Simon Usherwood

Department of Political, International & Policy Studies

University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK

GU2 7XH

S.Usherwood@surrey.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1483 – 68 9962

Fax: +44 (0)1483 - 686208

"The dilemmas of a single-issue party: The UK Independence Party"

Biography

Simon Usherwood is Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Political, International & Policy Studies at the University of Surrey, UK. His main research interest is opposition to the European Union, particularly in the UK and France, with particular regard to the impact of institutional structures. His work has been published in several journals and edited collections.

"The dilemmas of a single-issue party: The UK Independence Party" [1]

ABSTRACT

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) has been one of the most successful single-issue parties in modern British political history. With its central policy of withdraw from the European Union, UKIP was the third largest party in the 2004 European Parliament elections. However, this article highlights the tensions that exist within the party, in terms of strategy, focus and even its objectives. From its foundation in the early 1990s, the party has been placed in a position equivalent to the *Fundi-Realo* debate in the German Green party of the 1980s: does the party strive for ideological purity and singularity of purpose, or does it work within the system it professes to abhor? The article considers the different pressures placed on the party, considering both environmental constraints placed on it by the institutional system and the internal ideological currents at play. These internal and external factors help to explain the party's dilemma and point towards some possible future paths.

INTRODUCTION

Research on opposition to the European Union (EU) is soon to celebrate the first decade since the publication of Paul Taggart's (1998) article in the *European Journal of Political Research* on euroscepticism as a touchstone of dissent. Since then, there has been a veritable explosion of work, looking at countries and groups across Europe and at a wide variety of different theoretical approaches (see Flood & Usherwood 2005 for an overview). However, one of the more surprising omissions from this catalogue of research has been the UK Independence Party (UKIP): despite being one of the oldest and biggest and electorally most successfully anti-EU parties, there has been only indirect academic research and a couple of books, both written by insiders (Daniel 2006; Gardner 2006). Such an omission is surprising, but perhaps reflects a certain unease on the part of researchers about how to deal with the party. On the one hand, it is successful at the level of mobilising significant numbers of voters, resulting in a presence in the European Parliament (EP) since 1999. On the other, it is weakly organised and riven by disputes. Perhaps UKIP falls between two stools by being too small to be of interest as a party, but too big and too particular to be dealt with as a pressure group. Moreover, its status as a single-issue party, for whom all policy preferences circle around withdrawal from the EU, marks it out as something of an anomaly in British politics. Whatever the reasons, it will be argued that UKIP presents several aspects that are of interest to those studying the phenomenon of opposition to the EU. In particular, the party's experience since its formation in 1993 highlights the importance of both environmental factors (in the form of institutional constraints) and of internal dynamics (in the form of personalities and ideologies) in

determining the course of events. In this, UKIP is clearly not unique and the point will be made that all parties and pressure groups suffer the same tensions.

Founded in 1993 by Alan Sked, a university lecturer who had been involved in the Bruges Group in its early 1990s heyday, UKIP was intended to contest elections in the EP and Westminster with a view to securing British withdrawal from the EU. After several years of unexceptional performance and competition with the Referendum Party in the 1997 general election, the party suffered major upheavals in 1997 (when Sked resigned in the wake of allegations of infiltration by the British National Party (BNP) and disagreements with the National Executive (NEC)) and again in 1999 (when Sked's replacement, Michael Holmes, and the NEC were sacked by the party following legal wrangles in the wake of the election of 3 MEPs under the new proportional representation system to the EP). It was only under the leadership of Jeffrey Titford and then Roger Knapman that the party found more stability, broadening its policy base and gathering support for the 2004 EP elections. These elections marked the high point of the party's existence to date, with 12 MEPs and over 16% of the national vote. However, almost immediately the party had to deal with the struggle by one of these MEPs, former television presenter Robert Kilroy-Silk, to secure the leadership (in which he was unsuccessful) and with the party's inability to maintain media interest in its policies. The election of Nigel Farage, long a strong figure in the party, in late 2006 marked the start of an effort to mainstream UKIP into British political life.

The primary argument of the paper is that UKIP finds itself having to resolve a tension that confronts all ostensibly single-issue parties. This tension is the one that

lies between those who feel that the objective is fundamental to the nature of the party and cannot be compromised at any point, and those who accept a need to be flexible in the short-run, in order to have a better chance of achieving the objective in the longer-term. This is usually referred to the *Fundi-Realo* split, after the names given to these two camps in the German Green Party in the 1980s (Paterson & Southern 1991). This basis dynamic has, it will be contended, driven much of the development of the party and explains much of the trouble that it seems to attract to itself.

With this in mind, the article is structured as follows. Firstly, there is a consideration of the institutional environment in which UKIP operates: this covers not only the party system for the EP and Westminster, but also its relations with the rest of the British anti-EU movement and with other politically-peripheral parties, particularly on the far-right. The next section switches to the internal dynamics of the party, looking at the sub-currents of ideological thought and the somewhat opaque organisational structure. The conclusion then draws together the external and internal perspectives, to develop and flesh out the ideas introduced above.

EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

This article is concerned with understanding how the external environment and internal pressures have shaped the work and objectives of UKIP. This dual perspective builds on research on exploring and explaining the European issue (Hooghe 2007; Flood & Usherwood 2005) in a fashion that goes beyond simple (and simplistic) taxonomies. What this research has stressed so far has been the necessity

of unpicking the detail of a group's position on European integration, by exploring institutional and ideological factors. It is this insight which informs the rest of the article. Rather than divide the analysis between institutional and ideological elements, it is more useful to approach the matter with an internal/external split, to underline the interrelated nature of the factors under consideration. As will be apparent, just as ideology is contained and constrained by institutional factors, so institutions are underpinned by ideological assumptions.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL ARENAS

The most obvious environmental factor has been the British electoral system, or more accurately, systems. The difference between First-past-the-post (FPP) and Proportional Representation (PR) since 1999 has had a clear impact on party strategy: while the party aims to contest all elections at a national level, the structuring effects of the electoral systems result in more emphasis being placed on EP elections. This is inevitably intertwined with consideration of a second factor, namely that of political arenas. Despite the party's core policy of withdrawal from the EU, and its consequent refusal to recognise the legitimacy or purpose of the EP, there is still an understanding that it represents the best opportunity to gain a profile. This tension sits at the heart of the shifting policy on EP seats: Originally, the party had vowed not to take up any seats it might win, but with the replacement of Alan Sked in 1997, that policy changed to one of taking up seats in order to gather information to educate the public. Thus while there was an ideological pressure to not taking up EP seats, there was also a pragmatic, electoral one for contesting them, grounded in the higher prevalence of 'Europe' as a motivating factor in voting (Franklin, 2001). This contrasts with the experience of Sinn Féin, which has not taken up their seats in the UK Parliament on

grounds of principle, but which has access to other elected chambers in Northern Ireland and Eire. The key point is that the barrier to accessing the EP is lower than that for the House of Commons: to a lesser extent, this has also been true of efforts to contest local elections, where turnout is much lower.

The higher barrier to the House of Commons is constituted not only by the electoral system but also by the nature of the institution. As the source of governmental power, it is the dominant political assembly in the British political system. As a result, there is a voting dimension absent elsewhere, namely the relationship of the MP to the government: MPs are typically selected by voters on the basis of the party affiliation and the possibility of gaining power (Norton 2005). In making this decision voters will consider the party's programme and here UKIP suffers a distinct problem with its public profile as a single-issue party. The Commons does not only deal with the European Union, but the full range of public policy and so any party contesting the formation of the next government is driven to present a wide-ranging manifesto, in order to demonstrate competence and to maximise votes (Downs 1957). While there have been recent attempts to engage in such a widening of the party's programme, most notably with the development from 2002 of an immigration and asylum policy modelling in part on ideas of Pym Fortuyn in the Netherlands, this remains an incomplete process. This in turn partly explains the consistently poor performance of the party in both general elections and by-elections.

These uneven barriers to political arenas is also reflected in the different approaches taken by the party. This was particularly evident after Dick Morris offered his services to UKIP from 2003. Gardner (2006, 190) notes that for the 2004 EP election,

the strategy was one of simply mobilising the large latent anti-EU vote that was already present in the electorate: the core message was simply "Say NO", which would allow people to project whatever their discontents with the EU might be. To this end, the party invested all possible resources in spreading its message across the country, spending £2.36 million (as against £3.13 million by the Conservatives and £1.71 million by Labour (Electoral Commission, 2004)). By contrast, the 2005 general election was fought on a basis of concentrating on a few seats where winning might be possible, with a view to using any success in those areas to help bolster the national campaign (Gardner 2006, 265).

PARTY COMPETITION

The second key environmental factor comes from competition with other parties. Naturally, this is related to the previous factor, since electoral systems have shaped the party system. Once again, we see some difference between the party's stance in EP and general elections.

In the former, UKIP is able to present itself as a relevant party at the level of policy, as well as a focus of protest votes against Labour and the Conservatives. In this, it is largely benefiting from the structural second-order effects that shape EP election voting (Rief & Schmidt 1980; Marsh 1998). By contrast, in general elections it finds itself identified as occupying the same political space as the Conservatives, but with a much less ambiguous stance on the EU. This then has manifested itself in UKIP's efforts to highlight the substantive differences between itself and the Conservatives. In effect, much of this comes down to attacking the Tory line of "in Europe, not run by Europe" developed by William Hague as a means of holding together the various

factions within the party: in UKIP's opinion, membership of the EU necessarily implies an acceptance of policy outputs, both politically and legally (Gardner 2006, 143). A second strand in differentiation from the Conservatives was the development of a second policy line on controlled immigration in the aftermath of the 2001 general election, to try and capitalise on the perceived reluctance of the main parties to discuss the issue. Despite the risks of reinforcing the party's profile as a quasi-far-right grouping, policy was significantly hardened in 2003 (Gardner 2006, 177), only for the issue to be taken up by both Labour and the Conservatives a couple of years later, again closing down the distinctiveness of UKIP.

If the relationship to the Conservatives has been presented as one of conflict, then that should not let us ignore the strong ties between the two parties. Many UKIP members were previously Conservative members and it is tempting to consider UKIP as the anti-EU faction of the Conservative party, on both membership and ideological grounds. That was the basis for UKIP's ability to draw in votes during second-order elections from the Conservatives. However, this relationship extends beyond this: several key donors to the party have swung between UKIP and the Conservatives. A case in point here is Paul Sykes, a millionaire who had bank-rolled anti-Euro Conservative MPs in 1997, then helped support the Democracy Movement (the successor to the Referendum Party), before coming to fund UKIP in the 2001 general election and the 2004 EP elections. While doing the latter, it was apparent that Sykes was engaged in an on-going relationship with the Conservatives, in the form of trying to get them to harden their position on the EU: things came to a head in October 2004, when Robert Kilroy-Silk stated at the party conference that he wanted to ''"kill the Tories", causing Sykes to withdraw funding, since only the Conservatives had a

"credible chance of forming an anti-EU government" (BBC 2004, Gardner 2006, 240).

The ambiguity of the relationship is also seen in the repeated discussions about electoral pacts. On the one hand, UKIP has a pragmatic interest in gaining representation for itself, but on the other, it has an ideological interest in gaining representation for any MP opposed to membership of the European Union. This tension has resulted in agreements with other minor parties, in order to avoid splitting the vote, but it is with the Conservatives that this has held the greatest potential. However, the Conservatives have consistently rebuffed UKIP, on the grounds that their MPs should not be beholden in some way to another party, even if fears of a potential split in the centre-right vote did have some audience (Bruges Group 2005). Clearly, underpinning this refusal to cooperation is a position of predominance and a lack of willingness to enhance the implied credibility of UKIP's importance. Notwithstanding this, the continual movements (actual and threatened) of individuals between the parties does suggest that there is something of a meaningful overlap between the two parties' constituencies.

A final point to make in relation to party competition comes on the other side of the political space. UKIP has been repeatedly accused of being infiltrated by far-right elements, in some cases with some grounds for justification (Searchlight 1997). Regardless of whether these accusations have all the substance claimed of them, the relationship to groups such as the British National Party or the National Front is a fraught one. From the foundation of UKIP, there has been a continual effort by the leadership to stress their inclusiveness and non-racist nature. At the same time, those

areas that the party has focused on (EU withdrawal and restrictions on immigration) are very close to the far-right. Essentially, the issue is akin to the relationship with the Conservatives, in that UKIP find themselves wanting to differentiate themselves, but also wanting to gain votes and active members.

INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Having sketched out the environment within which the party operates, we must unpack the internal processes at work in the party. However, the focus is much more on the ideological aspect, although institutional considerations still play a part.

IDEOLOGY

At one level, UKIP's ideology is very clear: opposition to the European Union. At another, it is highly problematic. The basic issue is that the party's core ideological identity is placed around a negative definition: there is no clear agreement on why the party is opposed to the EU, less as to what should be the response to this opposition, and less still as to any other policy preferences.

In the party's early years, this was not a major issue, since it was relatively small, was not taken as a serious participant within elections (and so did not have to justify its position) and because it was able to feed off the visceral quality of euroscepticism, rather than the intellectual or ideological dimension. However, with time the party has been forced by its expansion and its success to expand, explore and modify its policy. The steps can represented as a progression from principled non-engagement

(under Alan Sked), to pragmatic engagement (under Michael Holmes and Jeffrey Titford), to developing new policy lines and arenas of activity (under Roger Knapman), to recontextualising the entire opposition to the EU in a wide-ranging notion of 'Independence' (under Nigel Farage). In this latest phase, the party has sought to develop a much more ambitious recasting of its public image and has tried to access new arenas of political debate. As much as the party has pursued a line of withdrawal since its foundation, it has been happy to buy into a system that gives it a certain legitimacy through its MEPs, as well as funding, a small amount of which has supported other activities.

This ambiguity of ideological programme has helped the party to respond to competition within the party system (see above), by giving it some flexibility. But it has also left UKIP open to entryism: the far-right has already been discussed, but we might also consider the way in which relatively high-profile individuals such as Holmes or Kilroy-Silk used their power and profile within the party to take it in new directions. That the party has been able to resist all of these incursions does demonstrate the limits to such tactics, but the simple fact of the attempts being made in the first place points to at least a perceived weakness of an ideological core. Ultimately, the tension comes from two very different pressures. Firstly, UKIP's members are relatively diverse, typically having left other political parties to express their particular frustration over European policy. This pulls the party in a number of different ideological directions. Secondly, UKIP has to respond to electoral necessities: by taking the path of being an office-seeking political party, it has to pursue votes. In this case, the issue is only partly about the exact policy on the EU,

because that issue is low in most voters' list of priorities. Hence the party has to roll it up with other policies in order to make a sufficiently interesting package.

The end-result has been the uneven development of a set of policies outside EU withdrawal, but still largely informed by it. UKIP's most recent set of manifestos (UKIP 2007a) provides a programme that talks about the economy, health, education and the other staples of British party politics, but all underpinned by a budget much enhanced from non-membership of the EU. In this way, the party is able to square the circle of cutting back state interference in peoples' lives and increasing spending on public services. Such ideas have been around for some thing within the anti-EU movement (e.g. Burkitt *et al*, 1996), but they remain essentially populist in their opportunistic (rather than principled) use of extra resources.

PARTY STRUCTURE

UKIP's party structure has also played a role in the changing fortunes of the party. While Sked had produced a complete constitutional document for the founding of the party, it has proved to be problematic. Firstly, it was a document for a more mature party than UKIP, and presupposed a certain stability within the membership and leadership which was not actually there: most obviously, the NEC was relatively large, and it has only been in recent years that there has not been a problem in finding individuals to take up posts. Consequently, more radical elements have found it easy to access positions of power, with a resultant instability. The text also has several lacunae of procedure and powers, resulting in at least three separate instances where extensive legal advice has been sought by competing groups, which in turn has undermined the constitution's status. That these instances have all revolved around the status and powers of the party leadership (Sked and Holmes' arguments with the NEC in 1997 and 1998 respectively; Kilroy-Silk's challenge for the leadership in 2001) has merely made the problem more obvious.

The tensions between the leadership and membership have also been noted. Particularly once UKIP started to win elected offices, those individuals have had access to much more reliable funding for their activities, largely outside the control of the party. Because much of the membership is passive, power inevitably accrues to the centre, only to produce the personality and policy clashes already noted. A case in point has been the tension between the NEC and the party's MEPs, who have taken up much of the party's resources, which was to result in the resignation of the party chair, Petrina Holdsworth, in 2005. This tension has been enhanced by the rise of the 'chequebook politics' of which Sked had criticised James Goldsmith's Referendum

Party in 1996: the party is reliant on a small number of bigger supporters for much of its financing, with the resultant influence that produces. Consequently, their opposition to the current review of party funding is rather unsurprising (UKIP 2007b).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that UKIP is a party in flux, whether it is considered ideologically, organisationally or in its tactics and strategy. In this, it has been shaped by a set of internal and external constraints, in the same way as any other party or pressure group. How then can this be pulled together?

At the heart of the matter is UKIP's status as a single-issue party. Its party-ness compels it towards certain practices, which are more or less compatible with its single issue. We might therefore look to similar parties for useful analytical frameworks. Of these, the one that seems most readily applicable is the experience of the German Green party: while not a single-issue party in the same sense, this was a political party emerging from a broader set of activities in civil society, struggling to reconcile different tensions (Rüdig 2005). In the case of the Greens, this was expressed as a *Fundi-Realo* split. The *Fundis* held a position of comprehensive rejection of the political system, while the *Realos* took the view that there had to be some engagement with the existing system and actors in order to change them (Paterson & Southern 1991): thus the core issue was one of flexibility of means to achieve an ultimate objective. In the German case, it was the *Realos* that won out, taking the party into the *Bundestag* and eventually into national government. Paterson & Southern (1991,

215-6) suggest this was possible because the internal tensions were compensated for by the rising profile of environmental issues in political debate from the 1970s and the highly educated and motivated social groups that supported them.

Transposing this to UKIP, we note several points. Firstly, the *Fundi-Realo* split has also been present in UKIP, most obviously at the end of the Sked era in 1996-7, when the policy on EP seats was changed. However, it has also resurfaced with the expansion of the party's programme outside of EU withdrawal. In one notable example, NEC member Damian Hockney (later to be UKIP's London mayoral candidate) invested much time into fighting what he perceived to be a shift in the core policy of the party: in 2003, election leaflets were drawn up with the slogan "No to European Union", which seemed to imply something different to the "No to the European Union" that had been used before (Ukipuncovered 2004). Hockney claimed that this was driven by the party leadership in response to (unpublished) polling data. Given its position as the only electorally significant party with a policy of withdrawal from the EU, UKIP is likely to continue to have members who are members precisely for that reason, which in turn will perpetuate the tension. This leads to a second point of comparison, namely the tensions between leadership and membership. In both cases, it has been the former that has led to shift to realism, unsurprisingly given their different perspective. Party leaderships are directly involved in the party political system and in the management of their party, thus predisposing them to a pragmatic understanding of how politics is done. Memberships, by contrast, are interested in the issue that the party is campaigning for and want that issue to be addressed as quickly and directly as possible.

Clearly, UKIP is not completely like the Greens. Firstly, it lacks the wider social support the Greens did: the issue of Europe enjoyed a period of relatively high public interest in the 1990s, but that is no longer the case (to use Gardner's (2006, 274) phrase, Europe was "the penny that didn't drop" for the British electorate, even after the 2004 EP elections). Likewise, the electoral base for UKIP appears much more contingent than the Greens' did, for the simple reason that UKIP is a relatively traditional centre-right party, whereas the Greens were able to appeal to a more general insecurity in its voters (Betz, 1990). Perhaps most significantly, UKIP negative ideological core makes a *Fundi*-type position very difficult to maintain, since each person has a set of positive political values and positions that construct the negative position of withdrawal.

A second comparison we might make is with the far-right parties in the UK that UKIP has made such efforts to hold at arm's length. The British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF) both hold similar views to UKIP on the EU, but framed by an explicit xenophobia and nationalism. Again, both parties have experienced deep internal divisions about the best methods to achieving political influence, broadly on *Fundi-Realo* lines (Copsey, 2004). However, the far-right's construction around a positive ideological core of nationalism has meant that it practice there has been more scope to accommodate such tensions. Nationalism is not policy-specific, in the way withdrawal from the EU is, so the far-right has been much more comfortable with developing a broad (if still lop-sided) set of policy stances that can evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Indeed, opposition to the EU is just such a case, having emerged as a specific policy commitment in the early 1990s in response to the raised profile of the EU in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty. Such adaptability has allowed

for internal power struggles to exist at the level of individual personalities, without compromising the essential identity of the far-right.

One option for UKIP to follow would be something much like the Danish People's Movement. Founded in the run-up to Danish accession in 1972, the Movement only contests EP elections on a policy of withdrawal, being in an electoral pact with other parties who do not put up candidates. The left-wing Movement has strong links with the anti-EU movement in Denmark and beyond, and aims to pursue educational projects to raise awareness of the problems with the EU (see People's Movement 2007). In this way, it maximises its impact, it sidesteps much political competition and helps generate wider effects.

However, UKIP looks unlikely to follow such a strategy. Firstly, the People's Movement demonstrates the limitations of a negative ideological core through its overshadowing since the early-1990s by the June Movement, led by Jens Peter Bonde, which talks about major reform of the EU and has articulated more progressive policy alternatives than the People's Movement, which have been more appealing to Danish voters, the large majority of whom do not wish to leave the EU (Raunio, 2007). Secondly, the central individuals within UKIP's history have been much more ambitious. Kilroy-Silk is the clearest example of this, but it has also been true in a more limited of Sked, Holmes and Farage, each of whom has sought to cast or recast the party in their own image. Thirdly, the long-term trend of British public opinion since the late 1990s has been to consign European integration to an ever-lower place in the ranking of political issues (see Mori, 2007), which makes it more than likely

that the broadening of UKIP's policy base will have to continue if the party is to keep its relevance in public eyes.

Ultimately, the most striking aspect of UKIP's development is that after 13 years of existence, the fighting of 3 general elections, 3 EP elections, over 30 by-elections, 3 major party schisms and numerous minor spats, the party still does not have a clear direction and purpose. The continuing evolution of the party's programme and the fractious plays for power have meant that the party remains a rather contingent organisation. With the Greens' experience in mind, we might expect yet more change to come.

Endnotes:

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