

Newbury Twin Town Association

Why the UK had an EU referendum

The reasons behind the UK EU referendum

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The UK's relationship with the EU has always been strained. From its initial rejection of participation in the Treaty of Rome, its rejection of membership to the EEC on two occasions, its referendum in 1975 and the poor relationship between Margret Thatcher and the EU commission, the UK has fought the idea of the political union of Europe, even though the ultimate aim of the EU is precisely this goal. So how, after 40 years, did we get to a referendum where the British people voted to leave the EU?

The trouble started with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which created the modern EU. This saw a change in the European project from a trading agreement to a political union with its own currency. It also saw powers being transferred from the UK Parliament to the EU Parliament which were unacceptable to the Euro sceptics in the Conservative Party.

Membership was not an issue under the Labour governments of Tony Blair or Gordon Brown as this coincided with economic growth until the financial crash of 2008. However, the issue of Europe was still a problem in the Conservative Party. Even though the Conservatives gained power in 2010, the issue of Europe was put on hold because the Conservatives were in power with the Liberal Democrats who are staunchly Pro EU.

The financial crash of 2008, and the election of a pro austerity government in 2010, brought a fall in living standards. The influx of European migrants, which was welcomed in good times, was now being resented by some of the lowly paid indigenous population as the migrants were now taking 'their' jobs and 'their services'. The leadership of the three major parties were slow to recognise this problem or respond to it. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Nigel Farage saw this as an opportunity and between 2010 and 2012 their support jumped from 3% to 15% of the electorate.

Conservative MPs, concerned that UKIP would split the Conservative vote, demanded that David Cameron should offer an EU referendum as a way of retaining the Eurosceptic party member's support. Initially David Cameron tried to make the issue go away by promising a referendum if the UK Government were asked to cede more powers to the EU Parliament, but this did not go far enough. Consequently, in January 2013 David Cameron gave a pledge that the Conservative Party would give the people of Britain an in/out referendum, even though some of his cabinet colleagues tried to dissuade him from his risky strategy. But why did he take the gamble?

The main reason is that Mr Cameron thought it would never happen. He wrongly assumed that the next government would be a coalition of either the Conservative or Labour with the Liberal Democrats and the referendum pledge would be the first thing to go in Coalition talks. The unexpected victory of the Conservatives in 2015 meant that David Cameron would have to follow through with his promise on a vote by the end of 2017.

Faced with a referendum David Cameron tried to get concessions from the EU to bolster the case for continued EU membership. Euro sceptics in his own party weren't convinced with the new deal and, eager for the issue not to dominate the political agenda for any longer than necessary, Mr Cameron set an early referendum date – 23 June 2016.

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