will leave the pragmatists cold. To them, the big picture will matter far more: which is more likely to boost jobs, prosperity and our children's future: maintaining our partnership with our European neighbours or arranging a divorce?

In short, campaigning by both sides is likely to be scrappy and negative. It may be the least bad way to decide Britain's relations with the rest of Europe, but only a wild optimist could think it a glorious way.

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