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British Novels and the European Union DysEUtopia

Lisa Bischoff

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To my parents

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ABSTRACT

Many attempts to explain the British EU relationship in general and (British) Euroscepticism in particular focus quite narrowly and exclusively on economic, legal or political aspects. The book at hand, in contrast, recognises the need for discussing the cultural roots of the phenomenon which ultimately led to Brexit and debating the underlying tensions and sentiments, which, as it argues, can be traced in fiction. The project thereby opts for an interdisciplinary approach, taking into account the societal, historical and political structures and contexts within which British Euroscepticism is produced and received, but, above all, its cultural narratives, images and tropes, as they circulate in British EU novels.

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Introduction: Brexit!

The year is 2045. For three decades, a federal European superstate has tormented the British. Constant surveillance and propaganda have become daily practice, while markers of Britishness—monarch, pound, Union Jack, Trafalgar Square, fish and chips, left-hand driving—have been abolished. A national resistance movement finally wins the fight for UK independence. Britain leaves the European Union.

Does this sound familiar? Andrew Roberts' fictional scenario became reality 25 years earlier than anticipated. On 31 January 2020 at 11pm (GMT), the United Kingdom officially left the European Union (EU) after 47 years of membership—a momentous juncture in British and European history. That night, the UK became the first ex EU member state. Three and a half years earlier, on 23 June 2016, the majority of the UK electorate (52%) had voted for withdrawal from the EU. The outcome of the In/Out-referendum set in motion breath-taking political developments: the country witnessed Prime Ministers, Brexit dates and deals come and go. Finally, under Boris Johnson's leadership, consensus for an exit agreement was reached in December 2019. For Brexiteers, a long-held dream came true. The Remainers woke up to a much-dreaded nightmare.

The UK remains deeply divided over the decision to leave the EU. According to an opinion poll conducted by YouGov shortly after Brexit day (2/2/2020), a slight majority (46% of the respondents) thinks Britain was wrong to vote to leave the European Union, whereas 43% find

that this was the right decision to make (YouGov, “Political” n.p.). Two years later the population still feels this way (for 49% the decision was wrong). While the UK has formally ceased to be a member of the EU, Brexit day did not mean the end of Brexit. Open questions remain with regard to the reasons and driving factors of Brexit, as well as the future of the UK, the Britain-EU relationship and European integration per se.

What is certain at this point of time, and what British EU debates before and after the referendum and Brexit have shown, is, that questions of EUrope in Britain tend to be advanced through a national lens: What does the EU mean for the United Kingdom? How does it reinforce or endanger the country? To what extent is the EU like Britain, or different from Britain? In the context of European integration, the nation (state) appears to be the central entity or building-block around which ideas and narratives are discussed and negotiated. The covers of leading newspapers and tabloids on both the day of the referendum and on Brexit day exemplified this most vividly: “Who do we want to be?” asked the *Guardian* on 23 June 2016. “An independent nation”, answered the *Sun*, while the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Express* displayed national symbols, unmistakably reminding the reader of their true allegiance (Greenslade n.p.). More than three years later, on Brexit day, the front pages of the newspapers again revolved around questions of national independence and sovereignty. They took up on the illustration of national icons (e.g. Union Jacks or Big Ben) and the white cliffs of Dover as symbol of separation from Europe, while the headlines read “Our Time has Come” (*Sun*) and “A new dawn for Britain” (*Daily Mail*) (Farrer n.p.).

Above all, references and appeals to nationhood such as these are associated with Eurosceptical attitudes. In British Eurosceptic discourses, the nation is frequently defended against a “European Superstate” or a “Brussels Monster”, to list but two phrases of an established set of Eurosceptic key terms and metaphors, slogans and rallying cries.

Eurosceptic dreams of an independent UK and nightmares of faceless EU bureaucrats, however, are not confined to the world of politics, public opinion and the media. Those tropes have also found their way into the literary domain. From 1973 till now, around a dozen novels about the European integration project have been published in Britain. The threat of ever closer union and the fear of a European Superstate, as they prevail in political and media discourses, find their expression also in these narratives. The book examines eight Eurosceptic novels, written between 1987 and 2012. The overall aim is to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the British EU relationship in general and British Euroscepticism in particular:

How is the EU represented in British fiction? What do the novels reveal about the underlying tensions of British EU relations? What future scenarios do they envision?

1.1 THE EU IN BRITISH (EUROSCEPTIC) FICTION

Britain's vote to leave the EU provoked an outburst of fictional responses, publications and performances in the UK, ranging from literary adaptations (*Alice in Brexitland*, 2017; *Five on Brexit Island*, 2016) to plays (*My Country: A Work in Progress*, 2017), musicals (*Brexit-The Musical*, 2017) and online films (*Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation*, 2017). Above all, the referendum gave rise to a new wave of novels, so-called *BrexLit* (Shaw 2018). Among them and most prominent are Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016),¹ Douglas Board's *Time of Lies* (2017), Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019).

This new strand of novels engages with the state of contemporary Britain after the decisive vote and reflects on the causes, driving factors and consequences of Brexit. *BrexLit* revolves around questions about immigration, socio-economic inequalities, cultural change and (national) identity, thereby accommodating both Europhile and Eurosceptic voices. In sum, the novels paint a picture of a divided nation, prompting the reader to enter into dialogue about the future of British society.

The novels, while written as a response to Britain's decision to leave the EU, do not, however, focus on the EU integration project. They do not raise questions or express criticism about the EU as political entity and supranational system. In fact, in these novels, as Jon Day most poignantly concludes in his review, the EU is "largely absent from the pages" (n.p.). He argues, that "most of these novels aren't in the end interested in showing us what the European project has done, and what it might continue to do were it allowed to. The Brexit novel – so far – turns out not to be about Europe at all, but about the littleness of Britain" (ibid.). Thus, although fiction triggered by Britain's EU exit is insightful in many respects, it does not explain Britain's relationship with the EU and British Eurosceptic attitudes for that matter.

¹ *Autumn* is the first novel of Smith's successful seasonal quartet *Winter, Spring, Summer* (2016–2020), responding to real world political developments (Brexit, US presidency, global racism, Covid-19).

To arrive at a deeper understanding of British-EU relations, we have to cast a look at novels specifically targeting the EU. While *BrexLit* is a rather new phenomenon, British fiction about the EU has existed all along. Representations of the EU can be found, for example, in the TV series *The Gravy Train* and its sequel *The Gravy Train Goes East* (Malcom Bradbury 1990, 1991), the plays *The Schuman Plan* (Tim Luscombe 2006, Caroline Jester 2013) and *In the Club: A Political Sex Farce for the Stage* (Richard Bean 2007) as well as in novels such as *Division* (Graham Ison 1996), *Europa* (Tim Parks 1997) or *Europe in Autumn*, *Europe at Midnight*, *Europe in Winter*, *Europe at Dawn* (Dave Hutchinson 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018).

Novelists have approached and engaged with the issue of European integration since the 1960s, i.e. the first application attempts of Britain for EC membership. Among the earliest Eurosceptic novels are *The Old Men at the Zoo* (Wilson 1961), *If you Believe the Soldiers* (Cordell 1973) and *Apocalypse 2000* (Jay and Stewart 1987). Those novels almost unanimously construct the Europeans as the evil and scheming Other and warn of an invasion. They clearly articulate Eurosceptic fears and feelings long before the term *Euroscepticism* is coined and widely used—and long before the integration project becomes today’s European Union.

This book focuses on British novels which are written in the same Eurosceptic tradition. The following eight novels have been selected for closer analysis:

Brian Aldiss. *Super-State*. Orbit, 2002.

Edwina Currie. *The Ambassador*. Little, Brown and Company, 1999.

Michael Dobbs. *A Sentimental Traitor*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Rob Grant. *Incompetence*. Gollancz, 2003.

Ken Jack. *United States of Europe*. Ken Jack Agencies, 2011.

Stanley Johnson. *The Commissioner*. Century, 1987.

Terry Palmer. *Euroslavia*. Pallas Publishing, 1997.

Andrew Roberts. *The Aachen Memorandum*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995.

Published between 1987 and 2012, the novels cover the period between the establishment of the European Union and Cameron’s announcement of a referendum. At their time of publication, the novels received predominantly positive reviews in both left- and right-wing press, especially with regard to creative originality, authenticity and humour. For example, *The Mail on Sunday* called the novel *The Ambassador* “[c]onfident,

well-researched entertainment”, while *The Guardian* found its author Edwina Currie “marvellous” (qtd. in “Review” n.p.). The novel *Incompetence* was praised by the *Daily Express* as “[a] revolutionary black comedy” (Grant, “Website” n.p.). *Super-State* received a similar review, which *The Guardian* hailed as “[b]lack, bitter and darkly unforgiving” (Grimwood n.p.). *The Commissioner* was positively reviewed by Roy Jenkins, the first ever (and only) British President of the European Commission, who, as Brussels-insider, recommended: “Immensely readable. [...] Strong on authentic detail” (Johnson, *The Commissioner* title page). Ten years after its publication, *The Commissioner* was even made into a movie, starring John Hurt and Armin Mueller-Stahl. Besides, it was listed in the forty-eighth Berlin International Film Festival (“Programme 1998” n.p.).

The two novels *The Aachen Memorandum* and *A Sentimental Traitor* have proved particularly popular among the Eurosceptic press and Conservative (Eurosceptic) politicians. *The Aachen Memorandum* was acclaimed by prominent Eurosceptics as “gripping novel” (Cash n.p.) and “cracking thriller” (Littlejohn n.p.), while it was disclosed as “Euro-phobic thriller” in the left-wing press (Buruma n.p.).² The novel was assumedly read by former PM David Cameron and MP Michael Gove, who, like MP Bill Cash, attended the book launch party of *The Aachen Memorandum* on 5 October 1995. Among the readers of *A Sentimental Traitor* are vocal Eurosceptics and hard Brexiteers such as UKIP/Brexit-Party leader Nigel Farage, Sir Bernard Jenkin MP and MEP Daniel Hannan.³ The latter commented in the *Daily Telegraph*: “*A Sentimental Traitor* works! Most of us can imagine our lives ruined by some EU agency. When the public demands such novels, it’s over for Brussels... Speaking of which, buy the book. You’ll enjoy it” (qtd. in Dobbs, “Website” n.p.). As these statements reveal, some of the Eurosceptic novels have been read by people

² Bill Cash highly recommended the novel, writing in the *Mail on Sunday* (1995): “This is a gripping novel about the European superstate [...]. This is required reading for all those who like their facts served up as fiction” (n.p.). Journalist Richard Littlejohn noted in the *Daily Mail* (1995): “Andrew Roberts has turned his nightmare vision of a Britain under the yoke of a federal Europe superstate into a cracking thriller [...]. *The Aachen Memorandum* is a rattling good yarn which would make an entertaining movie or mini-series” (n.p.).

³ Nigel Farage commented reading *A Sentimental Traitor* with the words: “I never read novels. I just don’t have the time. That said, I read *A Sentimental Traitor* in two sittings. Harry Jones is just great. Would it be possible to have lunch with him?” (qtd. in Dobbs, “Website” n.p.).

who have shaped politics and policy making in the UK. *The Aachen Memorandum* was even referred to in a debate in the House of Commons in 1996 by MP Norman Lamont:

Mr Andrew Roberts, the distinguished historian, recently wrote a novel, set in the next century, called *The Aachen Memorandum*, in which he described a situation in which civil unrest started in this country when the people found that they were unable to change the laws of this country in their own interests. I believe it is a warning. (col. 551)

Today, the Eurosceptic novels are widely available as e-books, having been re-issued in recent years (*Incompetence* 2011, *A Sentimental Traitor* 2012, *The Ambassador* 2012, *The Aachen Memorandum* 2012, *The Commissioner* 2017), thus signalling that there is an ongoing demand for these novels. *Incompetence* was also re-published as paperback in 2007 by the left-inclined Orion Publishing Group. To this date, *Incompetence* has been sold about 54,000 times in the UK (Henderson n.p.). *The Aachen Memorandum* was re-issued in 2012 as paperback by the conservative Biteback Publishing. The novel has been sold over 50,000 times in the UK (Roberts, “Enquiry” n.p.). *United States of Europe* has been retailed to the UK market about 10,000 times (it first sold in the thousands annually; it is now in the hundreds), with rising sales numbers at present (Jack, “Enquiry” n.p.). What is more, the novels receive high ratings at platforms such as *goodreads.com*: *Incompetence*, *A Sentimental Traitor* and *United States of Europe*, for example, all receive, on average, a rating of four (out of five) stars.

The authors of the eight Eurosceptic novels, judging from their biographies, appear to be rather new to writing political (dystopian) fiction. They are politicians, journalists, historians, screenwriters and novelists and include, most notably, Stanley Johnson, former Member of the European Parliament and father of Boris Johnson, and Michael Dobbs, Conservative politician (he worked for Margaret Thatcher), life peer and best-selling author of the internationally well-known *The House of Cards*. Besides Dobbs (*A Sentimental Traitor*) and Johnson (*The Commissioner*), also Edwina Currie (*The Ambassador*), novelist and broadcaster, served as Conservative Member of Parliament. Having experienced politics first hand, those three interestingly resort to the medium of literature to make their points. Andrew Roberts (*The Aachen Memorandum*) has made his name with non-fiction as journalist and historian (e.g. *Napoleon the Great*,

2014; much praise for *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, 2018).⁴ Rob Grant (*Incompetence*) has become famous as co-creator of the *Red Dwarf* TV series (BBC). Brian Aldiss (*Super-State*) was a prominent sci-fi author. Less is known about the journalists Ken Jack (*United States of Europe*) and Terry Palmer (*Euroslavia*).

1.2 APPROACHING (BRITISH) EUROSCEPTICISM

The eight novels have to be understood within the historical and discursive context of British-EU relations and Euroscepticism in particular. Published between 1987 and 2012, the novels roughly cover the period between the establishment of the European Union and David Cameron's announcement of the In/Out-referendum. British Euroscepticism thereby has to be studied within the Europe-wide context of EU scepticism, but also as a separate and comparatively peculiar variant of Euroscepticism.

The term *Euroscepticism* today is generally used to describe a wide spectrum of opposing attitudes towards European integration, ranging from slight criticism to outspoken hostility. Its origins can be traced back to the UK, where it first appeared on 11 November 1985 in the newspaper *The Times* to describe a sceptical opposition towards developments in the European Community. More specifically it referred to certain Members of Parliament within the Conservative Party, so-called anti-marketeters, who objected to steps towards an economic and monetary union (Spiering, *European Studies* 128). Margaret Thatcher's speech at the college in Bruges in 1988 is considered to play a central role in the evolution of Euroscepticism. Leconte calls it a "radical manifesto and a defining cornerstone of Eurosceptic discourse" (12). In the course of the 1990s (and as response to the Maastricht Treaty), the term *Euroscepticism* grew in use and spread across Europe, becoming a "catch-all synonym" denoting broadly "any form of opposition or reluctance towards the EU" (ibid., 4).

First associated with British party politics, Euroscepticism developed into a pan-European phenomenon, which is neither restricted to one country nor to one particular arena. The overall low turnout in the

⁴With regard to the In/Out-Referendum and Brexit: Andrew Roberts (Kraemer and Marusic n.p.) and Michael Dobbs (Dobbs, "Voting" n.p.) publicly supported the Leave-Campaign and Brexit, while Edwina Currie (Davis n.p.) and Stanley Johnson (Quinn n.p.) voted Remain. After the vote, the latter two went on supporting May's and Johnson's course to deliver Brexit.

European Parliament elections (2014: all-time low of 42,61%) and the success of right-wing Eurosceptic parties (e.g. Brexit Party) in both elections, 2014 and 2019, clearly demonstrate how contested the EU is among the European public (European Parliament, “European Elections” n.p.).⁵ A Eurobarometer poll conducted in November 2019 shows that 47% of all EU citizens do not tend to trust the EU (European Commission, “Trust” n.p.). Scholars trace the rise in Euroscepticism to the EU’s overall legitimisation problems, the Eastern enlargement (2004, 2007), the developments in supranational governance (e.g. the EU’s attempts for constitutionalisation) and, above all, to the latest economic and political crises (refugee crisis, Eurozone crisis) (Leconte 46; Gifford and Tournier-Sol 2; De Vries 4). According to Usherwood and Startin, Euroscepticism has become increasingly “embedded” within European nation states (12); Gifford and Tournier-Sol perceive Euroscepticism as a significant, complex and persistent feature of the dynamics of European integration (1–6).

British Euroscepticism is an exceptional case in point. Britain is not only the “home of the term Euroscepticism” (Spiering, *Euroscepticism* 127), its EU membership history and, not least, Brexit confirm its “distinctive Eurosceptic trajectory” (Gifford and Tournier-Sol 2). Considering the UK’s overall rather half-hearted commitment to further integration, many have described Britain’s relationship with the EU as awkward, ambivalent or difficult. David Cameron’s pledge to hold a referendum has widely been interpreted as a response to 30 years of Eurosceptic mobilisation and a general hardening of Euroscepticism in mainstream politics (Baker and Schnapper 62; Gifford and Tournier-Sol 10).

1.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE BRITISH-EU RELATIONSHIP (1973–2020)

Taking a backward glance at 47 years of British-EU relations indeed reveals that there have been various calls for reforms and re-negotiations during the UK’s EU membership. At times, the UK was very much committed to the EU project (Single European Act, defence/security matters), at others

⁵The outcomes of the European Parliament elections were clearly indicative of a growth of Euroscepticism: The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (in 2014) and the Brexit Party (in 2019), both arguing for withdrawal from the EU, won the majority of seats in the UK in the respective elections (UKIP: 24 seats; Brexit Party: 29 seats) (European Parliament, “European Elections” n.p.).

it became notorious for its economic pragmatism, several opt-outs (e.g. Schengen, the Euro) and special provisions (e.g. budget rebate).

In fact, right from the start, in the 1950s, when the first steps towards a supranational community were undertaken by France and Germany, the United Kingdom was reluctant to get involved: the governments (Labour 1945–1951; Conservative 1951–1964) decided to neither sign the Treaty of Paris, which formally created the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and thus laid the foundations for a common market, nor the two Treaties of Rome which saw to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Authority (EAEA or Euratom) (Geddes 51).

Britain's initial reluctance is often explained with the country's "long-standing preferences for free trade and the maintenance of economic relations with the Commonwealth and USA, an aversion to supranationalism, and a desire to recover great power status" (ibid., 43). Scholars see a clear link between Britain's different perception of its role in World War II, post-imperial nostalgia and (early) Euroscepticism (Deighton, "Past" 105–106; Grob-Fitzgibbon 468). Europe in the 1950s was considered to be one, but not the most important partner: "Only after a commitment to the Empire and the Commonwealth and the English speaking world, did Western Europe figure as an arena for British engagement" (Forster 11; see also Gamble 14). This early reluctance and overall economic pragmatism seem to have characterised the EU approach of various British governments throughout the 47 years.

From the outset, the decision to join the EC was purely made on economic grounds and membership as such sold to the public. By the early 1960s Britain had realised that the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) ultimately could not compete with the EEC and its fast-growing economies, which seemed to thrive and benefit from the dynamics of supranational integration.⁶ According to Gamble, the UK felt excluded from "the powerhouse of the European economy" (15).⁷ As a

⁶In 1959, Britain founded the EFTA jointly with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Austria and Switzerland, thus setting up a free trade area in Europe as a counterweight to the EEC (Geddes 53). At the time, Britain also joined a number of other intergovernmental organisations, such as the NATO (defence, 1949) or the Council of Europe (known for the European Convention on Human Rights, 1949).

⁷Not least with regard to the Suez crisis in 1956, and a weakening of its connections with the USA and the Commonwealth, the UK saw the decline of its status as a great world power (Geddes 55; Gamble 15). During the Suez crisis, the USA refrained from supporting the

consequence, it abandoned its experiment with EFTA and reconsidered its relationship with Europe. Labour and Conservatives both found EEC membership ultimately “necessary, if Britain were not to risk economic and political isolation” (Geddes 57). The UK applied twice unsuccessfully (in 1961 and 1967), before its application got accepted, almost a decade later, joining the EC on 1 January 1973 (Geddes 59).⁸

Economic pragmatism was also particularly visible during the Conservative government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990). Thatcher, who had voted in favour of EC membership in the first referendum on membership in 1975, became famous for battling for a budget rebate (in 1984, Thatcher secured a discount on the UK payments) and advocating the Single Market Programme.⁹ According to Gamble, the battle about the budget rebate “damaged long-term

UK’s military intervention in Egypt. Britain, then known as USA’s junior partner, became increasingly economic and military dependent on the US. The relationship and trading patterns with the Commonwealth nations changed, too. Australia and New Zealand reoriented themselves towards markets in the US and Japan (Geddes 55).

⁸The first application to EEC membership was submitted in 1961 by the Conservative government during the leadership of Harold Macmillan (1957–1963). The second application was made by the Labour government (1964–1970) under the premiership of Harold Wilson in 1967. As scholars point out, de Gaulle was not convinced of Britain’s full-hearted engagement with Europe (Gamble 16). The third and final attempt to join the European Communities was made by Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath (1970–1974) (Forster 32). Despite a number of contentious issues (e.g. regarding the Common Agricultural Policy and British contributions to the EC budget), Heath saw no other alternative for Britain but to enter and shape its institutions and structures “from within” (Geddes 57). De Gaulle’s successor, President Georges Pompidou, was more amenable to UK accession. After a parliamentary ratification in 1972 (the House of Commons passed the European Communities Act by 356 votes to 244), Britain, along with Ireland and Denmark, joined the EC on 1 January 1973 (*ibid.*, 59).

⁹Only two years after joining the club, in 1975, Britain, under the leadership of Labour (Harold Wilson), sought a renegotiation of the terms of accession and held the first in-or-out referendum on the terms of an allegedly improved membership settlement (Gamble 17). According to Geddes, “Britain gained little through the renegotiation that it could not have gained through normal Community channels” (64). On 5 June 1975 about two thirds (67.2%) voted in favour of staying in the EC (Bulmer 552). The result, however, cannot be interpreted as wholehearted, enthusiastic support of the EC as political integration project. Rather, people believed that they were joining an economic organisation and would benefit from the Common Market, because this is, as Geddes notes, how EC membership was sold to them (66). The first referendum has been widely understood as a strategy of Labour to win the election, while responding to intra-party divisions (a growing anti-EC sentiment within the party) (*ibid.*, 64). It did not settle the European question.

relationships, casting Britain in a role that was to become increasingly familiar of seeking to promote its own interests with no regard as to how Community institutions might be strengthened” (21).

This pragmatic, trade-oriented stance also surfaced in the negotiations around the creation of the Single Market.¹⁰ Though fully committed to the idea of an effective common market, the British government led by Thatcher saw the single market as an end in itself, while the other EC members understood it as the first move towards deeper economic and political integration (Geddes 70).¹¹ According to the latter, the single market had to be accompanied by steps towards a European Monetary Union (EMU), by giving more decision-making powers to the European Parliament (in terms of efficiency and democratic accountability) and equipping the EC with more competencies in the fields of social and regional policy (Geddes 69–71; Gamble 21–22). The UK government feared that accompanying policies on EC level would be too interventionist and social democratic; the British were afraid to lose control over its economic policy. In retrospect, the Single European Act (SEA), signed in 1986, accelerated the European integration process (against British will); shortly after, plans were made for closer integration, which ultimately culminated in the negotiations for the Maastricht Treaty.

The novels, above all, must indeed be read against the backdrop of the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties. Maastricht in particular is said to have marked a shift in the nature, but also the overall direction of the European integration project, and certainly gave rise to Euroscepticism in Britain (Gifford and Tournier-Sol 2; Usherwood and Startin 3–4; Taggart and Szczerbiak, “Coming” 17).

¹⁰Thatcher’s predecessor James Callaghan (Labour, 1976–1979) had been pragmatic and cautious regarding moves towards an economic and monetary union. In 1978 his government decided against taking part in the new European Monetary System (Gamble 19–20). While the Labour party in the course of the 1970s grew increasingly Eurosceptic, the Conservatives remained pro-EC till the mid-1980s. Divisions over EC membership within the Labour party even led to the creation of a pro-European breakaway Social Democratic Party in 1981 (Geddes 4–5). In the general election of 1983, Labour pledged for withdrawal from the EC on the grounds that it had become too capitalist and incompatible with Labour’s programme (1979–1988) which “aimed at guaranteeing employment and welfare through protectionist and interventionist policies” (Gamble 18; see also Forster 64).

¹¹Thatcher is said to have attempted to promote her own interests at the European level, i.e. pursuing a neo-liberal economic agenda to complement her efforts at home (Buller 556–557).

Especially regarding the Conservative Party Euroscepticism can be traced back to the late Thatcher years and the Maastricht negotiations. In her final years of government (1987–1990), Thatcher’s attitude towards the EC changed from a pragmatic position, viewing the EC as an economic opportunity, to hostility, as she began to perceive the EC as a threat to national sovereignty. Her famous speech to the College of Europe in Bruges in 1988 (“The Bruges Speech”) clearly signalled her Eurosceptic stance at the end of her premiership and is widely understood as having spurred the development of Euroscepticism (Forster 77).¹²

Through the 1990s, the moves towards an economic and political union then led to the growth and virulence of Euroscepticism within the whole Conservative Party (Gamble 21–22; Geddes 71, 225–229). Despite his earlier mildly pro-EC commitment, John Major’s government displayed deeply inherited Conservative policy preferences (e.g. pro intergovernmentalism) during the Maastricht negotiations in 1991 and thus, once again, confirmed the impression of Britain’s semi-detachment (Geddes 75; Buller 556; Gamble 23).¹³ Above all, the UK government insisted on crucial opt outs for Britain on the Social Chapter and the third stage of the European Monetary Union, i.e. the adoption of a single currency (Buller 557). By the time the Maastricht treaty was ratified in parliament, the Conservative Party faced huge intra-party divisions.¹⁴ Conservative Eurosceptics saw in the

¹²In her speech, she vehemently defended national sovereignty and promoted the idea of a European Community as an association of nation states (Gamble 22; Forster 67). Thatcher’s anti-EC stance was not shared by all Conservatives; in fact, it divided the party (Gamble 23). During her last years of office, disputes over EC issues (e.g. membership in the European Monetary System), led to the resignation of Nigel Lawson (Chancellor) and Geoffrey Howe (Foreign Secretary) (Geddes 5, 74). In his resignation speech, Howe vehemently criticised Thatcher’s leadership style. More and more party members (e.g. Michael Heseltine) and ministers saw Thatcher as electoral liability (*ibid.*, 72). In 1990, she felt forced to resign.

¹³John Major had taken Britain into the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1990. In 1992, however, the UK had been forced to leave the European Monetary System, i.e. withdraw sterling from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), because it had not been able to meet the specified fluctuation range of the exchange rate (Forster 106). The so-called ERM-crisis of 1992 is said to have weakened his government’s economic competence and credibility (Gamble 23–24; Forster 85). Gamble is convinced, that “[i]f sterling had stayed within the ERM then the ground would have been prepared for Britain’s eventual acceptance of a single currency and economic and monetary union” (24).

¹⁴Bridging the anti/pro-EU-divide within his party continued to be an enduring challenge for Major’s time in office (Forster 83; Geddes 75–76). The divisions would, amongst other reasons, lead to Major’s defeat in 1997 and contribute to Labour’s victories of 1997 and 2001.