Introduction

The current problems over Britain's membership of the European Union result largely because of an absence of quality debates during the critical period from 1959 to 1984. The situation today is attributed to members of the political elite from this period subordinating the question of Britain's future in Europe to short-term, pragmatic, party management or career considerations. In an historical examination of the impact short-term political expediency played in the positions adopted by members of Britain's political elites in the debates over Europe, the argument advanced is that many MPs failed to consider the long-term implications of membership. This failure subsequently led to Britain's continued troubled relationship with Europe and ultimately to leaving the European Union.

Exploring the background to the British government's early attempt at European Economic Community (EEC) membership, and concluding with the year that both major political parties accepted Britain's place in Europe, this book examines decision-making in Britain with particular reference to the relationship between elite and mass opinion. It focuses on the short-term political motives of a representative sample of the leading politicians involved in the critical decisions on whether Britain should join the Common Market. The findings cast light on the current toxic dilemma on the issue of Europe, and from today's perspective, enhances the capacity to view the period 1959–1984 far more effectively. As Europe is the most important issue confronting Britain in the post-war years, this book contributes to an understanding of Britain's political elites in the policy-making process, and adds explanatory value to the key issue of Britain's continued troubled membership of the European Union. It provides an explanation as to why Britain made successive applications, and eventually joined the EEC. A number of key questions are answered. These include why Britain's relationship with Europe has been so troubled, with British exceptionalism and Euroscepticism ultimately resulting in Britain's decision to leave the EU; whether the British public was largely misled by the political elite in respect of the true aims of the European project; and why

Britain's relationship with Europe continues to remain such a toxic issue for both the Labour and Conservative parties.

My own position on Britain's membership of the EU is not wholly straightforward. Having voted to remain in the EEC in 1975 and to leave the EU in 2016, with substantial reservations on both occasions, my view in many ways reflects the complexities of the issue. This book therefore looks at Britain's relationship with Europe evidentially, and as far as humanly possible, without bias.

There is a wealth of publications on Britain's relationship with Europe, and whilst some of the literature on the issue inevitably overlaps with this book, there are no competing titles. Most books on this subject concentrate on a particular aspect or period of Britain's relationship with Europe. Stephen Wall's *Official History of Britain and the European Community* (2013) for example, is a highly detailed work covering the period 1963–1975. However, the quality of the debates over Europe is not addressed, nor does this work fully examine the motives of individual members of the political elite in adopting a particular position on EEC membership. Similarly, Robert F. Dewey's *British National Identity and Opposition to Membership of Europe, 1961–63* (2009) provides an excellent account, but covers only a limited time period. Hugo Young's *This Blessed Plot* (1999) is a compelling narrative and offers an insightful account of the issue. Understandably, however, the work is journalistic and is written from a distinctly pro-Europe perspective. In addressing previously unanswered questions therefore, this book serves to fill a gap in the existing literature. This is particularly true of the book's central argument: that the lack of an adequate debate throughout the twenty-five year period 1959–1984 led to the problems faced by the current Conservative government.

In the 2016 referendum, the British people voted narrowly but decisively for the UK to leave the European Union after forty-three years of membership. This outcome was ultimately a consequence of many members of Britain's political elite approaching the issue of Europe between 1959 and 1984 on the basis of short-term political considerations and the failure to interrogate the true nature of the European project. With the 2015 general election resulting in a surprising Conservative majority, the issue of Britain's relationship with Europe had now been brought into sharp focus. Prior to the election, Prime Minister David Cameron promised the British people an in/out referendum on Britain's membership should his party be successful. This promise was made largely not only to appease the considerable number of his backbench Eurosceptic MPs but also to minimise the perceived threat to the Conservatives of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the general election.

Faced with a problem not too dissimilar to that encountered by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1975, Conservative Prime Minister Cameron had the task of renegotiating the terms of Britain's relationship with the EU to the satisfaction of not only his party but also the British media and, most

importantly, the British public. Although the outcome of the referendum held on 23 June 2016 resulted in a somewhat unexpected narrow majority vote to leave the EU, this was not to be the end of the matter. The largely right-wing Conservative Party Eurosceptics in Parliament were determined to keep up the pressure on newly appointed Prime Minister Theresa May, to ensure that Britain's exit from the EU is a clear break, with no fudge, an example of which would be Britain leaving the EU but remaining a member of the Single Market – a position favoured by some moderate Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs. In March 2017, however, Parliament voted by a large majority to trigger Article 50, the mechanism by which the UK government gives notice of leaving the EU. This led to a protracted series of bitter negotiations with the leaders of other EU member states. The aim of this book therefore is to provide an historical, evidence-based account of the reasons and circumstances that led to the current situation whereby both major political parties are utterly divided on Europe.

Europe was used by elements within the elite on both sides of the issue to secure electoral and political advantage. For the purpose of this book, the definition of the political elite is that of Members of Parliament. The nature of political elites is explored in more detail in Chapter 1.

The concept of sovereignty, which has been used by members of the political elite on the European issue, is examined in Chapter 2. This malleable and complex concept was employed in a rhetorical rather than in a precise manner to support or oppose integration into the European Community. The pro-Europeans for example, who support the pooling of sovereignty, maintain that sovereignty is not an immovable concept to be closely protected but rather 'it is a matter of using this state power and authority in the best possible way to secure advantages for the British people' (Geddes, 2004: 183). Those opposed to European integration, however, argue that sovereignty is not being pooled, but surrendered.

Whilst there have been several individual members of the leading political parties who were genuinely passionate in respect of their concern about the loss of Britain's sovereignty, within the Common Market debate the concept has been used in a manipulative manner by members of Britain's political elite. The fluid and evolving nature of sovereignty with its ambiguous definitions ensured ideal opportunities for those who wished to exploit the concept for their own personal or political motives. Furthermore, the tenacity with which some politicians used the term sovereignty when debating Britain's membership of the Common Market between 1959 and 1984 neglected the changing realities of political power resulting from executive domination and the emerging phenomena of globalisation and governance.

Chapter 3, 'The first application', examines the debates in the early 1960s over Common Market membership, and analyses the significant influence of

US foreign policy and the impact of American capital on Britain's decision to apply for membership of the Common Market. The main focus of the chapter, however, is on the internal debates and divisions within the Conservative Party and, in particular, the Labour Party during this period. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's application in 1961 and Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell's response in his speech to the Labour Party Conference in 1962 are of particular significance. This chapter discovers the extent to which both leaders expressed either an ideological view in respect of their relationship with Europe or used the issue for party and electoral advantage.

Chapter 4, 'The second application', focuses primarily on the problems faced by Harold Wilson in his struggle to keep the Labour Party united. Following Macmillan's failed attempt at Common Market entry, Prime Minister Wilson also found himself facing not only US pressure to apply for membership, but also demands from the pro-European right-wingers in the party. Having been seen to have strongly supported Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell's passionate 'thousand years of history' speech, Wilson needed to be able to make an application without on the one hand appearing to shift position on Europe, and on the other hand attempting to maintain party unity for electoral advantage. It was therefore the overriding consideration of maintaining party unity which allowed Wilson to take differing stances on the issue of Europe. Examples of members of the political elite taking a position on Europe for reasons of personal or party advantage include Wilson's choice of George Brown as Foreign Secretary rather than the anticipated appointment of James Callaghan. As Pimlott (1992) and Castle (1990) suggest, this was a decision based less on Europe and more concerned with Wilson's fear of a plot to replace him with Callaghan as leader. In Macmillan and Wilson's respective applications for membership of the EEC, the conditions of entry were inextricably linked with party management, with both leaders lacking total commitment to Europe. Wilson also used the pressure from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) for Britain to join the EEC to his own electoral advantage. As a consequence of his application for membership in 1967 therefore, Wilson subsequently gained the significant support of British business.

The crucial House of Commons vote on the principle of EEC membership and the subsequent severe ructions in the Labour Party as a result of sixty-nine Labour MPs defying the whip to vote with the Conservatives is analysed in Chapter 5, 'Taken in by Heath'. The 1970 general election is also of particular significance insofar as the successful Conservative leader Edward Heath was determined to take Britain into the Common Market in spite of public opposition and a manifesto that promised only to negotiate on European membership. The debates on Europe during this particular period were fought in the midst of a power struggle within the two major political parties. With the aid of primary sources, this chapter demonstrates the individual motives of Heath

and the extent of the Conservative government's determination to ensure Common Market membership.

Prime Minister Harold Wilson's decision to hold a referendum on Common Market membership in 1975 had a huge impact not only on both the Labour and the Conservative parties, but also on individual members of the political elite. In Chapter 6, 'The 1975 referendum on EEC membership', events leading up to the referendum are analysed: these include the general elections of 1974, and the crucial House of Commons three-day debate on the Labour government's recommendation that Britain remain a member of the Common Market. This chapter explores Wilson's motives for holding a referendum and, despite a clear verdict from the public, demonstrates how the issue was to be far from settled. This was a period of particular significance for several leading players in the European debate. As such, this chapter not only analyses the reasons why some of the political elite changed their position on Europe, but also reveals the highly significant consequences for the parties and individuals as a result of the 1975 referendum.

For some members of the political elite, the public's verdict on the 1975 referendum meant the issue was over at least for the foreseeable future. For others, however, the debate continued. A large number of Labour left-wing anti-Marketeers were unhappy at how the defeat on Europe was followed by a general offensive by the leadership against the left of the party on other issues. Chapter 7, 'Post referendum', examines the events following the outcome of the referendum including the resurgence of the Labour left as a consequence of the 1979 general election defeat. This chapter also analyses the Labour Party Conferences held in 1981, which were dominated by the left. These conferences formed the cornerstone of policy for the forthcoming 1983 general election and, for some right-wingers in the Labour Party, provided the catalyst for the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Although this chapter focuses primarily on the Labour Party, in the longer term, it was to be the Conservative Party that was to become the party most deeply divided over the issue of Europe.

In testing the central argument, Chapter 8, 'Positions taken on Europe, 1959–1984', examines the positions taken by a representative sample of individual MPs, the two major parties, the British press and public opinion over the period 1959–1984. This chapter analyses the effects on individual members of the political elite in the light of European events over the twenty-five year period. This is assisted by the trajectories which illustrate the relative stances of the major parties dependent on whether they are in or out of office.

In addition to summarising and explaining the main findings, the Conclusion also reflects on the inter-relationships between the period analysed and the continuing European debate. It is clear that during the period, which included two unsuccessful and one successful application, the long-term implications

of membership did not weigh heavily with many members of the political elite. The evidence suggests that for many MPs of both major parties, short-term considerations were of greater importance. There is evidence that party management was of greater concern for Wilson and Callaghan than a genuine commitment to European membership. An analysis of the trajectories in Chapter 8 also provides evidence to substantiate the central argument that positions adopted on Europe were, in many cases, more for reasons of party or career considerations than that of taking a principled position on the issue. Public opinion was also a factor in decisions taken by the political elite. This was particularly the case during the 1975 referendum, for example, when the elite was fractured on the issue and the opinion of the public was required.

The short-term nature of the debate stored up future problems for political parties and their leaderships. For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, by holding a referendum, Wilson kept the Labour Party together sufficiently to win the 1974 general elections, yet the party became openly divided following the 1975 referendum result. Furthermore, Macmillan's decision to apply for membership as examined in Chapter 3, and Labour's change of policy on Europe under Kinnock's leadership as discussed in Chapter 7, formed a significant part of their respective modernisation programmes as opposed to both leaders being fully committed to Britain's place in Europe.

Recently released documentation provides further evidence to substantiate the argument that members of the political elite used the issue for short-term considerations. As discussed in Chapter 5, for example, the questionable method with which the Conservatives attempted to obtain the support of the Ulster MPs in the crucial House of Commons vote on membership in 1971 displayed a greater need to save the government from defeat than a genuine commitment to Europe. Moreover, Wilson's letter to Jean Monnet endorses the argument that leaders are prepared to adopt differing positions when favourable to do so. During the entire period of 1959–1984, there was a lack of evidence to show that events in Europe had any influence over the debate in Britain. Subsequent events, such as the speeches in 1988 by Jacques Delors and Margaret Thatcher, and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 did, however, considerably shape the debate, and have been highly influential on parties and individuals.