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Never say never

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How high is the mountain of Euroscepticism Tony Blair and Robin Cook yesterday braced themselves to climb? They are keen to separate attitudes towards the euro and towards UK membership of the EU but they have a habit of mixing and matching.

We know that in a referendum more than 70% would opt to keep the pound. An already sceptical electorate seems to have been swayed further by the Danish "No" vote, continuing news of the euro's weakness and Mr Blair's avowal that he too would vote No in an opinion poll. Indeed, since August the shift in opposition to the euro has been most marked among Labour supporters. In August Labour voters would have said No to the euro by a margin of only 3%, now a majority of 28% would follow Mr Blair's advice.

Danish voters rejected the euro at the end of a campaign in which virtually the whole political, business and media establishment urged them to take the plunge. This knocked the notion here in the UK that the euro is inevitable.

Continuing news of the euro's weakness on the foreign exchange markets had already worried voters. They feel that a currency they hear is "weakening" and going "down" must, by definition, mean trouble for all who use it. They see no disadvantages for those whose currency is "strong" and "rising". And if that were not enough, already sceptical voters have been fed, drip by drip, opinion polls that suggest those who oppose the euro are in a clear majority, creating a climate of opinion hostile to any chance the pro-euro camp may have of winning a referendum.

Since "Yes" prospects are poor it makes little sense for Blair to allow the impression that he is in favour of joining the euro to harm his election chances: far better to start the campaign after he has been re-elected when perhaps the euro will be in better shape.

In focus groups, people are deeply distrustful of other Europeans. Often they say that we beat them all in the second world war and they have been trying to get back at us ever since. They fear the continentals sneaking up on us under the cover of the EU. Beyond this, people are confused about what the euro will mean to them. Yet they are also fatalistic, saying we will have to accept it in the end anyway.

While anti-euro campaigners trumpet the fact that we are taxed less than people in euroland and have one of the largest economies in the world, few believe it. More common is the idea that we are a small country, anchored somewhere offshore and unable to ignore them, the Europeans, or even resist their long-term will. So while only 18% would vote for the euro in a referendum now, 52% think it will be the currency of Britain within a decade. Only 21% think we will never have the euro.

So Mr Blair still has some reason to be cheerful about long-term prospects. Voters are tribal, Labour supporters especially. No matter how many issues pollsters ask about, around three-quarters of Labour voters nominate their own party as having the best policies. But Labour supporters show only low levels of support for policies where the party line is distinctly different from their instincts or where the policy is confused or badly communicated.

We can compare the apparent clarity of William Hague's message with the confused smoke signals from Labour's high command. In an immediate referendum, 85% of Tory voters would vote No and only 10% would vote Yes. But among Labour voters, 60% would vote No and 29% Yes. For as long as the government seems confused, so will Labour supporters. But at any time when the perceived economic fortunes of euroland improved, a more forceful message from the top would encourage more Labour supporters to fall into line.

Research also suggests that people in the lower social classes are most hostile to the euro. They do not like taking risks, which is in part a reflection of their personal financial circumstances. A risky gamble with a new-fangled currency is, for the moment, unlikely to appeal. But in time the euro will strengthen along with the perceived strength of euroland economies. And people will start to gain personal experience of euro notes and coins on trips across the Channel. The pound will at some point start to weaken relative to the euro. When that time comes, adopting the single currency will no longer seem like a dangerous adventure.

It is tempting but dangerous for No campaigners to look at the data in the chart and imagine the war is over when, in fact, it has yet to really start. Their problem is that public opposition is founded on nothing much more than inherited animosity to all things European. An added advantage is that, for the moment, Yes campaigners have given up the fight. A credible pro-euro movement would sharpen the focus on the economic realities determining whether we should adopt the euro.

If there is such a debate and if the accompanying opinion polls started measuring its impact on voter attitudes, people might become much less sure that their instinctive hostility to the euro (and the EU in general) was shared.

The pro-euro forces look as if they have been knocked out but No campaigners would be unwise to stop trying to find ways to carry on punching. The pro-euro lobby is not going to be killed off and the most the No campaign can hope for is that they will find it difficult to pick themselves up and resume the fight.

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