

THE FEDERAL TRUST
Enlightening the Debate on Good Governance

**European
Elections
in
Britain**

**Party Campaigns
in the 1990s**

Agnes Batory

European Essay No. 10

A Definition of Federalism

Federalism is defined as 'a system of government in which central and regional authorities are linked in an interdependent political relationship, in which powers and functions are distributed to achieve a substantial degree of autonomy and integrity in the regional units. In theory, a federal system seeks to maintain a balance such that neither level of government becomes sufficiently dominant to dictate the decision of the other, unlike in a unitary system, in which the central authorities hold primacy to the extent even of redesigning or abolishing regional and local units of government at will.'

(New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought)

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Sir Brian Corby
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Introduction

To master the future, you must understand the present. To understand the present, you must analyse the past. This European Essay does just that on the most sensitive and critical of events: elections – both the European elections of 1994 and 1999 and the general election of 1997. Condensing a mass of polling and electoral data, the author compares the declared intentions of the main parties with the actual turn-out. She compares what the politicians said they would do with what the public wanted them to do, and what each of them thought was important.

Given the context, it is not surprising that she concludes that Europe has risen up the scale of salience for the electorate as the decade has gone by. Parties that ignore the intelligence of the voters are inevitably punished, however much they may make short term gains, and some of her data point in this direction, too. Europe is a broad issue - the Euro is just the most specific and neuralgic point of that wider debate – and it is an issue that will not go away. The main political parties – their leadership, MEPs and MPs, councillors and activists - have the onerous task of actually making up their minds about what sort of relationship they want this country to have with our continental neighbours in the European Union.

Increasingly the public judges them on where they stand on Europe.

Martyn Bond
September 2000
Director of the Federal Trust

About the Author

Agnes Batory is attached to the Centre of International Studies, Cambridge University. She currently researches the impact of European integration on political parties and party systems in East Central Europe.

THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN BRITAIN

Party Campaigns in the 1990s

It is widely believed that the whole question of European integration stirs little excitement on the north-western side of the Channel. Turnout in the last European elections at 25%, the lowest ever in Britain since members of the European Parliament have been directly elected, lends credibility and renewed relevance to this statement as far as the public is concerned.

But why should this be the case? European integration impacts more and more clearly upon people's everyday life, and 'domestic' and 'European' politics are ever more closely intertwined. Europe was certainly not neglected at the elite level in British politics in the 1990s. On the contrary, debates about Britain's place in Europe and the shape the new polity should take has at times dominated the political agenda and caused heated confrontations within the main parties. In Britain, as in several other EU member states, attitudes to integration form one of the most important dimensions of intra-party divisions. They serve as decisive points of reference for party, and hence governmental, policy formation. But do they also play a similarly important role in electoral competition

between the parties? And how does political controversy at the elite level influence wider public opinion?

This essay addresses these questions by looking at the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat attitudes towards the EU since the watershed Maastricht Treaty. Examining the 1997 general election, and the European Parliamentary elections of 1994 and 1999, it assesses the extent to which a meaningful debate on contrasting visions of integration and Britain's place in Europe has become a feature of campaigns. The party manifestos are analysed to establish the formal positions put to the electorate, whilst an overview of the campaigns and the media coverage of prominent politicians' statements are used to trace the lines of intra-party division. Finally, it considers how far the parties' attitudes reflect those of the electorate.

The 1994 European election

One might expect elections to the European Parliament to offer the electorate a way of linking European structures to their opinions, but in practice votes cast and party programmes put forward in these elections have not been primarily about Europe. In the absence of a fully developed party system at the European level, in Britain, as in most member states, the parties competing in the electoral arena are to a large extent the same as in national elections. Consequently, the issues politicised in the European elections are as likely to be related to domestic as to European problems, even though the parties' positions are, to varying degrees, influenced by their transnational links to parties of similar ideological colour on the continent.

Attitudes to Europe could reasonably have been expected to make more of a difference to the 1994 European elections than on previous occasions, coming as they did in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty, which had come into effect in November 1993. The Treaty not only considerably extended the powers of the European Parliament (EP), whose composition the election was to determine, but had also been put to the test of popular approval in referenda, one of which, for the first time in the history of European integration, produced a negative result. The initial Danish ‘no,’ seen by many as signalling the end of the ‘permissive consensus’¹ on integration among the mass of the electorate was followed by a long and heated domestic political debate in several other member states. In the absence of a UK referendum, the British public could have chosen to register opposition to, or endorsement of, the Maastricht treaty through the 1994 election, thus indirectly indicating their opinion regarding the direction of further integration.

The ruling Conservatives’ strategy, which focused primarily on the kind of Europe the party advocated as opposed to the one they alleged Labour and the Liberal Democrats worked for, seemed to be based precisely on this expectation. It suggested that they assumed enough popular distrust towards Europe to divert attention from their unpopular domestic record. The government’s general unpopularity, coupled with the fact that the Tories outscored Labour in opinion polls specifically concerning Europe, prompted the party to fight the election on European issues despite the danger this choice carried for party cohesion.

By contrast, the opposition parties’ campaigns were primarily about domestic British politics, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats concentrating much of their efforts on the government’s record on issues such as taxation, health and crime. Their aim was to discredit the Conservatives’ 1992

election promises. Moreover, the sudden death of the Labour leader John Smith a mere three weeks before the election meant that speculation about his successor deflected attention in the national media from questions connected with European integration. Nevertheless, to the extent that a European agenda mattered in the campaign and as far as the Conservative Party's divisions allowed, voters in Britain did have some choice between two opposing visions of Europe and of Britain's role in it. How defined this choice was varied to a degree from constituency to constituency, depending on the prominence given the issue locally.

The choice was perhaps most apparent in the election manifestos. The Tories' programme, entitled *A strong Britain in a strong Europe*, to a great extent reflected the continuing Thatcherite agenda of resisting the interference of 'Brussels' in Britain's affairs. The language included references to a 'European superstate' and regulation 'rolled back' by the Conservatives, phrases reminiscent of the former prime minister's Bruges speech. The party completely disregarded both the spirit and the provisions of the federalist manifesto put forward by the European Peoples' Party, the group in which Conservative MEPs sat in the European Parliament. By contrast, Labour and the Liberal Democrats fought the election on the basis of the transnational documents adopted by their European allies, the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) respectively, although they produced their own national manifestos as well. Both the PES manifesto and the Liberal Democrats' programme, *Unlocking Britain's potential: Making Europe work for us*, expressed support for a vision of deepening integration.

The issue of regulation, especially in relation to the social chapter, proved to be a key area of inter-party confrontation.

The PES, strongly committed to a European social dimension, saw it as a necessary counterpart to the integrated market. The Liberal Democrats similarly rejected the British opt-out negotiated by the Tories. The Tories also had to consider the question if they were to stick to the European agenda they had chosen. However, they effectively linked the issue to the defence of the veto (the unanimity requirement in the Council), the ultimate justification of which was seen as a way to prevent Brussels from harming Britain's competitiveness and flexible labour market. Their determination to retain the veto on unspecified 'issues of vital national interest,' was in marked contrast to both the PES's call for a stronger European Parliament and 'majority voting in the Council to be the rule' and the Liberal Democrats' cautious support for the extension of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV).

The Conservatives in particular felt that there was some potential electoral advantage to be gained by playing the patriotic card. The increasingly eurosceptic tone of the Conservative leadership, and especially of John Major himself, was, however, attributable primarily to internal struggles in the Conservative Party. The Prime Minister's weakening position within the party seemed to prompt him to seek the support of the Eurosceptic right by indicating, for instance, that he would be prepared to use the veto at the next intergovernmental conference to prevent a 'federal' Europe, and expressing his support for a 'multi-track, multi-speed, multi-layered' Europe. These statements caused some of the pro-European members of the Cabinet to reaffirm their commitment not to see Britain in the slow lane in Europe. They did so a mere 72 hours before polling started, which in turn gave the opposition parties the opportunity to claim that government splits prevented it from articulating clear policy goals and subordinated the national interest to party interest.

In the event, it seems the Conservatives overestimated the importance of the European issue for the voters in the 1994 elections. Only 36.4% of the electorate turned out and opinion poll suggests European issues were never the most salient in most voters' minds. The Tories' share of the vote was their lowest in a national election since universal suffrage was introduced in Britain, despite the fact that public sentiment seemed to match the Conservative view on Europe more closely than that of Labour or the Liberal Democrats. 40% saw Europe as a threat, 71% were against granting more powers to the European Parliament, and 68% opposed a 'federal Europe.'²

However, public opinion polls also revealed that for an overwhelming majority the political situation in Britain was the most important influence on how they voted. Thus, what the election results reflected was the voters' judgement on the government's domestic record rather than their attitudes towards the state of European integration or their view of the appropriate relationship between Britain and the EU. Paradoxically, the more pro-European opposition parties, fighting a less European-focused campaign than the government, won the support of a relatively sceptical electorate, indicating that Europe mattered to the electorate to a much lesser extent than would have been necessary for the Conservative campaign to achieve its goal. From the government's perspective, the 1994 European election in Britain was largely fought on issues of European integration but lost on issues of British domestic politics. (For results, see table later in this essay).

The 1997 general election

In contrast to the 1994 European election, it was perfectly understandable that domestic issues formed the key focus of the campaigns in the 1997 Westminster election. Yet paradoxically the recent BSE crisis, the ongoing Intergovernmental Conference amending the European treaty, and the approaching third stage of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) all contributed to putting Europe high on the British domestic political agenda. This, together with the increasing polarisation over European issues within the ruling Tory party, especially over Britain's membership of the single currency, had an important impact on the campaign.

The three election manifestos paid scant attention to the European Union. *'You can only be sure with the Conservatives'* devoted only three pages out of fifty-five to Britain's role in Europe, while *'New Labour: Because Britain deserves better'* gave just one page out of forty to the matter, and even the pro-European Liberal Democrats' *'Make the difference'* had only three pages out of sixty.

However, there were clear differences between the three major parties' policy proposals regarding most of the key issues. The Conservatives pledged to maintain the opt-out on the social chapter and insist on Britain's exemption from the Working Time Directive at the Amsterdam IGC, and opposed a 'European employment chapter' in the new treaty. Labour on the other hand committed itself to signing the social chapter. The Labour and the Liberal Democrat manifestos supported the introduction of proportional representation (PR) for European elections, while in a section on constitutional matters the Conservative manifesto ruled out PR as 'un-British' and likely to lead to undemocratic practices. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats showed a willingness to consider the

extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) in Council decision-making in areas other than those defined as key matters of national interest, whereas the Conservatives categorically opposed any extension of majority voting.

Despite these relatively significant differences in terms of stated policy between Conservative and Labour manifestos on European social regulation, the electoral system, majority voting, and constructive involvement and leadership in Europe, Labour's rhetoric in the campaign was rather similar to that of the Conservatives. Pandering to the eurosceptic, formerly Tory-supporting tabloids, which now backed Labour, Tony Blair occasionally seemed to adopt a tone reminiscent of John Major, or even his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher. He pledged to 'see off the Euro-dragons' in the *Sun* and suggested in an interview in the *Independent on Sunday*: 'It is important that we recognise that the people of Europe want cooperation between independent nation states... You must always be prepared to be isolated if it is in the national interest to be so.'

The issue of the single currency, the Euro, was arguably the most important issue in the campaign, yet it was difficult to distinguish between the two largest parties' positions. The Tories maintained John Major's 'wait and see' line, a strategy that Labour seemed to share. Both parties pushed the date of entry into the distant future by emphasising what Labour termed 'formidable obstacles in the way of Britain being in the first wave of membership.' The Tory manifesto went further: without explicitly ruling the single currency out, its provision not to include legislation on the matter in the first year of the new parliament's agenda made an entry date of 1 January 1999 impossible. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats explicitly supported Britain's participation in the single currency. All three parties committed themselves to remain involved in the negotiations, to base the future choice on the

criteria of economic convergence among the member states, and to put the decision to the people in a referendum. The latter pledge was an indicator of the extent to which the parties had moved towards an even more cautious stance on the single currency since 1994. Then even the Tory manifesto had reserved the right to Parliament, and not the people, to decide.

The similarity of the two major parties' policies might have reduced interest in the single currency question, had the Conservatives' internal divisions not led the media to cover the issue extensively during the campaigns. The approaching target date of the Euro's introduction (1 January 1999) together with the increasing polarisation of the electorate also made the issue more pressing than in previous elections. Not only did some of the dailies fight an anti-Euro crusade, but the official government position proved to be unacceptable to a large part of the Conservative party, forcing John Major to campaign for moderation within his party as much as for the votes of the electorate. The Referendum Party decided not to put up candidates against sitting MPs who had declared themselves against the Euro, the bulk of whom were from the Conservative Party. There were also offers of financing from Paul Sykes, a right-wing millionaire businessman, in constituencies where the prospective party candidate had declared against the Euro. The growing number of Conservative candidates who broke the official party line and stated their opposition to Britain's membership led John Major to make a dramatic public appeal for party unity a mere two weeks before polling day and finally to pledge that he would allow a free vote on the single currency in the next parliament.

With the exception of EMU membership, Britain's relations with Europe received relatively little attention until

the final weeks before the election. By this stage, the Conservative campaign was dominated by a rhetoric that focused upon the defence of national unity on the one hand and of national sovereignty on the other. Opposition to constitutional change – devolution and European integration – were both key Conservative commitments. The more pronounced European element of the Tory campaign when compared to Labour, however, had little chance of becoming a significant vote winner. Together with domestic constitutional reform, Europe was an issue of low salience for voters in deciding which party to vote for, even though people believed European integration was the fourth most important issue facing Britain. The single currency also proved to be relatively insignificant at the polls; Conservative candidates publicly opposing the Euro did no better than their fellow candidates maintaining the official ‘negotiate-and-then-decide’ party line.³

Moreover, the positions of the two largest parties were more or less equally well (or badly) regarded by the electorate: 25% of respondents thought that the Conservatives had the best policies on Europe, 24% thought Labour did. The most consistently pro-European Liberal Democrats scored only 6%. But, respondents who thought Europe was an important issue were twice as likely to think the Tories, rather than Labour, had the best policies on Europe. The eurosceptic/patriotic tone of the Tories’ campaign on Europe seems therefore to have scored positively with the electorate on balance, and cannot be blamed for their poor electoral performance. What contributed to their defeat, however, was the party’s inability to reconcile its warring eurosceptic and europhile factions, generating a divided public image.

The 1999 European election

The outcome of the most recent European election in Britain says a lot about the preferences of the few voters who turned out and gives a good indication about those of the vast majority who did not. In June 1999 the electorate was called to the polls for the first time on the basis of a PR system. It was a much-changed political climate, after two years of a more EU-friendly - and still very popular - Labour government in office. But this was also just three months after the entire European Commission had resigned following charges of mismanagement, nepotism and fraud. The campaign led by the governing party, however, was low-key and paid relatively little attention to European issues. Instead, Labour stressed its domestic achievements - such as the lifting of the beef ban or the advantages of new social regulation for the British worker - without necessarily mentioning the European roots of these successes.

The comfortable lead that the governing party had over its main opponent in the polls probably largely explained both the lack of a greater effort from Labour as well as the Conservatives' decision to repeat their 1994 strategy. Now in opposition, they again focused on Europe in their campaign. The perception that the British electorate was becoming less supportive of European integration, and the Tories' identification of Europe, and especially the single currency, as Labour's weak point⁴ merely reinforced an increasingly hard Eurosceptical stance in the main opposition party. Reflecting this change, the Conservative manifesto '*In Europe, not run by Europe*' opposed further integration, pledging to rule out any extension of QMV in the Council and advocating a 'flexible integration model' in which participation in new European legislative actions would be optional outside of a

core policy area. It went even further, in effect calling for the curtailment of existing EU competencies, for instance in relation to the European Court of Justice.

Apart from a general domestic statement used in all the elections of 1999 - local, Scottish, Welsh and European. Labour did not publish a separate national manifesto for the 1999 Euro Elections. They fought the election on the basis of the manifesto of the PES, co-drafted by Robin Cook, which ensured that the bulk of the programme would reflect Labour's interests. The transnational manifesto of the PES contained few concrete policy proposals, however. The actual and potential role of the European Parliament in preventing fraud and controlling the Commission, for instance, received only a passing reference, perhaps reflecting the fact that in the parliamentary investigation preceding the March legitimacy crisis (which was under way at the time the document was adopted) European Socialists in the Commission, such as Edith Cresson, were compromised. By contrast, the Conservative manifesto demanded the 'disgraced' Commission leave office immediately, and proposed that the European Parliament be given the power to dismiss individual Commissioners (notably the only proposal in the Conservative manifesto to increase the powers of an EU institution). This was also a theme of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto, which set out an even more detailed programme to tackle the EU's democratic deficit.

Although the themes of the campaign were similar to those in 1994, there were new issues and significant differences of emphasis. Fraud, and the role of Conservative MEPs in exposing it, received some attention, as did resistance to plans for EU tax harmonisation. However, it was British membership of the single currency - ruled out for the lifetime of the next British Parliament by the Conservatives, and advocated by the

Liberal Democrats at the earliest opportunity on the basis of a referendum - that dominated the campaign. Labour's campaign was largely silent on the issue, although, when pressed, Tony Blair consistently argued that the government remained committed in principle to joining provided that the economic criteria were met and that the decision would be confirmed by a referendum. Although the party correctly pointed out that the European Parliament played no role in deciding on British membership in EMU, and thus the election should not be turned into a referendum on the single currency, Labour's silence further emphasised rather than downplayed the issue in public awareness. Against the background of the Euro's unexpected fall since its launch in January 1999, and with public opinion fairly strongly against entry, the 'keep the pound' theme was greatly advantageous for the Tories and correspondingly damaging for Labour.

The Conservatives' anti-Euro message came through all the more forcefully as they maintained a relatively united platform in comparison with the 1994 and 1997 campaigns, largely thanks to the moderation - indeed reticence - of several pro-European personalities in the party. In reaction to the drift of the party towards a more decisive anti-Euro position, and the greater possibilities for the entry of new political forces due to the introduction of PR, a more positive Conservative stance to the EU was in this case expressed by the Pro-Euro Conservative Party, founded by two Tory MEPs. It was, however, remarkably unsuccessful in the election, gaining less than 2% of the vote. At the other end of the spectrum the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was successful in the shifting the agenda around the Euro to the point of actually questioning the UK's EU membership. And in this they struck a chord with a significant section (7%) of those who voted, as did the Greens with their distinctive environmental campaign (6%).

Results of the 1999 and 1994 European Parliamentary Elections in Great Britain

Party	1999			1994		
	%	Seats	EP Group	%	Seats	EP Group
Conservative Party	35.77	36	EPP/ED	27.83	18	EPP
Labour Party	28.03	29	PES	44.24	62	PES
Liberal Democrat Party	12.66	10	ELDR	16.72	2	ELDR
UK Independence Party	6.96	3	EDD	0		
Greens	6.25	2	Greens/EFA	3.24		
Scottish National Party	2.68	2	Greens/EFA	3.19	2	ERA
Plaid Cymru	1.85	2	Greens/EFA	1.06		
Pro-Euro Conservative Party	1.38					
Others	4.42			3.72		
Total	100	84		100	84	
Turnout (%)	23.1			36.1		

The voter apathy characterising the 1999 elections was another striking feature across the whole EU. In addition to the possible effects of the legitimacy crisis erupting in the wake of the Commission's resignation and the fact that campaigns were, to some extent, overshadowed by the Kosovo war, other factors specific to Britain also contributed to the lowest turnout since direct elections were introduced. The very novelty of PR, election fatigue after the local, Scottish and Welsh elections, and the mid-term popularity of the Labour government, which reduced the element of protest-voting that usually characterises European elections, all discouraged the British electorate from voting. Indeed, in the case of the Labour Party the result could be seen as protest non-voting, abstention by otherwise loyal supporters. The low-key campaigns failed to counterbalance these factors and galvanise a jaded electorate.

Low turnout clearly damaged Labour more than the Conservatives, who were slightly more successful in engaging their core voters with a campaign that contained a strong element of opposition to further integration. Opinion poll data indicates that Labour would have enjoyed 52% support, a 25% advantage over the Tories, if a general, rather than European, election had been held at the time. Yet the party won only 28% of the vote - as little as in the 1983 general election. The Liberal Democrats polled only 13%, while the Tories' gained 36%, a share which would have given them a modest majority in Westminster at a general election. An explanation for this discrepancy has to include the differential mobilisation of the electorate, and the possibility that voters turning out based their choice on a set of issues different from those traditionally forming the basis of party choice in general election. Indeed it is unlikely that the Greens and the UKIP would win the same level of support in a general election held on the basis of the first past the post electoral system. The introduction of

proportional representation in the 1999 European election finally gave those electors who bothered to vote the opportunity to do something more than merely reproducing general election results, even if the most prominent theme, the Euro, did have national as well as European implications.

Public opinion data (see Table below) can shed some light on the background of this development. By 1999 the parties' European policies had become more important for party choice, with Europe and the single currency seen as the most important problem facing Britain. Despite this, among all respondents 41% still said they would vote mostly about 'the way the government is running the country,' as opposed to 36% voting 'mostly about the parties' policies on Europe.' Nevertheless,

Saliency of European issues

	1994 European Election (9 June 1994)	1997 European Election (1 May 1997)	1999 European Election (10 June 1999)
Priorities:			
European over National	31%	n/a	36% / (47%)
National over European	63%	n/a	41% / (40%) intending/(certain) to vote
The most important issue facing Britain 'EU/Europe/Euro' (by%)	6th most frequently mentioned (12%)	4th most frequently mentioned (33%)	the most frequently mentioned (37%)
If there was a referendum on the single currency -			
Would vote in favour:	33%	27%	24%
Against joining:	56%	54%	57%

Sources for this and the following tables: European Parliament (europarl.eu.int), Eurobarometer 41 (July 1994), 47 (Spring 1997), 50 (March 1999), British Public Opinion June/July 1994, March 1999, and MORI polls from Times, www.mori.com/polls, and www.ge97.co.uk/mori.

the percentage of voters who said they would vote on European issues was higher than ever before, and they were even more preponderant among those who were certain to vote: 47% as opposed to 40% who said they would vote on domestic political issues. Significantly, such respondents named the single currency as by far the most important issue in helping to decide which party to vote for.⁵ Regarding the British electorate at large, an overwhelming majority said they would vote against Britain's entry in a referendum, indicating that on the most important issue for the active part of the electorate (those expressing an intention to vote) the negative tone of the Conservative campaign had a better chance of winning votes than Labour's.

The two major British parties' voter bases showed significantly different attitudes towards Europe. In a referendum on whether Britain should stay in or leave the EU, the positive balance of Labour supporters saying they would favour staying in was 20%, of the Liberal Democrats 26%, while 14% more Tory voters would have supported leaving than staying in. Tory supporters were not only markedly more negative about EU membership than their Labour counterparts, but also attached more importance to European policies than the government's domestic performance (some 53%, while the proportion was reversed among Labour supporters).⁶

This pattern of attitudes is the best explanation for the results of the 1999 European election in Britain. For Labour, the low level of engagement among their moderately pro-European (but not necessarily pro-Euro) supporters was one factor. The Government's not unfavourable domestic record to which these voters attach more importance, and which this time decreased the usual anti-incumbent effect of mid-term European elections,⁷ but was seen as unrelated to the European elections, was another. These factors combined with a low-

key campaign were largely responsible for both the overall low turnout and Labour's poor performance, in stark contrast to the party's standing in the opinion polls. The Conservatives' vigorous anti-European, and especially anti-Euro, campaign on the other hand matched the attitudes of their core supporters and also attracted voters from other parties, thereby contributing to their good results. In this election the small part of the electorate that did turn out expressed its views on Europe to a greater extent than ever before - even though the election was still seen as unimportant, almost a non-event for three out of four British electors.

Conclusion

This series of elections in the 1990s demonstrated the growing importance of European issues to British political parties and public. Europe has divided the major political parties for decades, but by 1999 the Labour Party, like the Liberal Democrats, had adopted a broadly pro-European stance. Yet Labour in its election campaigning tended both in opposition and in government to focus more on domestic issues than the Tories. In marked contrast, the Tories were deeply divided, with the main thrust of their campaign turning to Euro-caution at best and outright hostility at worst. The result is that as far as issues of European integration were politicised at all, they were more likely to mobilise dissent than consent to the European enterprise.

The 1990s also witnessed some important changes in the way Europe was perceived by the electorate. The 1999 election was the first in which citizens intending to vote claimed that Europe - including the single currency issue with its clear

Voting Intentions

	1994 European Election	1997 General Election	1999 European Election
Voting intentions if a general elections were held at the time			
Conservative:	27%	n/a	25%
Labour:	46%	n/a	52%
Lib Dem:	23%	n/a	17%
Actual share of vote:			
Conservative:	26.8%	30.7%	36%
Labour:	42.7%	43.2%	28%
Lib Dem:	16.1%	16.8%	13%
Turnout	36.4%	71.2%	24%

domestic implications - mattered more to them than the government's record. This goes some way to explaining why the results differed so greatly from the parties' relative standing in the opinion polls. While voters showed that opinion about European integration was increasingly important in successive European elections, Europe was also increasingly seen as the most important issue facing Britain in national elections.

Certain attitudes to integration seemed to be clearly associated with individual parties, the Tories' voter base being significantly more sceptical about the EU than Labour's or that of the Liberal Democrats in 1999. This suggests, firstly, that voters were aware of what 'their' party's general stance towards Europe was, and secondly that this knowledge played a considerable part in establishing/maintaining party preferences. Thus by adopting a fairly radical Eurosceptic stance the Tories were likely to appeal to their core supporters. This was not necessarily the case in relation to the electorate at large, however. Given that the electorate was fairly evenly divided between those who favour staying in the EU and those who would vote in a referendum to terminate Britain's EU

membership (see Table below), an extreme Eurosceptic position advocating withdrawal from the EU could potentially alienate as many voters as it could attract. Moreover, a slightly larger part of the electorate regarded EU membership as a good thing than a bad thing, even though only a minority believed that membership had specifically benefited Britain. Overall, the proportion of those thinking that Britain did not benefit from EU membership or that membership was generally a bad thing did not increase during the 1990s, but the proportion of people showing positive attitudes in these indicators decreased slightly - reflecting the fact that the British electorate at large was becoming somewhat less supportive of integration.

Pro- and anti-EU sentiment

	1994 European Election	1997 General Election	1999 European Election
Benefit of country for EU membership:			
UK benefited:	41%	36%	37%
UK did not benefit:	43%	42%	42%
If referendum held will vote to			
Stay in:	n/a	40%	41%
Withdraw:	n/a	40%	37%
Don't know:	n/a	20%	22%

Public opinion concerning the general idea of British membership of the EU was divided to such an extent that the effects for any of the political parties of an overly hostile or supportive stance could be highly ambiguous. The situation was, however, different regarding one specific issue: there was a considerable and fairly stable majority against the single currency. This degree of popular opposition coupled with a correspondingly, unequivocal message by the Conservatives probably made the 'save the pound' theme the single most

important electoral asset the party had in the 1999 European election. The UK Independence Party capitalised on the same issue. The same message may well prove to be an equal asset to the Conservatives in the next general election. Unless a similarly decisive voice from the pro-Euro side matches Tory opposition to EMU, there is little hope that the electorate will subsequently endorse Britain's membership in the referendum which will ultimately settle the controversy.

¹ See L. Lindberg & S. Scheingold, *Europe's would-be polity* (Englewood Cliff: Prentice Hall, 1970).

² For the sources of results and public opinion data see generally Tables in body of text.

³ John Curtice & Michael Steed, 'The results analysed' in Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, p.308.

⁴ Interview with Anthony Teasdale, 11 June 1999.

⁵ MORI European parliamentary election research for the Green Party, May 1999.

⁶ MORI, *Times*, 28 May 1999.

⁷ See especially K. Reif & H. Schmitt, 'Nine second order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results', *European Journal of Political Research* 8 (1980), pp.3-44.

Shaping Europe

Reflections of three MEPs

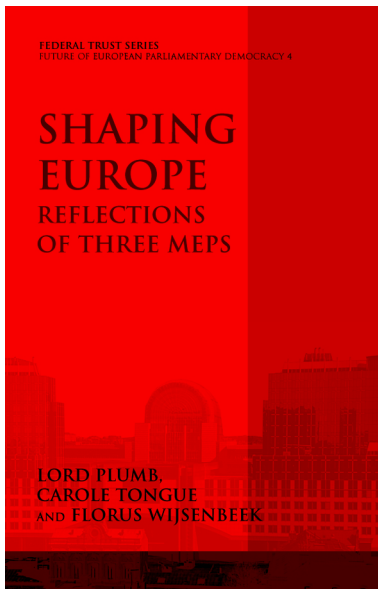
**Lord Plumb, Carole Tongue
and Florus Wijsenbeek**

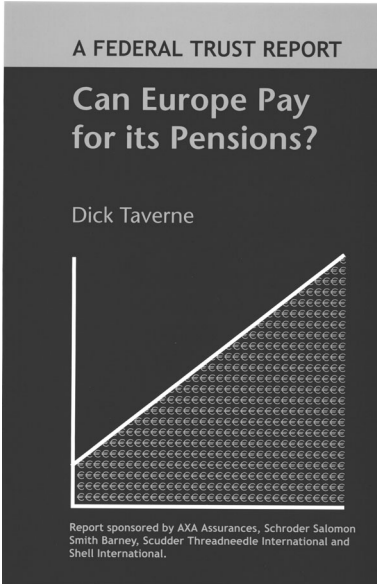
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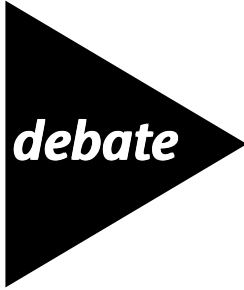
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