

Introduction

The UK's membership of the European Union (EU) has always been controversial. The UK first applied to join the EU in 1961 (it was then called the European Economic Community), but its membership bid was rejected by the French President, Charles de Gaulle. At that time, the UK was already involved in the European Free Trade Area (EFTA). The UK finally joined the EEC in 1973, as did Denmark and Ireland. The UK held a referendum on its membership 2 years after joining and, whilst the public voted in favour of the UK's membership, debate has continued. Today, many UK parties are wary of further EU integration, and some even support withdrawal from the EU..

History

All the main UK political parties initially agreed on the UK's membership of the Common Market, but there has been on-going debate about the UK's membership of the EU. In the 1970s, debate concentrated on criticism that despite being one of the poorest members, the UK was the second largest net contributor to the EU budget (largely because its relatively small agricultural sector meant it received reduced payments from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, CAP). In 1982, difficult budget and CAP negotiations led a number of member states to use their national vetoes against proposed reform.

The UK's involvement in the EU came under intense strain after the UK entered the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1990. The UK hoped to end a damaging recession, create stability and low inflation by attaching the rate of the British Pound to the German Deutschmark. However, the policy actually prolonged the recession and forced the British Government to raise interest rates (to a high of 15%) in order to stay in the range permitted by the ERM. Attempts to support the British Pound failed, and the UK was forced to devalue its currency and withdraw from the ERM on 16 September 1992 (known as 'Black Wednesday'). Also in 1992, full Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) became a goal of the EU, and the union's single currency (the Euro) was launched in 2002. The British Government maintained the right not to join the Euro.

In recent years, debate about the EU has not subsided and the UK's EU membership itself is still challenged. The question of whether the UK should join the Euro has not been answered and issues including the EU's Lisbon Treaty and EU enlargement caused much controversy. Furthermore, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from a number of UK political parties have been tarnished by expenses scandals.

UK parties represented in the EU Parliament

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) (24 MEPs) advocates complete withdrawal from the EU on the grounds of: its excessive cost; lack of democracy; and immigration problems. UKIP wants to replace the EU with a free-trade agreement without political union (like the EU has with Norway and Switzerland). UKIP policies are based on what the UK's relationship with the EU would be like if it were exempt from its political aspects, but involved in economic aspects.

The Green Party (3 MEPs) is critical of many aspects of the way the EU is run, believing that government should be as close to the people as possible. The party also fears that the EU is not adequately concerned about ecological priorities. The party opposed the EU Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty. It also opposes UK membership of the Euro.

The Scottish National Party (2 MEPs) is a left-leaning nationalist party. It aims to ensure advantages for Scotland, e.g. it is critical of the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and wants Scotland to regain responsibility for its fishing industry.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) (1 MEP) is a unionist party in Northern Ireland. It opposes the UK joining the Euro, campaigned for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty and wants fishing policy to be controlled at a local level.

The Conservative Party (19 MEPs) opposes further EU integration and traditionally does not advocate withdrawal from the EU; however, the party has a growing EU sceptic movement. The party opposed the Lisbon Treaty (2007) and campaigned for a referendum on it. The Conservative Party also opposes Britain joining the Euro and calls for 'radical' reform of the CAP and for the restoration of national control over social and employment legislation. In 2010 the party initiated the European Union Act, which passed into law in 2011. The Act provides for a referendum in the event of any future EU treaty change or new treaty which would see sovereignty given from the UK to the EU. The Conservative Party instigated a review on the 'Balance of Competences', which will see every policy areas evaluated to work out where power lies; with the UK, the EU or shared.

The Labour Party (20 MEPs) oversaw many developments in the EU when it held power in the UK from 1997-2010. For example, Labour Prime Minister (PM) Tony Blair signed the EU's Social Chapter in 1997 (reversing Conservative PM John Major's earlier decision to stay out of EU social policy altogether). However, the Labour Party's position on UK membership of the Euro is uncertain – in 2001 it supported joining the Euro if the UK economy passed 5 'tests of economic strength' and if it were supported at a referendum. However, in 2007, Labour PM Gordon Brown asserted the UK would not join. In 2005, Tony Blair gave up 20% of the UK's EU budget rebate in exchange for 'fundamental reform of the CAP', but reform was more limited than expected. In 2007, Gordon Brown, signed the Lisbon Treaty despite the Labour Party's earlier promise that the Treaty's predecessor, the EU Constitution, would be put to a referendum.

The Liberal Democrats (1 MEP) has traditionally been the most 'Pro-EU' UK party, arguing that 'the UK's place is at the heart of Europe'. In 2008, Liberal Democrats Leader, Nick Clegg, called for a referendum on the UK's EU membership to provide the opportunity to make a case in favour of the EU to 'defeat the eurosceptics for a generation'. The Liberal Democrats supported the Lisbon Treaty, but the party is keen to avoid further institutional changes and has insisted on the importance of **subsidiarity**; Lib Dems argue that the EU is useful for dealing with global issues (such as cross-border crime and environmental concerns), but that the EU should not act in areas where national or local action would be more effective. The Lib Dems advocate reforming the EU budget and ending the monthly relocation of the EP from Brussels to Strasbourg.

Sinn Fein (1 MEP) is a Northern Irish republican party. It adopts a 'critical but constructive' approach to the EU and wants the EU to be a partnership of equal sovereign states. The party opposed the Lisbon Treaty, arguing that it would 'damage Irish interests'.

Plaid Cymru (1 MEP) campaigns for the establishment of an independent Wales within the EU. It believes EU membership has been good for Wales, but that reform is still needed e.g. it wants decisions to be made at a level as close to the people as possible.

The Ulster Conservatives and Unionists (1 MEP) combines the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Northern Ireland branch of the Conservative Party. It opposes further extension of the EU's power over the UK and it also opposes joining the Euro.

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Rebate:** refund of part of budget contributions.
- ❖ **Subsidiarity:** principle that the EU should only act where member states cannot take effective action themselves.
- ❖ **Nationalism:** advocacy of a country's political independence, often promoting that nation's interests above all others.

Links

- ❖ <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-uk-2014.html>