

Europe: Good News for Tony Blair

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YouGov's general election polls frequently contained bad personal news for Tony Blair. They showed that he no longer enjoyed the cross-party appeal that marked his early years as Labour Party leader; that Iraq was costing him votes; and that he was widely distrusted.

YouGov's latest poll for Sky News, however, contains good news for the Prime Minister. Conducted days after the collapse of the European Union summit in Brussels, where EU leaders failed to agree a budget. Only 4% of the British public blame Tony Blair. The great majority blame either France's President Jacques Chirac (45%) or "all the leaders" (40%). Views are similar among voters of all parties; Liberal Democrats are most likely to blame Blair - but the figure rises to only 5%!

Even more important, a majority of almost two-to-one backs the Prime Minister's offer to negotiate "about the future size of Britain's rebate, if this is part of a wider negotiation about the future of Europe's subsidies to farmers. 57% take this view, compared with just 30% who think Britain should keep the rebate in its present form.

Once again, supporters of all parties support the negotiation offer: Labour voters by 63-27%, Conservatives by 55-38% and Liberal Democrats by 70-20%.

More widely, the budget dispute has harmed the EU's reputation in Britain. 23% say their view is now less favourable than it was a few weeks ago; a further 46% say they were, and remain, critics of the EU. Only 1% say their view is now more favourable, while 17% say they remain supporters of the EU.

By 45-35%, the public thinks membership of the EU has done Britain more harm than good.

Conservatives hold this view by 71-18%; Labour voters disagree by the modest margin of 45-34%, and Liberal Democrats by 47-36%.

In the light of these figures, it is scarcely surprising that six out of ten electors think that Britain should either pull out of the EU (24%), or remain within the EU but only if it gives up its political functions and reverts to a trading bloc (35%). However, one in three of the trading-bloc-supporters think, reluctantly, that Britain should remain within the EU if - as seems certain - any move to convert the EU into simply a trading bloc is vetoed by other countries. Taking this into account, the British public is now evenly divided on whether Britain should remain in the EU. But a mere 10% now think "the UK should work for closer political union within the EU".

Eastward expansion of the EU is also a minority passion. 72% would support Norway joining the club, but only 25% back a Turkish application. However, this appears to be because Turkey lies to the east, rather than because it has a large Muslim population. The figures for other eastern European countries are similar - and, in three instances, worse: Romania 27%, Ukraine 25%, Russia 24%, Serbia 20% and Albania 18%.

The public is more evenly split over one of the widely-discussed consequences of Poland's recent admission to the EU: the arrival in Britain of Polish plumbers and building workers. 44% welcome their arrival, "because Britain needs more workers with these skills", while 39% oppose it as "unfair competition with British workers".

These results suggest that a fundamental challenge faces EU leaders, and especially Tony Blair. There is widespread unease about the record, powers and future of the European Union, especially in Britain but also (judging by the results of the French and Dutch referendums) in other member states.

A new sense of vision is needed, to replace the burning ambition that guided the EU's founders in the 1950s, to prevent another major European war. That vision needs to embrace a more sensible Budget, and reasons that western Europeans can respect for moving the eastern borders of the Union nearer to Moscow and Baghdad.

For the moment, however, Tony Blair has achieved national unity on an issue where, for many years, unity has been conspicuously absent.

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