



Dynamics of the Eurosceptic Narrative

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Speaker: Professor John Curtice (Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, and President of the British Polling Council)

Moderator: Otmar Lahodynsky (President of the Association of European Journalists, Austria)

This session focused on the 'Leave' and 'Remain' campaigns surrounding the UK referendum on EU membership held in June 2016. The two campaigns were compared, in terms of the narratives employed and the societal responses triggered, using also the background of UK history and evolution of citizen sentiment towards the EU.

Otmar Lahodynsky introduced the topic by noting the rise in Eurosceptic rightwing parties and populism across the EU, and highlighting recent developments in Hungary and Poland, as well as the Austrian presidential elections. He noted that there was a rising general mistrust of the EU, which was increasingly seen as a generator of problems rather than an answer to challenges. He raised the question of whether this could ultimately lead to the destruction of the EU.

Beginning his lecture by tackling the question of why Euroscepticism is so dominant in the UK, **Professor John Curtice** argued that the referendum showed that the EU project fundamentally failed on a cultural dimension in the UK. It did not persuade UK citizens to see the EU as 'us' instead of 'other'. With only 15% identifying themselves as European, the majority of UK citizens identify themselves as 'British and not European'. Moreover, the EU continues to be perceived as a threat to a distinct British culture. He concluded that the UK's relationship with the EU has always been of a pragmatic and transactional nature, which he sees as a crucial element in how the campaigns played out.

Prof. Curtice stressed the importance of the UK's historical relations with the EU and highlighted three major developments since the 1975 referendum on EU membership that paved the way for the negative outcome in 2016. The first incident was the EU's banning of iconic British export products in 1995, which fueled pre-existing negative sentiments. The second was the UK experiencing an unprecedented rise in net immigration. The third was that the UK's economy performed comparatively well after the recent economic crisis, whereas in 1975 the EU was seen offering an economically superior model to an economy that was struggling.

In the second part, Prof. Curtice analysed how the campaigns for Leave and Remain were fought. His main argument revolved around the idea that by relying on a 'half-out' message, the Remain supporters engaged in a rather negative campaign, focusing on abstract economic consequences of leaving instead of highlighting the gains of staying in the EU. The slogan of 'the best of both worlds'

lent the campaign a sceptical aspect. The Leave campaign, meanwhile, structured their communications around a set of straightforward messages, depicting the EU as a negative influence and highlighting the benefits of leaving. The Remain campaign did not offer a contrasting story. Leave provided a clear option, a positive message of gains and a vision of a full-out UK. Prof. Curtice explored this point by quoting Leave's rallying cry of taking back control over laws and immigration, and spending £350 million weekly on the NHS rather than giving it to Brussels. By contrast, Remain's central message was that 'Brexit will cost £4,300 per household by 2030'.

Prof. Curtice then examined how the public reacted, by analysing what the voters believed were the consequences of leaving the EU. According to surveys, a majority of voters indeed thought that Brexit will leave the UK worse off economically, but an even larger majority also thought that immigration numbers would fall. He pointed out that this shows a strong traction for Remain's main argument but an even stronger traction for Leave's main argument. Although many voters believed Brexit would be negative, Prof. Curtice sees the Remain campaign as failing to align these perceptions more clearly to its campaign.

Furthermore, over the course of the campaign, Remain support began to be less strongly associated with the issue of the economy, whereas Leave support succeeded in being strongly associated with its core themes. Leave was seen as a clearer solution for the immigration issue than Remain was for the economy. Prof. Curtice highlighted the fact that only half the population was convinced that staying in the EU would result in the economy improving as a crucial indicator that Remain's message did not resonate the way it was expected to. This was indeed a serious problem in a debate in which financial consequences formed the heart of the matter.

Prof. Curtice also described the demographic, educational and geographical divisions of society on Brexit, with older and less educated people finding it harder to adapt to an increasingly heterogenic cultural environment. His main conclusion was that the UK had never taken Europe to its heart, making support for the EU rational and conditional. While economic arguments were persuasive, they did not convince enough people to deliver a 'remain' result, as they were counter-balanced by powerful arguments about immigration and the nature of sovereignty. This left the merits of the transactional relationship open to debate, in a campaign where the Leave side had the more compelling tunes.

Mr. Lahodynsky then opened the floor to questions. During the discussion that followed, **Prof. Curtice** explained that migration was seen as a particular problem in the UK because when freedom of movement was introduced most UK citizens lived in culturally homogenous places. UKIP spotted the opportunity to link the issue of EU membership to migration. While UK citizens don't necessarily see the nation state as more capable of dealing with the issue of immigration, they dislike the idea of bowing to consensus decisions. When asked whether a better Remain campaign could have resulted in a different outcome, Prof. Curtice stressed that the point of his lecture was to show why the outcome was always going to be close but never set in stone. He suggested that the Remain side could have invested more effort in a positive message, and that it failed to either find an answer to the migration issue or to shift the focus back to the economic issue.