*This chapter, to be the first of the thesis, concerns itself chiefly with the relationship between politicians and the ways in which they perceived public opinion regarding the question of Britain’s relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC). In doing so, it neglects much that is of interest – debates within the left intelligentsia about the nature of the British constitution and the nation-state, for instance, or the ways in which other policy debates changed the contours of the one on Europe. Some of this is dealt with elsewhere in the thesis. It also focuses on domestic politics to the exclusion of the actions of the EEC itself. This is partly for reasons of space and focus, but it also derives from something that Robert Saunders alluded to in his study of the 1975 referendum – that the institutions of the EEC (such as the Commission or the Court of Justice) did not seem to be the active, initiative-taking bodies they were seen to be by the end of the 1980s. Diplomatically, therefore, managing EEC affairs was little different from the general conduct of bilateral relations with the other member states’ governments. In other words, there is much that does not belong here but which may form a valuable part of our discussion, which I look forward to greatly.*

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The wisdom of hindsight, so useful to historians and indeed to authors of memoirs, is sadly denied to practising politicians. Looking back, it is now possible to see the period of the second term as Prime Minister [1983-87] as that in which the European Community subtly but surely shifted its direction away from being a Community of open trade, light regulation and freely co-operating sovereign nation-states towards statism and centralism. I can only say that it didn’t seem like that at the time. … It was clear to me from the start that there were two competing visions of Europe: but I felt that our vision of a free enterprise *Europe des patries* was predominant.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here Margaret Thatcher summarises much of the conventional account of what changed in the attitudes of British politicians towards European integration in the 1980s. That the decade saw the mantle of ‘Euroscepticism’ shift from the Labour party to the Conservative party, and that this shift occurred because Thatcher and other leading politicians reacted to the European Community’s turn to federalism under Jacques Delors’ presidency of the Commission, provides the basic understanding of the period, for both contemporaries and historians. Hugo Young, for instance, went so far as to say that ‘seldom in the recent record of democracy … has a lengthy course of events been attributable so particularly to a single character.’[[2]](#footnote-2) One of Thatcher’s biographers, John Campbell, takes the same approach, ascribing much of her party’s turmoil over Europe to the fact that ‘she could not see, because she did not want to see, that movement towards economic and monetary union was, as John Major wrote in his memoirs, “the logical extension of the changes she had set in train”. … She veered between denouncing federalist ambitions as a mortal threat to Britain’s sovereignty and dismissing them as a fantasy that would never happen.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Neil Kinnock too has a similar position in Labour’s changing stance on Europe – the party’s gradual changes after the 1983 general election (which this chapter concentrates on) are mostly explained by Kinnock’s own change of heart on Europe after he assumed the party leadership. Once this was set, ‘the march of time would settle the European issue.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

With these assumptions in place, scholars have often discussed the place of the issue of ‘Europe’ in British politics in similarly personalised terms. John Turner characterises the Thatcher government’s policy towards the EEC as ‘handbagging’, and suggests that they were fuelled by her own personal antipathies to the European project and her European counterparts.[[5]](#footnote-5) The rare allusions to public opinion, as something that influences politicians, are vague or dismissive. N.J. Crowson echoes several of Thatcher’s colleagues in suggesting that when she confronted European leaders over the Community budget or agriculture prices she was merely interested in ‘playing to the gallery’ of public opinion.[[6]](#footnote-6) Similarly, Roger Broad asserts that the acrimonious negotiations between European heads of government amounted to ‘the diplomatic equivalent of a foreign war [that] served to distract domestic opinion from the rising unemployment and widespread factory and business closures that resulted from Conservative [economic] policy’, but pays no attention to how the issue was addressed in national political debate, nor to how it related to other political issues – public opinion is treated as a blank canvass onto which a politician may project whatever she pleases.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This thesis seeks, by contrast, to examine how domestic politics, and interpretations of public opinion, greatly influenced the formation of attitudes to European integration. This was the case for the leaders of both major parties and of anti-Marketeers belonging to either party. Indeed, too often studies of this subject tackle one party entirely in isolation, while they were clearly operating with their opponents very strongly in mind. It is insufficient to tell this story as a tale of Thatcher’s or Kinnock’s changing prejudices or convictions. To a considerable extent, the different players in British politics were operating with similar assumptions and calculations in mind.

In particular, this chapter argues that politicians were generally very sensitive to what the electorate thought (or was assumed to think) about the EEC. It will initially set out the scene as it existed before the 1983 general election – the final period in which the old conditions of the 1960s-1970s debate on European integration persisted, with the Labour anti-Marketeers at the height of their influence within the party, and the Conservatives still defining their stance in opposition to that policy of outright withdrawal. Strains in this old dispensation were visible, but the 1983 general election was the crucial point of rupture. Only after then did opponents of British membership of the EEC, while not believing the country to be enthusiastic about the Common Market, begin to despair of winning that particular battle for the foreseeable future. Politicians of all persuasions, pro- or anti-EEC, Conservative or Labour, backbench or frontbench, were making the same sort of calculations about the Europe debate at about the same time throughout this period. By the time of the 1984 European Parliament elections, both Labour and Conservative campaigns were instead eager to relegate the arguments over membership beneath using ‘Europe’ as a pretext to advertise their domestic agenda or their fitness to safeguard the national interest against encroachment from the EEC. In fact, it is one of the additional aims of this chapter to show that European Parliament elections, usually ignored as low-turnout sideshows of no consequence, were occasions which by definition required politicians to consider carefully how best to present their stances on European integration relative to those of their opponents, and are therefore of much interest to scholars working in this field.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the aftermath of these elections, the new arrangement of arguments was clear – those who continued to make withdrawal from the EEC their chief message in the debate were sidelined. The Labour party was now interested, like the Conservatives had been since before 1983, in playing down the argument over membership in favour of using ‘Europe’ as a proxy for arguments over purely domestic issues, and in favour of usually rather vague statements in support of ‘reform’ of the EEC’s undesirable characteristics.

After the 1979 general election, the Labour party membership, as embodied in its annual conference, acquired more power over its parliamentary representatives and over its policy positions. Whereas that election’s manifesto committed Labour merely to ‘bringing about fundamental and much-needed reform of the EEC’, while opposing ‘any move towards turning the Community into a federation’, the party’s conference in 1980 resolved, with over 70% of the vote, to oblige the next Labour government to withdraw fully from the EEC within the lifetime of a single Parliament.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the debate over that motion, the appeal to flexibility and ambiguity succumbed to the brute clarity of the anti-EEC cause. Whereas former foreign secretary (and soon-to-be co-founder of the Social Democratic Party) David Owen told delegates that ‘there are those of us who want genuine reform, who want to work with our socialist partners in Europe to achieve these reforms…. It [the EEC] will be changed. There is room for change. There is constant negotiation’, Eric Heffer (a left-wing MP who tended towards opposing European integration) dismissed such ‘constructive ambiguity’ bluntly: ‘If we merely go forward once again, arguing that we can reform the Common Market, I think we shall be misleading the British people and fudging the issue. We cannot continue to argue reforms in the interests of a spurious unity.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Anti-Marketeers’ rejection of such hedging rhetoric was a sign of their confidence in winning the argument within the Labour party – as we shall see, as their position weakened after the 1983 election, they discovered the value of rhetorical ambivalence.

Looming behind this shift to an explicit pro-withdrawal position was the apparent turn of public opinion against the EEC since the vote to stay in 1975. By the spring of 1980, voters regarding a broad range of issues – including food prices, employment, wages and the standard of living – were much more likely to say that they were worsened by EEC membership than in 1975.[[11]](#footnote-11) At the same time, when asked how they would vote in another referendum, voters surveyed said that they would vote to leave, by a margin of 59% to 27%.[[12]](#footnote-12) This level of antipathy persisted for almost the entire 1979-83 parliament, but crucially, as the 1983 general election approached, anti-EEC resolve evaporated – the six months leading up to the election saw a Leave lead of 54-36 switch to a 53-35 lead for staying in.[[13]](#footnote-13) As we shall see, the unreliability of voters’ intentions as gauged by pollsters would become a persistent concern for politicians when dealing with this subject.

In this most promising environment for Labour anti-Marketeers, their most prominent spokesman was Peter Shore – inveterate opponent of European integration ever since working for Hugh Gaitskell, minister in successive Labour cabinets since 1967, and now, following Michael Foot’s election as leader, shadow chancellor. At the 1981 Labour party conference, Shore triumphantly told his fellow anti-Marketeers that ‘the question now is not whether we resume the self-government of Britain. We shall: but only when and how. And it is to these crucial questions that serious people must now turn their minds.’[[14]](#footnote-14) The mandates of the conference decisions remained crucial to the Labour Common Market Safeguards Committee (LCMSC), the anti-EEC pressure group within the party. At the time of the 1982 conference, one of their publications asserted the strength of their position by eliding the conference mandates and public opinion entirely: ‘A majority of the British electorate support Britain’s withdrawal from the European Communities. The Labour party adopted this policy at its annual conference on 1980 by a majority of five to two, and the Trades Union Congress followed suit in September 1981 (a decision recently reaffirmed by 1982 Congress).’[[15]](#footnote-15) The LCMSC went on, cementing the two further: ‘this broad consensus of opinion within the Labour movement and the electorate at large is based firmly on the experience of our membership of the EEC over the past 9 ½ years’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Beyond the background hum of intermittent public opinion polls showing broad hostility to the EEC, there was, however, little attempt by these anti-Marketeers to get into the nuances of public opinion.

The apparent supremacy of the anti-Marketeers did not, however, pass without disquiet. Indeed, at the time the conference made its decision Shore himself warned his colleagues that the outcome of the 1975 referendum showed that ‘it is essential that we change the underlying psychology and attitude of our people; that we harden the present majority sentiment [for withdrawal from the EEC] into what I once described as “a settled will and preponderant opinion”’.[[17]](#footnote-17) But there is no sign that these warnings remained very much more than platitudes, and the anti-EEC message remained largely unchanged from the debates of years gone by. One significant jolt came in the form of another veteran Eurosceptic, Barbara Castle, by this time an MEP. On the eve of the 1982 party conference, she wrote in the *New Statesman* that her party was generally perceived as ‘confused, convoluted and remote … seeming authoritarian instead of democratic, insular instead of internationalist.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Castle went on, towards the jugular, ‘In no field is this more true than in the party’s current commitment to withdraw Britain from the EEC. … Anyone who believes that withdrawal policy is an automatic vote-catcher is living in cloud-cuckoo land. Of course our membership of the Common Market is unpopular, but that is not necessarily a guide to the mood which will predominate when the election comes. It is one thing to register a complaint with an opinion pollster; quite another to cast a vote for going into the unknown.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

Such prominent criticism could not go unremarked. A week later, Shore responded to Castle with a conciliatory tone:

As a serious socialist and established anti-Marketeer and now as leader of our group in the Euro Assembly, it is right that we should weigh and study her words … YES: we must not assume automatic popularity for withdrawal. … But the crucial question is how deeply rooted the commitment is – and whether the opposition to membership is not seriously weakened by, or will be in the future, when the whole barrage of media is unleashed upon the consequences of withdrawal. This, the fear of withdrawal, is what we must combat.[[20]](#footnote-20)

How to go about this combat was, of course, the bigger question, which was never satisfactorily answered, beyond ‘restating the manifest disadvantages of membership and by soberly stating the real benefit and opportunities that our renewed national independence will give us’ – in other words, running the same lines of argument anti-Marketeers were interested in to begin with.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This uncertainty about the real value of Labour’s new pro-withdrawal stance to the anti-EEC cause could also be found outside the party itself. The British Anti-Common Market Campaign (BACMC), formerly the Safeguard Britain Campaign, had been one of the main organisations striving to maintain the fight since the defeat in the 1975 referendum. Though obviously happy that Labour was espousing outright opposition to EEC membership, it was not entirely satisfied. Even at the zenith of the anti-Marketeers’ sway within the Labour party, there was some wariness at how trusty the anti-EEC position really was. Over a year before the disaster of the 1983 election, internal correspondence between senior members of BACMC expressed unease at the current balance of anti-EEC forces within the party system. One member of the organisation’s executive committee told the honorary secretary, Sir Robin Williams, that ‘in the present situation, it seems to me that … emphasis – on the Conservatives – is doubly valid: in spite of its commitment to withdraw from the Market, the Labour party … may indeed not gain a majority at the next election. The Tories may even be our (anti-Market) best barrier against the SDP.’[[22]](#footnote-22) As the general election approached, apprehension over the real contents and consequences of Labour’s new official anti-EEC policy did not diminish. One meeting of the BACMC committee noted that ‘Mr [Douglas] Jay said that he detected no change of attitude by Mr Foot. Mr [Enoch] Powell thought that the public did not believe that the Labour party were firmly for withdrawal so that party’s manifesto would need to be absolutely clear as otherwise the pledge would not be taken seriously and electors would vote on other issues.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

In BACMC eyes, a competing source of anti-Market influence came from the Conservative European Reform Group, founded in 1980 to represent Eurosceptic Conservative backbenchers. Over the course of 1982, its growing strength was noted more than once by BACMC, who told their members that ‘whilst the official [Conservative] policy remains pro-Market, critics of the EEC grow in number. Amongst them are the Conservative European Reform Group of some 40 MPs’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Perhaps, admittedly, with a keen eye for any cause for optimism, this was taken to be symptomatic of a wider tendency within the party, with an article titled ‘Conservative Critics’ telling its readers that ‘officially the Conservative party continues its support of membership of the Common Market although there is less active enthusiasm for it than a few years ago.’[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Conservative party as a whole was in favour of Britain’s continued membership of the EEC. But the meaning of that commitment, and how they justified it to the public, was not by any means a case of uncomplicated enthusiasm. The best starting point for understanding the nuances and tensions in their position on this issue is to establish where they judged public opinion to stand, and for their assessment of public opinion we can look to focus groups that they ran just before the start of our period, in 1981.[[26]](#footnote-26) The members of the public selected to participate in these groups were generally opinionated but not stubborn on the issue of membership or on the question of how to best advance Britain’s interests within the Community. Though they were ready to confess their ignorance of many aspects of EEC affairs, and to blame the media for this, they confidently distinguished the parties’ different policies on membership: ‘Nearly all thought the Conservatives were for staying in; Opinion was more divided on Labour’s policy and drew a distinction between official party line (recognised as being for ‘out’) and the opinions of some within the party; SDP generally thought to be in favour of continuing British membership’. More interestingly, the same group of people tended to ascribe quite different motives to the main parties’ stances: ‘Reasons for why the Tories want to stay in the EEC were centred on “because they wanted to go in the first place”; “because they think overall it’s beneficial in the country”. To the extent that any reasons were ascribed to Labour’s wish to come out of the EEC it was thought that it was thought to be a vote-getting position’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Here we can see the natural advantage that the Conservatives would enjoy in presenting itself as the party best suited to defend British interests in Brussels, though it is notable too that opposition to EEC membership is taken to be the best ‘vote-getting’ policy.

It may seem that this evidence backs up what the existing literature tends to assume – that in the early 1980s Europe was not a particularly important issue in British politics, that there was widespread though not especially deep hostility to European integration, and that the public could be easily convinced that membership was necessary or bearable, even if it was not desirable. In other words, politicians had little to fear from public opinion.

However, when looking at the deliberations of senior Conservatives charged with formulating party policy on Europe – the Europe Policy Group – the party does not seem as sanguine as that interpretation would suggest. It is certainly true that throughout the proceedings of the group, it is taken for granted that the Conservatives are set on staying in the EEC and justifying this position to the electorate (though there was one dissenting anti-Marketeer on the committee). But there is a persistent anxiety over how the question of membership could best be handled, or perhaps, best be circumvented. Thus, according to one MP, David Myles, ‘the European argument could only be decisively won if we move the debate on from the question of membership’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Even Michael Latham, the sole anti-Marketeer, veered from saying at one meeting that ‘the party had to face up to the fact that the question of membership remained a very real political issue’, to saying four weeks later that ‘he didn’t think the British public felt particularly strongly about the question of membership.’[[29]](#footnote-29) However, this assumption did not settle all uneasiness. Myles, a pro-Marketeer, was generally sanguine about the electoral viability of an outspoken pro-EEC line, but still feared that ‘on the sovereignty issue the electorate were worried about both a threat to the “British way of life”’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Indeed, this last phrase appeared in the final version of the group’s report to the party, when it stated that one reason for the public’s continued suspicion of the Common Market was that

The Community’s long-term purpose seems either obscure or actively unwelcome. Despite assumption (b) in para.3 [‘The European Community will continue to be an association of nations’], which is accepted by most European politicians, there is a fear that we have embarked upon a long-term journey towards a federal state, that Britain has already sacrificed a good part of its “sovereignty” to no good purpose, and that this may lead to an undermining of the “British way of life”.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Although quick to attack Labour for the folly of advocating withdrawal, the Conservative party, then did not let itself get too carried away by enthusiasm, and at least in private senior members could express detachment or suspicion towards the EEC. Douglas Hurd, Europe Minister before 1983, was for example addressing the Centre for Policy Studies, when ‘one of those present asked him what was the point of it all: what was the “over-arching” principle? Douglas replied that it was not in the tradition of British foreign policy to speculate much on long-term aims.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Close to the prime minister were figures like Ian Gow, her Parliamentary Private Secretary, who told a correspondent that ‘I want to see the maximum cooperation between the Member States which have so much in common and yet whose history and traditions are so diverse. I am suspicious of the presumed advantage of the significant bureaucracies which have grown up in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg … I am no enthusiast for the European State, whether Federal or otherwise; there is a distinct (and to me unwelcome) element of dirigisme in the activities of the Commission and of the Council of Ministers.’[[33]](#footnote-33)

By the eve of the 1983 election, there were signs that the BACMC could expect a sympathetic hearing from sections of the Conservative party. One member in St Albans wrote to that constituency’s new Conservative candidate, Peter Lilley, who replied:

I share your attitudes on most of the issues you raised. Notably I wish to see Parliamentary authority over all legislation restored in this country. Also Mrs Thatcher’s forthright attempts to ensure that we do not end up subsidising our richer neighbours have my full support.

Despite those objections to the present working of the EEC I am not in favour of simply withdrawing. Like De Gaulle (who was no Euro fanatic) I believe that we can modify the EEC and make it work in our national interest if we are prepared to be sufficiently robust about it.

The reality of Europe is the nation states which compose it. Much of what is unacceptable in principle about the Community is pure theory which will fall into desuetude as it is brushed aside by reality.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This then was the kind of ‘sceptical’ language that Conservatives could get away with using, without apparently displeasing either their leadership or committed anti-Marketeers. Whatever problems membership posed, however profound, the main thing was that the EEC be confronted in a ‘forthright’ and ‘robust’ way – and any contradictions in this approach could be dismissed as mere ‘theory’ to be ‘brushed aside by reality’. As the time went on beyond the 1983 election, this rhetorical balancing act featured more prominently among Conservative Eurosceptics, even if the party leadership’s pro-Europeanism continued to antagonise anti-Marketeers.

Here was the kernel of what became the most distinctive mark of the Conservatives’ approach to European integration in this period – a ‘balancing act’ stance set up between itself, Labour and the Alliance, for public consumption. As will be shown below, the Conservatives sought to simultaneously make it clear that they had a firm position (supporting continued membership) without seeming more committed to a ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ position on the principle of membership than either of the other parties. Unlike Labour, the Conservatives were not willing to sacrifice Britain’s economic and geopolitical interests for the sake of abstract notions of sovereignty, and unlike the Alliance, they were not going to let their guard down in defending the national interest against the rest of the EEC for the sake of abstract notions of European unity. Furthermore, rather than just being an opportunistic reaction to the perceived extremism of the two other parties on this matter, it reflected a genuine dilemma for the Conservatives, derived ultimately from the perception that the electorate, even if presently quiescent on the issue of Europe, still contained much anti-EEC sentiment that needed to be handled carefully.

After the 1983 election, this understanding of how the European issue worked in British politics came to be adopted more generally by most players in the field. Even before the election, however, there were occasions when events would expose a gap between any widely held interpretation of the national interest and the prevailing currents within the EEC’s institutions.

In May 1982, in front of the background of the years-old budget contributions crisis (more on which in the following chapter), a regular meeting of EEC national agriculture ministers ended in a majority voting to override the veto laid by the British minister, Peter Walker, who attempted to stop his colleagues from increasing the level of subsidised food prices across the EEC. The understanding, underpinning all the EEC’s affairs since the mid-1960s – that member states have the right to veto any proposals that they deem detrimental to their own interests – was broken.[[35]](#footnote-35) This small occurrence proved explosive, at least in the short term, and provided a real opening for anti-Marketeers to connect their broader arguments over sovereignty and the undesirable encroachments of the EEC to the direct, more tangible business of governments conducting themselves in a European arena.

The incident was certainly taken very seriously by the press. On the day after the fateful meeting of agriculture ministers, it was reported on one prominent front page that ‘Britain’s relations with the rest of the Common Market plunged to a chilling low point’,[[36]](#footnote-36) while another called the vote a ‘violation’ of British interests.[[37]](#footnote-37) The government told the Commons that ‘It is wrong that for the first time in 16 years a number of member states should have changed the rules of procedure to suit their immediate requirements.’ What is more, he was then forced to concede that ‘as to the question of the future role of the veto, it is a fundamental and basic question … in government white papers this country joined the Community knowing that this was the process involved. I can only say that, obviously, this is a matter which now causes a major crisis within the Community.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

This should have been just the sort of thing that anti-EEC campaigners could latch onto to make their case. The BACMC certainly treated it as evidence that the European institutions could never be used by British governments to get what they wanted, and that a crucial plank of the case for entry in 1972-75 was now gone.[[39]](#footnote-39) As it put it in a full-page newspaper advertisement,

EEC: THE QUESTIONS ANSWERED

British national interests within the Common Market can no longer be protected … our EEC partners chose to change the rules of the game. The British veto on farm prices was overruled. The Luxembourg Compromise, under which EEC countries could agree to disagree, is now dead. Without it, the EEC is no longer the institution that the British parliament and British people were persuaded to endorse in 1972 and 1975.[[40]](#footnote-40)

It is worth remarking that such prominent advertisements were a significant item of expenditure for this small, poorly-funded organisation, and that this rare opportunity at major publicity was used to pass comment on the travails of the government’s negotiations rather than on the principle of EEC membership.

Peter Shore was also alive to the opportunity presented here. As he told an audience of Labour anti-Marketeers, as a result of this incident:

the last lingering belief in “reform from within” vanished. Not only was our bargaining position destroyed. The central convention that had dominated the operation of the EEC for the past 16 years [the Luxembourg compromise of 1966] – the central constitutional convention which was prominently displayed during the referendum campaign in Britain in 1975 and in the 1971 White Paper prior to the signing of the Treaty of Accession – was destroyed with it.[[41]](#footnote-41)

As he and others keenly remembered, the Yes campaign in the 1975 referendum had laid great stress on the national veto as a rebuttal of anti-EEC arguments on national sovereignty.[[42]](#footnote-42) At the time, the foreign secretary, Francis Pym, was pressed from both left and right (Ron Leighton and Eldon Griffiths, respectively) about the implications of this overriding of the national veto.[[43]](#footnote-43) But Pym could only assure the Commons that ‘We must see what progress can be made and how to continue from here. If necessary, I shall return to this matter and raise the subject again with our partners.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

But even in this vulnerable position, there is no indication that the anti-Marketeers had any real success in pressuring the government or pro-Marketeers further, or in impressing the implications of this moment at all on public debate. As the *Financial Times* soon told its readers, ‘tempers in the European community appear to have cooled after the drama over the farm prices decision.’[[45]](#footnote-45) Even more confident was the *Daily Telegraph*, which asserted that ‘argue though we must and will [against the imposition of majority voting], we should not fall into the error of believing that the principle of majority voting, if adopted, would imperil our sovereignty or ultimate political independence. By its nature, the Common Market could not touch those, now as ever.’[[46]](#footnote-46)

The 1983 general election is often taken the starting point of Labour’s change of heart on Europe, the moment at which it came to its senses and realised that advocating withdrawal from the EEC was politically unsustainable. As was clear at the time, the Conservatives put Labour’s policy on Europe in the service of its broader attack on the Labour leadership as beholden to leftist extremists, alongside their policies on nuclear disarmament, nationalisation, and Northern Ireland.[[47]](#footnote-47) It therefore seems straightforward to deduce that Labour found itself with a vote-losing policy that was (if only gradually) altered to better match public opinion.[[48]](#footnote-48) At the time, Conservatives certainly seemed happy with this explanation of events, with one internal missive observing that ‘following Labour’s humiliating defeat, it was widely recognised that Labour’s policy of withdrawal from the Community had been one of the chief reasons for the electorate’s decisive rejection of the Labour Party.’[[49]](#footnote-49)

The Labour party of course did have to grapple with the consequences of the 1983 election in reappraising their Europe policy, but what this actually entailed has not been appreciated. Both before and after the election, Labour party officials were clear about what their basic difficulty was with their EEC policy. One memorandum before the election told the leadership that ‘the EEC is generally unpopular, but like the weather. People are afraid of the economic consequences of leaving the EEC and this is an issue which the Tories will hammer the party on. It will be a major task to convince many Labour voters that the UK can survive outside.’[[50]](#footnote-50) After it had become clear that the party had indeed failed to convince the electorate, the need to distinguish between the EEC’s general unpopularity and the feasibility of persuading voters to support withdrawal became clearer:

Labour’s problem here is that … as many as a fifth of the electorate are little more than “gutless whingers” – opposed to the Common Market and even saying they favour withdrawal in times when this is not a realistic possibility but reverting to the status quo position when given a genuine chance to bring about withdrawal. … When presented with a chance to withdraw, the bulk of those previously hostile to the EEC retreat to the “handbag-shaking” alternative merely of reduced budget contributions and renegotiation of the Common Agricultural Policy.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The survey data on which this assessment was based illustrated the point clearly. Although an overwhelming 96 per cent of the nationally representative sample agreed that ‘Britain should insist that alterations are made in the CAP and budget contributions, even if this makes us unpopular’ (admittedly with only 52 per cent strongly agreeing), a mere 38 per cent were willing to go so far as to agree that ‘Britain should begin negotiations to withdraw from the EEC over a period of years’ – and these voters were heavily concentrated among those already committed to voting Labour in any case.[[52]](#footnote-52) There was a gap between supporting a confrontational stance with the other EEC member states and supporting outright withdrawal; and the Conservatives had done a better job of exploiting that gap than Labour had.

It was not just the inner councils of the Labour party taking the election result to heart. Committed anti-EEC MPs had set great store by the possibilities offered by having one of the main political parties expressly embrace a policy of withdrawal from the EEC. One such MP was Nigel Spearing, a Labour backbench MP for Newham South who opposed European integration throughout his career. He served as chairman of the European Legislation Scrutiny Committee in the House of Commons, and as an active member of organisations such as the BACMC. In the latter capacity he wrote to the president of the European Council just before the 1983 election, where he warned that ‘membership of the EEC will be an election issue in the United Kingdom … any further moves towards political and economic union or the strengthening of EEC institutions at the expense of those of nation states, will not only be highly controversial but also highly unpopular among most groups of opinion within the UK.’[[53]](#footnote-53)

Yet, barely six weeks after the general election, Spearing could do no more than peer to a distant horizon in search of hope when addressing his BACMC colleagues, telling then that ‘the result of the election means that no major party is *at present* [emphasis in original] in the position to place early withdrawal in its political programme, although the Labour party may maintain that long term aim.’[[54]](#footnote-54) As a result, he ‘the initiative for maintaining resistance to the encroachments of the EEC, or progress towards an eventual disengagement now lies more within the Conservative Party than elsewhere.’[[55]](#footnote-55)

Spearing was not the only anti-Marketeer to react in this way, and these other MPs could be found outside the Labour party. Enoch Powell, for instance, despite being an Ulster Unionist in this period, was still well connected to the major parties’ networks of anti-EEC MPs. Outspoken in his opposition to membership, and prolific in his public speeches, he repeated in 1983 the declaration he made in 1974, that the issue of Europe superseded all others, and that voters ought therefore to support Labour, disregarding whatever qualms they may have had for the party’s other policies. After the election, however, after damning what he could already discern as the beginnings of Labour fudging their anti-EEC position, Powell like Spearing had to content himself with the prospect of victory through some as yet unforeseen reconfiguration of political circumstances, in which any reliance on the Labour party alone would end: ‘The question [of EEC membership] has not been closed: it has been changed. It has ceased to be an issue between the Ins and the Outs, between Government and Opposition, Tories and Socialists.’[[56]](#footnote-56)

What might have made the blow of 1983 particularly aggravating for anti-Marketeers is that the circumstances of 1983 may have otherwise seemed so favourable – not merely in the sense of having one major party campaigning for withdrawal, but also because these years were dominated by an increasingly rancorous series of negotiations between Britain and the other EEC countries over the former’s payments to the Community budget.[[57]](#footnote-57) As some other Labour anti-Marketeers observed with hope in 1979, ‘1982 is the time when the [EEC] budget, with all its implications, will hit the public. We should therefore work to be as well informed and as capable of giving a lead in 1982 to the public.’[[58]](#footnote-58) In other words, if even this moment of political promise had come and gone not only without victory but with crushing defeat, then what hope was there?

Even in this context, however, any alteration in Labour’s rhetorical emphasis when talking about Europe, let alone its explicit policy position, could only be fitful. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that what changes there were formed part of an overarching plan to inch Labour slowly but surely into a pro-EEC position. But there were changes nonetheless. Neil Kinnock, almost as soon as he launched his leadership election campaign in the summer of 1983, set out a line on Europe policy that he stuck to consistently. Allowing himself to appeal to both camps in the party, Kinnock stressed three things. First, that the centre of his view of the EEC lay on the need to pursue ‘positive’ policies, by which he meant things like overhauling the Common Agricultural Policy, and halting ‘the continual outflow of investment and employment which has followed our EEC membership and continues without any compensating improvement in our trade position.’[[59]](#footnote-59) Second, withdrawal was touted as a possibility, but only with such caveats as to defang the proposition entirely: ‘given the fact that we will now be in for another four or five years under Thatcher, the option of withdrawal becomes a last resort instead of a first strike.’[[60]](#footnote-60) He pressed the same point again after becoming leader, in a speech to European socialist MEPs in Strasbourg: ‘we recognise that by 1988, Britain will have been in the Common Market for 15 years. … After that length of time, however, withdrawal should be regarded as a last resort.’[[61]](#footnote-61)

However balanced he may have tried to be, Kinnock could not avoid facing at some resistance. At that same Strasbourg speech he spoke of the need for ‘a European Bretton Woods’, a ‘joint planning of our trade [which] implies joint planning towards economic expansion’, and that ‘democracy must be multi-national’.[[62]](#footnote-62) Given the audience he was addressing, it may not be entirely surprising that he wished to stress Labour’s internationalist credentials. One Labour official wrote to Eric Heffer that ‘Analysed dispassionately, Neil’s speech can only be seen as a total repudiation of Labour party policy towards the EEC, and a call for some sort of federal Europe… It is imperative that Neil is taken aside and given an intensive briefing into the whys and wherefores of the party’s EEC policies. Whoever wrote the speech should simply be shot.’[[63]](#footnote-63)

This was not the only person in the Labour party to be dissatisfied with this early deviation from the established manifesto position. On Michael Foot’s resignation, Shore stood in the ensuing leadership contest (finishing at the bottom of the poll), and on the campaign platform set out ‘where he stood’. He opened his appeal with three principal stances. First, ‘the development of new and existing industries, in all sectors and regions, which can provide jobs for the millions unemployed and secure jobs for the millions more that are under threat’; followed by ‘the pursuit of a society based on the socialist principles of liberty and equity’; and finally ‘the maintenance of a strong and independent socialist Britain, making its major decisions in London, not Brussels; able to withstand the power of international finance; capable of defending itself against hostility or threat from any potential enemy.’[[64]](#footnote-64)

The two adjectives ‘independent’ and ‘socialist’ match each other here, and the ‘power of international finance’ is elided with the more nebulous ‘hostility or threat from any potential enemy’. The (left-wing) economic case for withdrawal complements the ‘sovereignty’ case for withdrawal. This was especially the case in the context of industrial policy. Addressing the steelworkers’ trade union, he told his audience that, on top of the threats of privatisation and cuts in government investment, there was a ‘special factor in the very gloomy outlook for the British steel industry. It is the effect of the subjugation of British Steel to the restrictions and limitations of the European Steel Cartel, the ECSC which now, as you know, has established production quotas for British and other European steel industries; whose consent is now needed for any substantial investment in our own industry and which determines our trade relations with other steel-producing countries.’[[65]](#footnote-65) For Shore, it was clear that the chief issue at stake in the European question was ‘the right of countries to rule themselves without the threat or the reality of external coercion. But, if that is the first freedom, the second is undoubtedly freedom from the coercion of external economic power, freedom from the constraints and miseries of poverty and gross inequality, freedom from the brutal internal rule of generals and juntas. Labour stands four square for both kinds of freedom and independence.’[[66]](#footnote-66)

The stridency with which this case was sometimes made should not blind us to the pressures that Shore and other anti-Marketeers laboured under, especially after the 1983 election. Just like the leaderships of the major parties in the European Parliament elections in 1984 (see blow), a mere reiteration of the traditional arguments about the principle of membership would not suffice. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Shore and other anti-Marketeers had to resort to a critique of the EEC’s ongoing and prominent difficulties – especially the controversy of Britain’s budget contributions, and the financing of the Common Agricultural Policy – and attempt to fuse these commonplace lines of attack to their deeper criticisms of European integration: ‘If we add together the budget contribution, the trade deficit, the outflows of capital, the cost of the dear food policy, I defy you to find any nation that has ever inflicted so grave an injury upon itself as Britain has done in the past ten years of its Common Market membership.’[[67]](#footnote-67) Of course, Eurosceptics were not the only people to make these attacks on the EEC, and that in many ways may have commended this approach to them. But unlike the Conservative government, Shore had to make this an all-weather rhetorical tactic – so even when the government was being widely praised for solving the budget issue in June 1984, he still had to make the same case:

All this year … Mrs Thatcher has missed and muffed the only chance that Britain has had this past decade to change the appalling terms of entry to the Common Market … During this year, so great have been the mounting costs of the CAP, that the EEC has run out of money … What an opportunity for a tough and determined UK government! And how tragically that opportunity has been squandered![[68]](#footnote-68)

It seems that Shore’s reservations about Kinnock’s new approach were pronounced, at least in private. At the time of the European elections, Shore recorded in his diary that ‘the next test is the Euro elections in June – but 1. I do not think that that is a real test at all; 2. I think we shall do very badly in any event and 3. The new Kinnock/Cook line will, in my view, get us nowhere.’[[69]](#footnote-69) Even when the election yielded some success for Labour, Shore was minded to emphasise the level of public disengagement from EEC politics: ‘We did “well” in the Euro elections: meaning by that that we won 13 seats [sic], bringing our total to 32 as against the 36 Conservative MEPs. But the British people showed their good sense once again by abstaining in vast numbers. The total turnout amounted to 32% of the electorate’.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Shore was certainly aware of the need to defend the party’s manifesto pledge on withdrawal from internal criticism after the election. Pro-Europeans like Roy Hattersley (who was also a leadership contender in the summer of 1983) made his diagnosis of Labour’s Europe policy very clear: ‘there is no majority in Britain for withdrawal. Nor, with all the logic and eloquence at our disposal, can we create one … by 1988 the notion of abandoning the Community will be literally incredible. The hint that we might do so will rightly be seen as a preference for sectarian prejudices rather than national opinion.’[[71]](#footnote-71) In the leadership contest, therefore, Shore made it clear that he was digging in: ‘I can only conclude that those who made them [arguments for changing the party’s position on the EEC] have simply not thought through what the issues are – and are astonishingly ill informed as to how events in Europe are now developing. … So I conclude: it would be ridiculous, even farcical for Labour to make a major reversal in its policy towards the EEC.’[[72]](#footnote-72) The tone of defensiveness is evident, and it comes out in an interesting way later on in that same speech, where he prescribes the party’s future goals:

We should start now a vigorous campaign for a total revision of the Rome Treaty. We should press for a new Messina Conference … and most crucially, we must insist upon the return to Britain of those economic powers without which we shall not be able to cope with the major economic crisis that now awaits us. … *To reclaim those powers we must repeal the 1972 European Communities Act* [emphasis in original].[[73]](#footnote-73)

Superficially, the pledge to do away with the current Treaty of Rome, and to repeal the European Communities Act, is a straightforward repetition of the policy of withdrawal. But, tellingly, the phrase ‘new Messina Conference’ was used by Kinnock frequently in the run-up to the European elections, as a way of communicating a desire to increase collaboration with other European countries, without explicitly renouncing ‘withdrawal’.[[74]](#footnote-74) And to put one’s hopes in repealing the European Communities Act without formally abrogating the Treaty of Accession resembles Bryan Gould’s formulation of repealing Section 2 of that Act without officially leaving the EEC (see below). This is most particularly in contrast to Shore’s earlier approach, of always emphasising the need to repeal the relevant domestic legislation *and* to negotiate a way out of the European treaties, thus recognising membership of the EEC being a matter of both domestic and international law.[[75]](#footnote-75) Perhaps even this most dedicated anti-Marketeer was, like others in his party, trying to find a way to alter his rhetorical approach to Europe, however tentatively.

The possible benefits of this approach are evident from some of the private opinion polling on Europe that the Conservatives commissioned. A survey conducted in March 1984 showed that the population was evenly divided over the question of membership of the EEC, with 45% of voters in favour of staying in, and 42% wishing to leave. Much as in 1975 and 1983, Conservative supporters were far likelier to approve of the EEC than Labour supporters.[[76]](#footnote-76) Despite this ambivalence, however, an overwhelming majority (78%) of people agreed that ‘the Common Market could be made to work in the interests of the whole of Europe if the politicians tried hard enough to make it work.’[[77]](#footnote-77) By a margin of 27 percentage points, voters believed that the Conservatives were likelier than Labour ‘to get the best deal for Britain.’[[78]](#footnote-78) As the survey’s cover letter put it, ‘the Conservative Party is seen as having the tough approach which Britain needs in Europe and as being experienced in dealing with other European political parties.’[[79]](#footnote-79)

So long as the Conservatives could move away from the issue of membership and towards the question of governing competence, they would be on firmer ground. Hence the Conservative Research Department (CRD) paper, outlining the ideal position for the party to adopt at the European elections – the party had a ‘consistent record of commitment to the Community’, but more importantly, ‘within the affairs of the Community, the British people can be expected to see Mrs Thatcher as a champion of Britain’s rights.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

Labour, by contrast, were expected to approach the elections differently. In the judgment of the CRD, their main objectives in these elections would be to present their newfound unity under Neil Kinnock; to focus on the Conservatives’ domestic record in office; and only after that to express its ‘solidarity with European Socialist parties behind a programme of economic re-expansion and full employment.’ Overall, this prospect did not perturb the Conservatives, who considered that ‘the Labour Party is unlikely to make much of an impression with an attack on Mrs Thatcher for neglecting to fight for British interests in Europe. Labour’s own pacifism and weakness would prevent such an attack carrying conviction.’[[81]](#footnote-81) The Alliance, furthermore, presented an even less threatening prospect: ‘To reiterate the strength of their conviction to Europe will hardly impress the British electorate in its present sceptical mood; it is quite difficult to see how the Alliance can pull their act together at all for the June election.’[[82]](#footnote-82)

These characterisations of the three main parties broadly held good throughout the election campaign. As the political scientist Richard Rose in the *Telegraph* assessed the campaign, ‘Labour’s chances of using the appeal of Mr Kinnock are much less in the European Parliament election than in a national election. The Gallup poll [published that morning] found that only 17 per cent think that Mr Kinnock can stand up for Britain in Europe, as against 51 per cent putting Mrs Thatcher first.’[[83]](#footnote-83) And an editorial in the same newspaper on polling day drove home the concern about what an Alliance vote could mean:

A vote for Labour is almost harmless. It is not a vote for Europe or against Europe. It is a vote for hugely increased public spending and for the re-socialisation of the economy. ... A vote for Labour amounts to an endorsement of a number of fantasies which swim about in Mr Kinnock’s brain. A vote for the Alliance carries far more significance. … Since the start of the campaign, members of the Alliance hierarchy have made perfectly clear that they want the EEC to develop closer economic and political ties which must inevitably lead towards some degree of actual union. Mrs Thatcher’s efforts to control the European Budget are seen as excessively zealous and a bar to closer European integration.[[84]](#footnote-84)

The Conservatives in their campaign sought to strike a rhetorical balance, by simultaneously using polemical terms and slogans that would ordinarily be associated with antagonists on either side of the debate over membership. So at the launch of the Conservative manifesto, Mrs Thatcher ‘condemned both “Euro fanatics” who want to see “the British character submerged in Europe” and “Europhobes” who want Britain out of Europe.’[[85]](#footnote-85) Lord Hailsham carried this line of attack in starker terms still, dismissing Neil Kinnock as ‘utterly trivial’. As he elaborated:

The truth is that the Labour party has never really modified its anti-Community prejudices. Backward-looking and Little Englander to the last man and woman ... whatever their value in this country, in that [European] Parliament their influence is detrimental to British interests. … I therefore put forward the Conservative Party as the only party that whose attitude to Europe adds up to anything like sense. The Labour Party, if its utterances are to be believed, still hankers after leaving the Community altogether. The Liberal Party would sell British interests down the river in the interests of European federation.[[86]](#footnote-86)

In setting up two stark poles, the Conservatives could cast all contentious and undesirable ‘extreme’ stances on Europe out to the dogmatists in the two other parties – leaving the mantle of responsible statecraft on Conservative shoulders alone. In an overview of the campaign, the *Economist* concluded that ‘with Mrs Thatcher battling against Britain’s budget contribution and the common agricultural policy, no party can afford to be thought too strongly European, though the Liberal/Social Democrat alliance has that reputation. But nobody is simply saying “pull out”. Real Euro-policy arguments will be few.’[[87]](#footnote-87) At the local level too, individual candidates often embraced the same lines of attack. In the London Central constituency, Adam Fergusson, the sitting Conservative MEP, attacked his two main rivals – the first, former Labour MP Stan Newens, was committed to nuclear disarmament, anti-EEC and anti-NATO. ‘How people can ask for votes [to sit in the European Parliament] when they don’t believe in it is beyond me.’ And as for the Alliance candidate (and director of the European Movement), Ernest Wistrich, ‘he is too much of a committed federalist to represent the views of Londoners in Strasbourg’.[[88]](#footnote-88)

Against this kind of attack, the Labour party tried to turn the argument back onto the Conservatives’ domestic record, while also casting themselves as the acceptable middle between two unpalatable extremes. The resulting rhetoric, which at times was considerably more favourable to pan-European policy-making than its official opposition to the EEC would suggest, was not merely a matter of pro-Marketeers getting one over on the party’s anti-Marketeers. The LCMSC, the main anti-EEC pressure group within the party, unsurprisingly maintained its hostility to European integration in the immediate aftermath of the 1983 general election:

In the immediate aftermath of the Election, some have concluded that our failure to make withdrawal a vote-winning issue, the need to show that we are willing to learn lessons from our defeat, and the fact that it will be another four or five years before Labour has any chance to take governmental action, all mean that we should declare now that withdrawal is no longer in any circumstance a credible policy. This conclusion is both premature and mistaken.

First, it is hard to see why, among the several issues on which Labour failed to convince the electorate and accordingly lost support, the issue of withdrawal should be so soon singled out as ripe for abandonment. It is by no means the most obvious candidate. Unlike some other vote-losing issues, it has the merit of at least providing us with a case which, properly deployed, could have been advanced with confidence and with which our own supporters are fundamentally sympathetic.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Two months later, however, the LCMSC, beginning to look to the 1984 European elections, were willing to see a Labour approach more constructive than blanket opposition to the EEC might suggest:

But withdrawal from the EEC cannot be a central issue in the European Elections, since no election of a British national government – the only body with the power to effect withdrawal – is involved. Although we could artificially seek to make a “mandate for future withdrawal” an issue in the election, this would, in our judgment, be a serious tactical error. It would mean, once again, fighting the Market question on a negative. … By fighting on a negative we would pass up the initiative – and the ground – to our opponents: who would concentrate – as they did at the General Election – on scares about the effects of withdrawal upon jobs, trade and investment, and divert attention from the real and serious weaknesses of the Common Market … The government claim that they have stood up for Britain’s interest, but … the Tories talk tough but act weak.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Continued opposition to the EEC was being held by anti-Marketeers to be compatible with arguments on Europe that sought to dwell more on the government’s shortcomings than on the Community’s.

The Labour campaign, then, dwelt less on the iniquities of the European Commission or the Parliament, and more on the iniquities of the Conservatives’ policies as regarded unemployment, economic stagnation and nuclear proliferation. In the opinion of the *Economist*, what was notable was ‘the ambiguity of the Labour party’s strategy’. On the one hand, at the national level, the EEC was a ‘vehicle for a major attack on unemployment, undertaken with other Socialist parties of western Europe’; while in the constituencies, ‘Labour campaigners present a far more negative picture of the community. The majority of Labour candidates are anti-Marketeers.’[[91]](#footnote-91)

Though it is true that most Labour candidates were anti-EEC, that did not necessarily dominate the tone of their campaign. It has been noted that Labour election addresses were likelier than Conservative or Alliance addresses to use the central office formula: ‘a New Deal for Europe and a Fair Deal for Britain.’[[92]](#footnote-92) The language of the national campaign allowed anti-EEC candidates to oppose membership as it then stood, while also adopting the anti-Conservative arguments at the centre of the official party campaign. So, for example, Anita Pollack, candidate for London South West, could say to her members that in European Parliament campaign ‘we are not retracting any of our criticisms of the Treaty of Rome … We retain our withdrawal option for a future Labour government.’ But what actually mattered at the present moment was not this, but rather, ‘as socialists and internationalists, we need to kick out as many Tories as possible because of the damage they do and the resources their position gives them.’[[93]](#footnote-93)

This approach, of course, allowed a pro-Marketeer like Roy Hattersley to speak sincerely in terms virtually indistinguishable from any of his colleagues: ‘Over the next five years every institution of the EEC – Assembly, Council of Ministers and Commission – must become committed to a joint reflation of the Western European economies. That reflation must replace the dismal doctrine of Euromonetarism.’[[94]](#footnote-94) The contrast between this situation and the one that prevailed in 1983 was stark. At the general election, the Conservatives gleefully observed the contradictions that differing Labour spokesmen would get themselves into, observing that even in the midst of an election campaign, a senior frontbencher like Roy Hattersley would refuse to even pay lip service to the party’s manifesto position – ‘On balance, I’ve always believed that Britain was better in than out … On balance, I think it will probably improve our prospects rather than not … The next Labour government is very clear about its policy, and of course I’m absolutely loyal to that policy.’[[95]](#footnote-95)

The central aim throughout the Labour campaign, then, was to recruit the subject of Europe to advance their domestic agenda. So at the launch of the campaign, Neil Kinnock addressed, first, ‘the greatest single problem facing the peoples of Europe – unemployment’.[[96]](#footnote-96) Similarly, Europe was used as a pretext to argue the domestic case for nuclear disarmament: ‘two world wars have begun in Europe and been fought on European soil. Despite the horrible scale of the devastation, Europe survived and Europe recovered. Nuclear war would not permit survival or recovery.’ [[97]](#footnote-97) And underpinning all this, Labour strove to set a stark contrast between themselves and their rivals, as the Conservatives did. Like their rivals, Labour sought to attack their opponents for representing both certain ‘vested interests’, and unpalatable views on Europe. The latter line was the obvious attitude to take towards the SDP/Liberal Alliance, whose ‘infatuation with the Common Market eliminates any claims they may try to make to be the reformers of the EEC or defenders of Britain’s needs. They support a larger budget for the Common Market. They want to give the Common Market responsibility for defence.’[[98]](#footnote-98) But as for the Conservatives, Kinnock refrained from attacking their official stance on Europe as such, and focused instead on how they behaved on the European stage. He was particularly concerned to use these talking points to directly confront the Conservative conceit to be the only reliable custodians of the national interest at the European level. At the ‘Festival for a Socialist Europe’ in Edinburgh, he declared that: ‘the Conservatives serve only two constituencies: big farming and big business. ... [and they] haven’t got a “strong voice” in Europe. They have that braying empty bombast that they use everywhere to cover up failure.’[[99]](#footnote-99)

There were occasions, however, when it would need to be made clear that support for Europe-wide reflation of the economy did not entail support for the EEC as it was. At a European socialists’ campaign event in Brussels, Mr Kinnock emphasised that any sense of fraternity could not trump the need to reflect at least some of the considerable anti-EEC feeling in the party, nor the imperative to show some of the hard-headedness that the British electorate clearly expected from their leaders. As the *Times* reported, ‘although he welcomed the recent speech by President Mitterrand, calling for a move towards greater European unity, he was not prepared to see any more power given to the European Parliament. The power for change in British Society had to remain inside the House of Commons.’[[100]](#footnote-100)

Despite the inclusion of these caveats, as time passed many anti-Marketeers inside the Labour party began to accommodate themselves to the new limitations placed on their room for manoeuvre. One party member active in the Labour Common Market Safeguard Committee (LCMSC), Edward Barber, told Enoch Powell that ‘we are, as before, pointing out the great drawbacks and injustices inherent in Britain’s EEC membership, but increasingly, we are drawing attention to the incompatibility of Labour’s economic plans with a continued membership of the Common Market.’[[101]](#footnote-101) The attempts to orient discussions of economic policy around the issue of Europe could prove frustrating. As Barber himself told the readers of the *New Socialist*, ‘Since Neil Kinnock’s immediate post general election statement on the party’s EEC policy, a conspiracy of silence has arisen on that subject. … So what is the party to have? Its economic policy intact, but outside the EEC as party policy constitutionally ordains? Or is it to stay in the EEC and consign the Hattersley plan to the dustbin?’[[102]](#footnote-102)

For the most part, however, the majority of opinion expressed within Labour on the European question began to converge, at least semantically. Figures ostensibly on opposing sides of the debate could be found speaking in strikingly similar terms. Ken Coates, of the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign, believed that the policies a Labour government would want to pursue were ‘quite inimical to the prospectus of the Treaty of Rome, and this gives rise to the need for either a comprehensive review of that Treaty, or for joint action outside its framework’ – this coming in an argument *against* an explicit policy of withdrawal.[[103]](#footnote-103) Frances Morrell, leader of the Inner London Educational Authority, also urging the party to build economic policies at a European level, simply said that ‘we must ignore the Treaty of Rome … A Labour government cannot be bound by the Treaty’s provisions which prevent a national re-industrialisation programme. We should simply ignore them, as other member states have done.’[[104]](#footnote-104)

Bryan Gould, an anti-EEC MP and trade spokesman for the Labour party, might have been expected to pounce on these rhetorical concessions from pro-Marketeers. In the same issue of the *New Socialist*, he indeed said that ‘the truth is that Labour’s EEC policy is not an optional extra which can be safely jettisoned.’ But his target was not immediate departure from the EEC. Rather, he took aim at section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 – the legislation that enshrined Britain’s EEC membership in domestic law. It allowed, he claimed, ‘any aggrieved Tory businessman’ to uphold EEC law against a Labour government in domestic courts. ‘The repeal of that provision, and the consequent restoration of some semblance of national control over our own policy, is the minimum requirement for any Labour government.’[[105]](#footnote-105) Gould took this suggestion further, directly to the party leader. In a report submitted to the leader’s office he attempted to square the circle that confronted the Labour party and anti-Marketeers:

In developing our policy, we must take account of a number of factors. In electoral terms, we cannot afford to ignore the continuing disaffection of a majority of voters (particularly Labour voters) with the Common Market and all its works. We should be foolish to allow Mrs Thatcher to outflank us by appearing to be tougher with the EEC than we are… On the other hand, we must also recognise the nervousness of the British electorate about any talk of withdrawal.[[106]](#footnote-106)

Gould’s proposed trade-off was to amend the European Communities Act 1972 in order to remove the explicit recognition of Community law’s supremacy over British law, thereby ending any ability of domestic courts to enforce EEC legislation, without overtly renouncing the UK’s obligations under the Treaty of Accession. Thus, Gould ended with a flourish, it ‘would achieve the essential requirements of any EEC policy. It would be electorally popular, it would unite the Party, it would give us a distinctive advantage over our opponents, it would be an essential pre-condition to and element in the implementation of our general programme, and it would allow us to take the initiative in Europe on an agenda of constructive cooperation.’[[107]](#footnote-107) That this committed anti-Marketeer was willing to trade away full withdrawal from the EEC in favour of a supposedly more feasible alternative is of course interesting, but it is also worth noting that before the 1983 election, another Labour anti-European, John Silkin, rejected just this kind of legislative gamesmanship regarding the 1972 Act, warning that ‘a repeal of substantial parts of the European Communities Act would be a political act and raise the whole question of our membership of the EEC. There is no way in which such an action could be dressed up as a legal or technical act in order to mask the real issue – membership or withdrawal.’[[108]](#footnote-108)

On the Conservative side, however, trends barely visible before 1983 shone more brightly as the decade wore on. There was a kind of ‘sceptical’ language that Conservatives could get away with using, without apparently displeasing either their leadership or committed anti-Marketeers. We saw this, for example, with the statements of MPs like Peter Lilley. Whatever problems membership posed, however profound, the main thing was that the EEC be confronted in a ‘forthright’ and ‘robust’ way – and any contradictions in this approach could be dismissed as mere ‘theory’ to be ‘brushed aside by reality’. As the time went on beyond the 1983 election, this rhetorical balancing act featured more prominently among Conservative Eurosceptics, even if the party leadership’s pro-Europeanism continued to antagonise anti-Marketeers.[[109]](#footnote-109) By the summer of 1984, the Conservative European Reform Group was managing to make their anti-EEC rumblings seem almost like a declaration of loyalty to the prime minister:

For many of us in the Conservative party, the apparent inability of the Community to deliver the promised benefits has been deeply disappointing. Mrs Thatcher obviously shares this disappointment: no prime minister has worked harder to try to get the Community onto a sensible course. … Putting sentiment on one side, we can’t shirk the arguments which Mrs Thatcher is bringing home to us. EEC policies and our own domestic policies (which *are* proving successful) often seem quite inconsistent: cheap food sales to the Soviet Union (a boost for their economy and their war machine); huge subsidies from the taxpayer for Continental agriculture; inflated prices for the housewife; a complete absence of budgetary discipline; and an army of bureaucrats apparently dedicated to circumventing national governments. Hardly Mrs Thatcher, is it?[[110]](#footnote-110)

The same newsletter published an attack on the inherently statist ambitions of the ‘Eurocrats’, dubbing the EEC ‘Red Ken’s Community’,[[111]](#footnote-111) and while it disparaged the government’s accomplishments at Fontainebleau, it managed somehow to claim the prime minister’s side at the same time: ‘Understandably, the government did its best to present the Fontainebleau summit in a reasonable light. Inwardly, Mrs Thatcher must have been bitterly disappointed.’[[112]](#footnote-112)

This approach seemed to impress the BACMC, which was examining its own strategic position in early 1985, inviting assessments and recommendations for action from members of its executive committee. The honorary secretary, Sir Robin Williams, lamented that their organisation has been left behind by ‘the more fluid situation resulting from the 1983 general election … preclud[ing] us from pursuing the undermining approach of the Conservatives for European Reform.’[[113]](#footnote-113) Another member, Chris Jones, concurred:

‘Two factors – the change in the political agenda since the Seventies, and our own lack of resources – mean that we must broaden the base of the campaign as much as possible. Conservative MPs were the first to understand this, and thus the first to adopt the words “European reform”. Partly as a result, their own organisation is now the strongest and healthiest component of the anti-Market movement. I believe we should follow them and form a “European Reform Campaign”.[[114]](#footnote-114)

By 1986, these anti-EEC campaigners had become so pessimistic about the prospects of keeping up the approach that they had had before the 1983 election, that ‘I am now developing a very strong feeling that the name of our organization causes a good deal of our material to be thrown into the waste paper basket. … I think it is very unlikely that we will get [out] of the EEC as a result of a political act. I think we should work to bring about a severance while remaining nominally within. When that severance is a reality the political act will follow.’[[115]](#footnote-115) Before the passage of the Single European Act (SEA), then, the strategic view of anti-Marketeers seems to have already embarked on its basic shift, towards seeing the Conservatives as its best hope for advancement within the political mainstream.

It seems, then, that before the SEA, before the Treaty of Maastricht, before any concrete prospect of increased political integration had formed, there was a great deal of complexity and fluidity in what politicians thought and said about the EEC to the public. Contrary to the underlying assumptions of so much of what has been written, British politics did not merely react to whatever initiatives adopted by European institutions. The domestic political world behaved of its own accord, and its participants deliberated and acted amongst themselves. Nor is very much of this process owed to the personalities of Margaret Thatcher or Neil Kinnock – they were important, obviously, but could only contribute to a situation not of their own making. Politicians constantly paid attention to what was acceptable or profitable to say on the matter of Europe, and they constantly strove to reconcile whatever they concluded was acceptable or profitable to the limitations imposed by their own beliefs or the imperative to preserve as far as possible the unity of their party. In other words, ‘Europe’ functioned like any domestic political issue, and was never at any point merely a foreign affairs matter. A great determinant of acceptability and profitability was public opinion, and it is clear that, though the years before the SEA are usually taken to have been dormant as far as the public salience of ‘Europe’ is concerned, measuring public opinion never ceased to be central to politicians’ calculations.

1. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), p. 536. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (London, 1998), p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher, Volume Two: The Iron Lady* (London, 2003), pp.598-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roger Broad, *Labour’s European Dilemmas. From Bevin to Blair* (London, 2001), pp. 157-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Turner, *The Tories and Europe* (Manchester, 2000), p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. N.J. Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945: At the Heart of Europe?* (London, 2006), p. 49. It is notable that though Lord Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past* (London, 1988) p. 319, Francis Pym, *The Politics of Consent* (London, 1984), and Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London, 1994), p. 184, all say much the same thing about this, no attempt is made to gauge public opinion independently. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Roger Broad, *Labour’s European Dilemmas. From Bevin to Blair* (London, 2001), pp. 150-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This chapter is not concerned with the psephology of the 1984 European Parliament election, though it is worth now a very brief summary of the electoral situation. Across Great Britain, the Conservative Party won 40.8% of the vote, ahead of Labour with 36.5%, and the Alliance with 19.5%. Of the 78 (first-past-the-post) constituencies contested, the Conservatives won 45 of them, Labour 32, the Scottish Nationalists one, and the Alliance none. This constituted a gain by Labour of 15 seats compared to the previous European election in 1979. For a full-length analysis of the election itself, see David Butler & Paul Jowell, *Party Strategies in Britain*. *A Study of the 1984 European Elections* (Basingstoke, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1979 Labour Manifesto, in F.W.S. Craig, *British General Election Manifestoes, 1959-87* (Aldershot, 1990, 3rd edn.), p. 299; *Report of the 1980 Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Report of the 1980 Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, pp. 128, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Gallup Political Index*, nos. 178 and 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., nos. 236-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. LSE, Peter Shore papers, SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *Speech to LCMSC meeting, Brighton, 27th September 1981*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *‘The Common Market: a Guide to Withdrawal’, published by the Labour Common Market Safeguards Committee, October 1982*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *Speech to LCMSC, Blackpool, 28th September 1980*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Barbara Castle, ‘Let them throw us out’, *New Statesman*, 17th September 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *Speech to LCMSC meeting, Blackpool, 26th September 1982*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. LSE, Campaign for an Independent Britain papers, CIB/3/1, letter from Ivor Johns to Sir Robin Williams, 14th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. CIB/3/1, minutes of the committee meeting of BACMC, 19th October 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Common Market Watchdog*, New Year 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Common Market Watchdog*, Autumn 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. CRD 4/27/85 - Opinion Research Attitude towards Europe, 1980-1981 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. CRD 4/27/85 - Opinion Research Attitude towards Europe, 1980-1981, *British party politics and the EEC* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bodleian Library, Conservative Party Archives, CRD 4/22/43 – European Policy Group, Agenda and Minutes 1983, *Meeting of the Study Group, 18th January 1983* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. CRD 4/22/43 – European Policy Group, Agenda and Minutes 1983, *Meeting of the Study Group, 18th January 1983*; *14th February 1983* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. CRD 4/22/43 – European Policy Group, Agenda and Minutes 1983, *Meeting of the Study Group,, 22nd February 1983* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. CRD 4/22/39 – Europe Policy Group Report, 31st March 1983, *The Current Standing of the Community in Britain* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Churchill Archives Centre, Margaret Thatcher papers, THCR 2/7/3/7, Papers relating to the Europe Study Group, October- November 1982, *Letter from Centre for Policy Studies (Hugh Thomas) to Geoffrey Howe*, 15 October 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. CAC, THCR 2/7/3/7, Papers relating to the Europe Study Group, October- November 1982, *Letter from Ian Gow to Hugh Thomas*, 20 October 1982 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. CIB/3/1, letter from Peter Lilley to BACMC member, 7th April 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This was the so-called Luxembourg Compromise, established in 1966 by Charles De Gaulle, who refused to participate in EEC proceedings until the right to veto was recognised. This superseded the nominal rule in the Treaty of Rome that stipulated that on many issues the Council of Ministers would proceed by majority voting. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Daily Telegraph*, 18th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Financial Times*, 27th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Guardian*, 20th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Common Market Watchdog*, summer 1982, ‘Our Veto Vanishes’. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. CIB/2/3, *The Times*, 25th September 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *Speech to LCMSC meeting, Blackpool, 26th September 1982.* [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In SHORE/15/4, EEC, 1981-5, one can see the deluge of incriminating quotations and cuttings that Nigel Spearing sent to Shore at this moment, highlighting all the instances in the referendum campaign and the 1971-2 debates on entry when the government stressed the importance and security of the national veto,. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, 22nd June 1982, columns 155-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *FT*, 28th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *DT*, 18th May 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983* (Basingstoke, 1999, 2nd edn), p. 104. One of Saatchi & Saatchi’s campaign posters listed these points of similarity between the Labour and Communist election manifestoes, and put ‘withdrawal from the EEC’ at the top of the list. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: the Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era* (London, 2009), p. 234. Also see Roger Broad’s comments on the development of Labour policy under Kinnock cited above. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. CAC, Christopher Prout papers, KGLD 3/8 - European elections, 1984: draft European campaign guide, December 1983, *British Political Parties and Europe – The Conservative Commitment*, introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. CAC, Neil Kinnock papers, KNNK 3/1/1, 1983 General Election Strategy, *Labour and the 1983 general election*, undated. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. KNNK 3/1/4, General Election, 1983: post-mortems, Patrick Dunleavy and Christopher Husbands*, The 1983 General Election and the Way Back*, 4 July 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. CAC, Nigel Spearing papers, SPRG 3/3, Publications, 1980-85, *Notes for a draft letter from British MPs to the German President of the EEC Council [Helmut Kohl],* 2 March 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. SPRG 3/3, Publications, 1980-85, *Memorandum for BACMC committee circular,* 28th July 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Enoch Powell’s Speeches, downloaded from [www.enochpowell.info/speeches](http://www.enochpowell.info/speeches) (accessed on 13th October 2018), *Speech to a BACMC meeting in Eastbourne, 2nd September 1983* [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The domestic politics of the ‘budget rebate’ controversy, culminating in the Fontainebleau summit of June 1984, are closely related to the arguments presented here, for which see the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. CAC, John Silkin papers, SLKN 8/2/4, Anti-EEC press cuttings, *Draft paper sent to John Silkin by Jo Richardson and Ron Leighton, ‘The EEC – what should our tactics be?’*, 6th July 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. KNNK 16/2/6 , *Summary of Views to ASTMS* , July 1983; KNNK 16/1/14, *Speech to the Socialist Group at the European Assembly in Strasbourg,* 15th September 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Tribune*, 15th July 1983, interview with Chris Mullin. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. KNNK 16/1/14, *Speech to the Socialist Group at the European Assembly in Strasbourg,* 15th September 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. KNNK 8/2 – Papers and correspondence on Europe, September 1983-December 1985, *Neil Kinnock’s Strasbourg speech [given on 15 September 1983], Chris Jones’ briefing to Eric Heffer*, 27 September 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. SHORE/2/20, Master speech file, 1983, *Press release – Where I stand, by Peter Shore, 4th July 1983.* [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. SHORE/2/20, Master speech file, 1983, *Speech to a special meeting of the executive council of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, London, 16th August 1983.* [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. SHORE/2/20, Master speech file, 1983, *Speech at Toynbee Hall, London, 6th August 1983.* [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. SHORE/2/20, Master speech file, 1983, *Summary of speech delivered in Wakefield, 19th August 1983.* [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. SHORE/2/21, Master speech file, 1984, *Speech to the Common Market Safeguards Committee, Blackpool, 30th September 1984.* [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. SHORE/1/24, political diary, October 1983-October 1985, *15th May 1984*. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. SHORE /1/24, political diary, October 1983-October 1985, *2nd July 1984*. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Guardian*, 8th August 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. SHORE/2/20, Master speech file, 1983, *Summary of speech delivered in Wakefield, 19th August 1983.* [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *New Socialist*, 16 (March 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See, for example, SHORE/13/154, Europe, August 1983, *Speech to LCMSC meeting, Brighton, 27th September 1981.* [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. THCR 1/8/8, *Harris (ORC) poll on public attitudes towards the Community and Community institutions*, Section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
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78. Ibid., Table 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., cover letter from Keith Britto to Stephen Sherbourne, 26th April 1984 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. THCR 2/7/4/1, European Elections, 1984, Howe Group, *Memo by Peter Cropper, Conservative Research Department, ‘Organisation and Strategy for the European Parliament Elections’*, 11th January 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Daily Telegraph*, 18th May 1984, p.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., 14th June 1984, p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Daily Mail*, 22nd May 1984, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Times*, 12th June 1984, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Economist*, 26th May 1984, p.38. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Times*, 6th June 1984, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. KNNK 3/1/8, European Elections campaign committee, June-August 1983. *Statement by the Executive Committee of the Labour Common Market Safeguards Committee after the general election*, June 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. KNNK 3/1/8, European Elections campaign committee, June-August 1983. *Draft: Labour Common Market Safeguards Committee, ‘The European Elections – a Strategy’*, by Jack Straw, 4th August 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Economist*, 9th June 1984, p.66. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Butler & Jowell, *Party Strategies in Britain*, p.89. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. KNNK 16/1/14, Speeches, April-June 1984. *Letter from Anita Pollack (Labour candidate in London SW) to party members*, undated. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Daily Telegraph*, 30th May 1984, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
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96. KNNK 16/1/14, Speeches, April-June 1984. *Speech at the press conference to launch the Labour Party’s European Election campaign*, 21st May 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. KNNK 16/1/14, Speeches, April-June 1984. *Speech at the Festival for a Socialist Europe, Edinburgh*, 27th May 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. *Times*, 2nd June 1984. A cutting of the article was found in CAC, KNNK 8/5, Socialist International correspondence. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
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102. *New Socialist*, 29 (July 1985), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. *New Socialist*, 31 (September 1985), pp. 36-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. *New Socialist*, 32 (October 1985), pp. 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
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109. For evidence of BACMC’s hostility to the Conservatives’ official European election campaigning approach, see CIB/3/1, letter from Lord Stoddart to Robert Maxwell (Daily Mirror), 8th August 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
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111. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
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