

Pro-Europeans have reasons to be cheerful

Richard Gowan & Robert Blackhurst

British pro-Europeans look rather like cult members facing the apocalypse. With Robert Kilroy-Silk as harbinger of doom, Polly Toynbee has prophesied that “it will take a near miracle to win a constitutional referendum now.” Like all prophecies, this has the potential to become self-fulfilling.

Ironically, there is a case for holding off the valium. Whatever the last week’s headlines, there are clear signs that the anti-European vote is approaching its high water-mark. The potential pro-European vote is dormant, but could win out.

The insurgent UKIP has been taken as proof of a groundswell of anti-European feeling. It may have won 15% at the Euro-polls, but it touted surveys suggesting that 48% of voters are ready to leave the EU.

But the weekend brought figures that threw that groundswell into doubt. An ICM poll indicating that voters would reject the constitution by 57% to 28% has been declared a disaster for Blair. But previous ICM polling, conducted in late April, had put the level of opposition at 55% to 25%.

Thus the intervening period, during which the UKIP flourished, and both Howard and Blair seemed outflanked on Europe, did not see a growth in underlying anti-EU feeling. The UKIP’s supposedly momentous impact on the political landscape was a tiny shift in favour of the pro-Europeans.

This is reassuring, but hardly cause for champagne. The anti-constitutional lead remains huge. But two underlying issues suggest that it is surmountable. Firstly, ICM’s earlier work suggested that half of voters consider themselves to be pro-European in the broadest sense: they do not wish to leave the EU. Only a third are instinctively anti-European.

Secondly, most voters lack strong opinions on the matter. At the start of the year, MORI found that only 9% viewed Europe as the most important issue facing the UK. Surprisingly, these voters are thought to be agitated *Guardian* types rather than the irate *Daily Mail* readers. The tabloids tell Blair to “listen to the voters” on Europe, but the electorate doesn’t want to talk about it most of the time.

Overall, therefore, the UK is characterised by a weak instinctive preference for Europe. But this soft feeling is difficult to translate into strong opinions on concrete issues such as the constitution or the European parliament. The challenge is to give the electorate reasons to turn their instincts into choices.

This was once thought impossible. Commentators predicted that turnout on 10 June would be below the 1999 level of 24%. The Electoral Commission indicated that, even among those strongly in favour of scrapping the EU, only 40% intended to vote. A similar figure applied to arch-federalists.

Labour and the Liberals attempted to resolve this by arguing on non-European issues: Howard and Iraq. The Tory message was obscure. Only the UKIP campaigned on the EU. It motivated anti-Europeans who would otherwise have stayed at home.

It did so in “perfect storm” conditions. With England awash with George crosses and the rhetoric of Harfleur, the party could play football politics. It probably also profited from the slew of stories associating enlargement with immigration “chaos” earlier this year. Immigration tops polls of popular concerns, and the UKIP emphasised that Britain must “regain control of its own borders”. Europe became a high-salience issue for peripheral reasons.

The perfect storm will not be repeated. England cannot play France at every vote. The UKIP will be tarnished by responsibility - it is a highly factional party. But the constitution is the more immediate issue, and one on which the party can still do damage. But that damage may be to its own side: the Tories and UKIP will struggle to find a single message. Incoherence will not breed trust. In the 1975 referendum on EC membership, the coherence of the yes camp (uniting Roy Jenkins and Edward Heath) contrasted successfully with the antis, dismissed as obsessives with “wide staring eyes”.

A similarly useful contrast can emerge this time, but only if Tony Blair and his allies learn from Kilroy-Silk. Pro-Europeans must now convert their instinctive constituency into active voters. That means developing stronger media messages, and talking frankly about the risks of voting no. Blair failed to do this before 10 June, but has made some efforts in the last days – these must not tail off.

The rise of the UKIP is actually helpful, in that it may keep Europe as a high-salience issue. This should push pro-European politicians to hone their arguments, and make the gently pro-European public face the choices they must make on referendum day. But if the government does not show leadership, the significance of those choices will remain obscure. And the constitution will be lost.

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