

INTRODUCTION: 'A FANFARE FOR EUROPE'

At the bar a florid man in a black suit was predicting the imminent collapse of the nation. He gave us three months, he said, then curtains.

John Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974)¹

In effect, what they were saying was that the final collapse of capitalism might be a matter of weeks away.

Tony Benn, 5 December 1974²

This year's referendum is more than a hands up for or against Europe. It is one aspect of a disintegrating political order.

The Guardian, 21 May 1975³

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. That verdict, in only the third UK-wide referendum in its history, struck British politics like an earthquake at sea. Within hours a tidal wave had built up that would sweep through Westminster and Whitehall, demolishing a political order established just a year earlier at the general election. Over the days that followed, the prime minister announced his resignation, Labour MPs declared war on their leader and the Scottish government began preparations for a second independence vote. Global financial markets, which had surged in the expectation of a vote to stay in, lost more than \$2 trillion in a single day of trading, while the pound dropped to its lowest level for thirty years.⁴

For good or for ill, the vote in 2016 overturned the central pillar of British economic and diplomatic policy since the 1960s. Scrabbling for a precedent, commentators likened what had happened to the

break-up of Yugoslavia, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the British Empire.⁵ For those who had campaigned to leave, 23 June marked Britain's 'Independence Day', when voters 'took back control' of their destiny.⁶ For their opponents in the Remain camp, defeat was like a bereavement, stirring feelings of loss, anger and disbelief. A study by the London School of Economics claimed that more than half of Remain voters wept or felt close to tears on learning of the result.⁷

It had all been so different four decades earlier. On 5 June 1975, just two years after joining what was then the European Community (or 'Common Market'), voters had gone to the polls in the UK's first referendum on membership. The result was a landslide, with a majority of more than two-to-one for staying in. Voters endorsed membership by 67.2 per cent to 32.8 per cent, the biggest mandate ever achieved in a national election, almost exactly reversing the state of the polls the previous autumn. The Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, told reporters that the European debate was now closed. 'Fourteen years of national argument', he proclaimed, 'are over.'⁸

The parallels between the two votes are intriguing. Harold Wilson, like David Cameron, was a reluctant European, convinced with his head rather than his heart of the case for membership. Like his successor, he led a divided party with a tiny majority in Parliament, at a time of rising hostility to membership among the public. Both deployed the referendum as an instrument of domestic political management, calling in the electorate as a political bomb-disposal unit to deal with an explosive issue on their own backbenches. It was Wilson who pioneered the offer to renegotiate the terms of membership and put them to the public in a referendum, which Cameron would repeat in his Bloomberg Speech of January 2013. Cameron followed the Wilson playbook almost to the letter; yet when he sought to replicate his predecessor's success, the device blew up in his hands.⁹

Writing shortly after the 1975 referendum, the political commentator Anthony King called it 'one of the half-dozen most important events in post-war British history'. It ranked, in his view, alongside the Attlee governments, the Suez crisis and the fall of the British Empire in scale and significance.¹⁰ Yet it has attracted none of the attention lavished on those other historical milestones. Dominic Sandbrook, in his popular history of the 1970s, calls it 'The Referendum Sideshow', while *The Official History of Britain and the European Community*, a multi-volume project sponsored by the Foreign Office, dedicates just

twelve pages to the referendum campaign.¹¹ Neglected by historians and political scientists, 1975 has become the property more of myth than of history.

This can be explained partly by what did *not* happen. The electorate did not, as in 2016, overturn the decision of Parliament or reverse the settled policy of successive governments. Its actions did not spark a political crisis, nor end the career of a prime minister. Voters in 1975 did not compel politicians to enact measures they had previously described as disastrous, nor challenge the authority of the political establishment. It was this, thought the *Daily Express*, that constituted the real significance of the vote. 'We are still a United Kingdom,' it exulted. 'We are still a sensible kingdom.' 'The most encouraging lesson of the referendum is that the centre held.'¹²

Yet the importance of what happened in 1975 is not simply negative. This was the first national referendum in British history: the first time that a front-rank political question had been taken out of the hands of Westminster and passed directly to the electorate. That marked a major constitutional innovation, at a time when there was widespread talk of a 'crisis of government'. The referendum challenged the right and even the capacity of MPs to embody the will of their constituents, striking a lasting blow against the sovereignty of Parliament.

The referendum took the European question out of Whitehall and into the country, triggering the only really sustained debate the British had ever had on their role in the world. Businesses produced newsletters, advising customers and employees how to vote. Shops issued carrier bags saying 'Yes to Europe', while Sainsbury's backed membership in its customer magazine. Bishops preached sermons on the blessings of integration, while a quarter of churches held services and days of prayer. In Northern Ireland, experiencing one of the bloodiest years of 'the Troubles', Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries formed an uneasy alliance against membership. The future Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd, held discussions in factory canteens, while the Women's Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds and the Rotary Club all hosted meetings. Campaign literature was distributed in Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Welsh, and when the BBC screened a live debate from the Oxford Union, in the week before the poll, nearly 11 million people tuned in to watch.¹³

The result was the most full-throated endorsement the public have ever given of membership of the European project. Every part

of the United Kingdom voted to stay in, with the exception only of Shetland and the Western Isles. Industrial towns and agricultural districts, Labour heartlands and Tory citadels, all said 'Yes' to Europe. As the *Daily Express* put it, in a jubilant editorial: 'Britain's Yes to Europe' had rung 'louder, clearer and more unanimous than any decision in peacetime history'. The result had shown 'decisively' and 'irrevocably' that 'Britain belongs to Europe'.¹⁴

This was to prove unduly optimistic; yet the *Express* was right about the significance of what had happened. The decision to remain in the European Community set the course of British history for a generation. Membership would reshape how Britain was governed, who it traded with and who had the right to live or work in the country. Its consequences would be felt in every area of national life: from trade policy and employment law to the criminal justice system and the peace process in Northern Ireland. Over the decades that followed, the European question would pulse like an electric charge through British politics, splitting the Labour Party in the 1980s, the Conservative Party in the 1990s and fracturing the political landscape again in 2016. It drove the two most successful challenger parties of modern times – the Social Democratic Party and the UK Independence Party – and has brought the future of the United Kingdom itself into question. As the dust settles on a second referendum, its capacity to inflame political passions has lost none of its explosive potential.

'A FANFARE FOR EUROPE'

The United Kingdom had joined the European Community on 1 January 1973: sixteen years after the Treaty of Rome and twelve years after its first abortive application. Entry marked an epoch in national history; perhaps 'the most profound revolution in British foreign policy in the twentieth century'.¹⁵ For the first time in the modern era, the UK had pooled its sovereignty with an alliance of Continental states. For the first time since the Reformation, its courts would be subject to an authority outside the British Isles, interpreting laws drawn up not just in Westminster but in Brussels and Strasbourg. In return, it was hoped, Britain would 'be able once again to play a worthy role in the world', gaining a voice in the destinies of a continent.¹⁶

For Edward Heath, the Conservative prime minister who had negotiated membership, entry was a turning point in British history.



FIGURE I.1 Edward Heath signs the Treaty of Accession in 1972. The ceremony was delayed by 55 minutes when a protestor threw a bottle of ink over Heath. Source: Hulton Deutsch, Corbis Historical: www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/613503132

Heath had come to power in 1970 promising ‘nothing less’ than ‘to change the course of history of this nation’, through ‘a change so radical, a revolution so quiet and yet so total, that it will go far beyond the programme for a Parliament’.¹⁷ Joining the European Community was fundamental to that ambition. Heath’s politics had been forged in the decade before 1945, when war in Europe had brought the continent to the brink of destruction. As a student in the 1930s, he had travelled through Germany and witnessed a Nazi rally at Nuremberg. He had visited Spain during the Civil War, witnessing at close hand the bombing of Barcelona. During the Second World War he had fought in France and Belgium, before ending the conflict in the shattered city of Hanover. European unity, he believed, was not only an economic necessity but a moral imperative. ‘Only by working together’, he wrote later, could nations ‘uphold the true values of European civilization’.¹⁸

It had taken three attempts to secure membership, and ministers celebrated with a two-week festival of culture: a ‘Fanfare for Europe’,

showcasing more than 300 different events. The Queen attended a gala opening at the Royal Opera House, conducted by Benjamin Britten and Colin Davis, with performances by Janet Baker, Judi Dench, Laurence Olivier and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Europe's most celebrated conductor, Herbert von Karajan, brought the Berlin Philharmonic to the Royal Albert Hall, while Bernard Haitink led the London Philharmonic in Vaughan Williams' Fourth Symphony. There was a televised service of thanksgiving at Coventry Cathedral, famously rebuilt out of the rubble of the Blitz, while a Festival of European Art gathered treasures from across the Continent. Ministers had hoped to borrow the Bayeux Tapestry for display in Westminster Hall, but it was felt that the subject matter – involving the invasion, conquest and butchery of the native population – struck an unduly sanguinary note.¹⁹

The Fanfare offered something for all tastes. There was a vintage car rally from London to Brussels; a special episode of the talent show, *Opportunity Knocks*; and a beauty contest won by the Dutch model Sylvia Kristel (soon to find fame in the erotic movie franchise, *Emmanuelle*). Slade rocked the London Palladium, the Kinks played at Drury Lane, and there were performances by the Chieftains and Steeleye Span. At Wembley Stadium, a football match pitted the three new member states – Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom – against the six founder members. Bobby Charlton captained the home team, Bobby Moore renewed his rivalry with Franz Beckenbauer and 'the Three' won comfortably by two goals to nil.²⁰



FIGURE 1.2 Steeleye Span outside the Royal Albert Hall, 15 January 1973: Frank Barratt/Stringer, Hulton.

Source: Archive: www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/3281658

Sitting in the Royal Opera House on 3 January, Heath was in buoyant mood: 'my heart', he recalled later, 'was full of joy that night'.²¹ Yet the fat lady was singing for Heath in more senses than one. The Fanfare was a flop: Wembley Stadium was half empty, events were sparsely attended and the government was accused of squandering £3 50,000 of public money. Opinion polls, which had shown a slender majority for entry in January, quickly turned sour. By August, more than half of respondents thought Britain had been 'wrong' to join the Common Market; by Christmas, opponents of membership enjoyed a fourteen-point lead. By March 1974, just 12 per cent of the electorate 'believed that we had obtained any benefit as a result of membership'.²² An official at the Department of Trade and Industry likened the public to 'a crowd of holidaymakers who, after much doubt and expense, have made a dangerous journey only to find the climate chilly, the hotel not what it was cracked up to be and the food too expensive'. Ominously for the government, he concluded, 'bloodthirsty feelings are mounting, not only towards the other nationalities in the hotel but to the courier who got them there'.²³

The mood in Whitehall was similarly grim. When John Hunt became Cabinet secretary in November, he was struck by the 'smell of death hanging over the government'.²⁴ With his premiership disintegrating under the pressure of a miners' strike, Heath was driven into an early election in February 1974. Defeat brought to power a Labour government under Harold Wilson, who shared none of Heath's fervour for the Community. The Labour manifesto promised 'a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of entry', to be followed by a referendum or a general election. It ended with a stark warning: if new, more satisfactory terms could not be agreed, Labour would seek a mandate from the public for 'our withdrawal from the Communities'.²⁵

'A DEVICE OF DICTATORS AND DEMAGOGUES'

The decision to hold a referendum was highly controversial. The *Sun* called it a 'constitutional monstrosity': a 'rotten', 'silly', 'alien' and 'unconstitutional' device that menaced the very survival of democracy.²⁶ Margaret Thatcher, in her first major speech as Leader of the Opposition, labelled it 'a device of dictators and demagogues' and refused to confirm that her party would be bound by the result.²⁷ For its supporters, by contrast, the referendum promised a rare injection

of democracy into a system that seemed more often to frustrate the popular will than to express it. Tony Benn, the paladin of the Labour Left, had been arguing since the 1960s that a mature, educated electorate could no longer be satisfied with 'the five-yearly cross on the ballot paper'. Always an enthusiast for new technology, he predicted that there would soon be an electronic button in every household, making possible 'a new popular democracy' in place of 'parliamentary democracy as we know it'. Regular plebiscites, he hoped, would make governments truly accountable to the public, while enlarging both 'the responsibility and understanding of ordinary people'.²⁸

What followed was the first national election of the modern era to be fought outside the conventional party system, a fact that posed real challenges to all involved. The national co-ordinating groups, many of whose activists had little experience of electoral politics, struggled to police the legal guidelines on 'treating' and fundraising. Broadcasters, likewise, found it difficult to apply rules of impartiality and fair coverage to an electoral landscape whose contours were so unfamiliar. New alliances had to be constructed, often along the most unlikely lines. The campaign to get Britain out brought together left-wingers such as Tony Benn and Michael Foot; the right-wing populist Enoch Powell; Ulster Protestants such as Ian Paisley and James Molyneaux; and groups ranging from the National Front to the Communist Party of Great Britain. The 'In' campaign was led by a Labour home secretary, Roy Jenkins, and counted among its vice-presidents a former Conservative prime minister, the president of the National Farmers' Union and the former general secretary of the Trades Union Congress. In the constituencies, party activists found themselves working cheerfully with sworn political enemies, in a festive atmosphere that reminded some of the Christmas truce.²⁹

The suspension – or, more accurately, the confusion – of party allegiances opened a space for an unusual array of campaigning forces. Voluntary organisations and ad hoc alliances played a larger role than was conventional in UK elections, while the faces that looked down from posters were those not of politicians or diplomats but of sportsmen, actors and public intellectuals. Star recruits for the Yes campaign included the boxer Henry Cooper, the Olympic gold medalist Mary Peters, and the captain of the British and Irish Lions, Willie John McBride; the No campaign claimed the support of the footballing superstar George Best, memorably described as 'the Enoch Powell

of British football'.³⁰ Women's voices were especially prominent, and close attention was paid to the votes of immigrant communities.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Attitudes to the European question have changed significantly over time, both within and between parties. In 1975 it was the Conservative Party that was most enthusiastically European. Margaret Thatcher, newly elected as party leader, stumped the country demanding 'a massive Yes' to Europe, resplendent in a woolly jumper knitted from the flags of the member states.³¹ The Labour Party was much more hostile, with a majority of its MPs, activists and some of the biggest names in Cabinet fighting to get Britain out. Newspapers that would later become fiercely critical of the EU – including the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* – campaigned fervently to stay in. Of the national press, only the *Spectator* and the Communist *Morning Star* backed withdrawal.

The geography of the European debate was also very different. Support for membership was strongest in England, especially in counties with a strong Tory vote such as Buckinghamshire, Surrey, West Sussex and North Yorkshire. Lincolnshire and Essex, which produced the four highest votes to leave in 2016, backed membership in 1975 by 74.7 per cent and 67.6 per cent respectively.³² Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were more hostile, with Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party all campaigning for a No vote.³³ In 1975, as in 2016, it was feared that the referendum might tear the United Kingdom apart; but in the 1970s, the



FIGURE 1.3 Margaret Thatcher in her 'Yes to Europe' jumper, 4 June 1975.
Source: P. Floyd/Stringer, Hulton Archive: www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/641305251

nightmare was that England would vote to *stay in*, while the rest of the UK voted to leave. The future leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, was just one who campaigned for a No vote, telling reporters that 'Scotland knows from bitter experience what treatment is in store for a powerless region of a Common Market.'³⁴

This was reflected in the spread of issues. Immigration, which dominated the campaign in 2016, was barely mentioned in 1975. The number of EEC nationals applying for settlement in the UK actually *dropped* after British entry, as deteriorating economic conditions made the country ever less attractive as a destination for migrant workers.³⁵ Outside Northern Ireland, where there was some concern about Catholic migration from the South, there was more concern about the *outward* movement of people, with anti-Marketeters warning that the unemployed would be 'forced to leave Britain to find jobs' on the Continent.³⁶ Conversely, issues like food prices, fishing and the Common Agricultural Policy consumed large amounts of airtime in the 1970s, yet were almost invisible forty years later.

A referendum is nominally a single-issue campaign, yet in practice the debate is rarely restricted to the question on the ballot paper. This was exacerbated in 1975 by the form of campaigning. 'Britain in Europe', the wealthier of the two co-ordinating groups, conducted extensive polling, which it used to target particular cohorts of the electorate. Dedicated campaign vehicles were created for every conceivable constituency: 'Actors for Europe', 'Christians for Europe', 'Communists for Europe', even – for one glorious moment before the leadership intervened – 'Wombles for Europe'.³⁷ High-level organisers were assigned to work with trade unionists, women, immigrants and professional groups, crafting messages that were tailored to the concerns of each cohort. The result was not simply to carry the European debate into unlikely places (though articles addressed to single parents, Commonwealth citizens and paramilitaries did precisely that). Just as importantly, the effect was to bring the referendum into contact with a much wider range of issues and concerns, so that what had begun as a vote on the European Community became a larger debate about the 'state of the nation'.

What bound all this together was a series of core questions and concerns. Elections do not take place in a vacuum: they respond to the context and climate in which the vote is held. Four themes were especially prominent in 1975: the memory of war; the ongoing struggle

between East and West; the search for a new world role; and, above all, a powerful sense of domestic crisis.

'NATIONALISM KILLS'

For the generation that voted in 1975, war in Europe was not an abstract concept. It was only thirty years since the end of World War II; indeed, voters in 1975 were closer to the end of the *First* World War than voters in 2016 were to the *Second*. The campaign was punctuated by the chronologies of war, for the thirtieth anniversary of Victory in Europe fell a month before the vote, while the results were announced on the thirty-first anniversary of D-Day. For many who took part in the campaign, these were personal, not simply public, anniversaries. Tony Benn had served with the Royal Air Force; Denis Healey had fought with the Royal Engineers; while Willie Whitelaw won the Military Cross as a tank commander. Enoch Powell had served in military intelligence, while Roy Jenkins was a code-breaker at Bletchley Park. Neil Marten, the Conservative MP who ran the 'Out' campaign, had been parachuted behind enemy lines to fight with the Resistance; his opposite number in the European Movement, Ernest Wistrich, had escaped from Poland before the Nazi invasion. Wistrich subsequently fought for both his old country and his new, taking to the skies with the Polish division of the RAF.³⁸

The memory of war was not restricted to those who had lived through it. As the historian Geoff Eley has written, "remembering" World War Two requires no immediate experience of those years', for subsequent generations 'grew up suffused in the effects of the war'. Whether in the form of the ration book, national service or the bomb damage that still scarred Britain's towns and cities, the legacies of war were concrete and tangible, and they were bound together by the stories (and silences) of parents, teachers and public figures.³⁹ Popular culture, too, was pervaded by memories of conflict. The war movie had been a staple of British cinema during the 1950s and '60s, while TV shows such as *Dad's Army* (1968–77) and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (1974–81) used the war as a comic backdrop. ITV's monumental, 26-part series *The World at War* ran weekly from October 1973 to May 1974, ending with the single word 'remember' projected onto the television screen. Just months after the referendum, in October 1975, John Cleese would goose-step through one of the most famous episodes of *Fawlty Towers*, shrieking 'Don't mention the War!' at his horrified guests.⁴⁰

Memories of war saturated the referendum campaign, though their significance was fiercely contested. For some, the surrender of national sovereignty to the EEC was a betrayal of all those who had fought and died 'to deliver Europe from Nazi dictatorship'.⁴¹ As a woman from Bournemouth wrote to Barbara Castle, 'I ... did not fight and suffer a war for six years to be dictated to by the Germans.' Anti-German sentiment was rarely expressed in public – and was openly mocked in programmes like *Fawlty Towers* – but it loomed large in MPs' postbags. 'Hitler's ghost', wrote another correspondent to Castle, 'must be shaking with laughter at Roy Jenkins, Hattersley & the rest of the traitor crew.' Such letters often emphasised the price that had been paid for freedom, either personally ('I lost the boy I was engaged to') or in the nation's continuing economic problems ('Saving France and all the other countries has cost us dear'). Some viewed the Community as a new power-grab by Germany, a country which 'on two occasions ... has failed to conquer the British militarily'. The conviction that Britain had been 'sold up the river with the French & two war Germans' caused real anger, with pro-Marketeers likened to the 'Quislings' who would have surrendered to the Nazis in 1940. The notion 'that the GERMANS love us any more today than they did in 1914 & 1939' was dismissed with contempt. 'The leopard does not easily change its spots.'⁴²

Campaign officials rarely endorsed such sentiments, but anti-Marketeers did very consciously evoke the language of wartime resistance. The Common Market Safeguards Campaign published a newspaper called *Resistance News*, and the group of MPs around Neil Marten was known as the 'R' Group for the same reason. Such language evoked the war as a struggle for national independence, with the Battle of Britain and the Blitz as its exemplary conflicts. 1940 loomed large in such retellings, recalling a time when Britain had 'stood alone' against overwhelming odds. Only by voting for independence could the living 'honour the memory of the dead', who had 'made the supreme sacrifice in order to maintain our freedom'.⁴³

This was linked to a memory of appeasement. Anti-Marketeers likened the Treaty of Accession to the Munich Agreement of 1938, remembered as a craven act of surrender by the 'guilty men' of British politics. Christopher Frere-Smith, who ran the Get Britain Out campaign, warned repeatedly that accession to the Common Market marked a 'new Munich', with Heath and Jenkins playing the roles of

Chamberlain and Halifax.⁴⁴ Voters should not be 'fooled by the press bosses and the establishment politicians. They were wrong about Hitler and they're wrong again.'⁴⁵

Pro-Marketeers also invoked the war years, though they drew a different moral. Here the emphasis was on the horror of war, which had devoured millions of lives in the prosecution of national rivalries. Britain in Europe used the poppy, the flower of remembrance, in its literature, while its logo was a dove of peace. 'Nationalism kills', warned a poster. 'No more Civil Wars'. Another, published for the anniversary of victory in Europe, noted that 'On VE Day we celebrated the beginnings of peace. Vote Yes to make sure we keep it.' In perhaps the most powerful slogan of the campaign, a third poster read simply: 'Forty million people died in two European wars this century. Better lose a little sovereignty than a son or daughter.'⁴⁶

For many in the Yes campaign, the war remained the central reference of their politics. The Conservative MP Sir Anthony Meyer, who would later challenge Margaret Thatcher for the Tory leadership, recalled how 'virtually all my friends were killed' during the Second World War. It was the 'senseless waste of human life', he wrote, and 'the absolute conviction that untrammelled national sovereignty is *the* cause of war ... [that] made me enthusiastic about a united Europe'.⁴⁷ Heath, likewise, appealed explicitly to the war in an emotional radio broadcast in 1971:

Many of you have fought in Europe, as I did, or have lost fathers, or brothers, or husbands who fell fighting in Europe. I say to you now, with that experience in my memory, that joining the Community, working together with them for our joint security and prosperity, is the best guarantee we can give ourselves of a lasting peace in Europe.⁴⁸

For the advocates of membership, their opponents had misread the experience of the 1930s. For Roy Jenkins, the most important lesson of this period was 'the sheer impossibility of opting out of events across the Channel'. The British had 'shouted plenty of words of warning and encouragement from the touchline; but until it was far too late we pretended we were not needed on the field of play. Tens of millions of people paid for that mistake with their lives.'

Jenkins also challenged the romantic image of Britain in 1940, 'standing alone' against the continental dictators. Between the fall of

France and the declaration of war by the United States and the Soviet Union, he argued, Britain had been *compelled* to stand alone; but the central focus of its diplomacy had been to find new allies and to return to the Continent in arms. There was 'the world of difference', he noted tartly, 'between standing alone because others have succumbed and you have survived, and standing alone because others are successfully co-operating and you are sulking in a corner'.⁴⁹

COLD WAR AND COMMON MARKET

It was not just past conflicts that loomed over the campaign. The referendum came at a moment of particular anxiety in the Cold War, that great ideological struggle that framed so much of British history after 1945. The same newspapers that were reporting the referendum debate also brought news of the fall of Saigon, the defeat of American forces in Vietnam and the seizure of a US merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*, by the Khmer Rouge. There were fears that Portugal, which had overthrown the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo* the previous year, might fall under Communist influence, giving the Soviets a foothold on Europe's western seaboard. If Portugal became 'Europe's Cuba', other countries might soon be drawn into its orbit.⁵⁰ The governor of California and Republican presidential hopeful, Ronald Reagan, told a dinner in London that Russia possessed 'all the important elements to substantially alter the political map of Europe'. The *Spectator* agreed: 'The world balance of power is undergoing a major shift and ... the shift is all in favour of the Communists.'⁵¹

As Reagan was aware, European vulnerabilities fed off concerns about American strength and resolve. The United States was undergoing its own internal convulsions in the wake of Watergate, the civil rights movement and the impeachment of Richard Nixon. With the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, it seemed that America might be entering a period of protectionism, introspection and even isolationism, preoccupied by internal violence, the 'culture wars' ignited by Vietnam and the faltering of the US economy. 'The Pax Americana', thought the *Guardian*, was 'eroding', and Europe could no longer rely upon its protection.⁵²

Such fears were widely ventilated during the referendum. Harold Wilson told the Cabinet at the end of 1974 that 'American leadership had gone,' while Roy Jenkins claimed that the capacity of

the United States to protect its allies – ‘the dominant feature of the 20 years from 1948 to 1968’ – had ‘declined substantially’.⁵³ Others predicted that Washington would reduce its military commitments in Europe, or that ‘the loss of face in south-east Asia’ would see America return to ‘isolationism’. A correspondent to the *Scotsman* warned that the peoples of Europe ‘no longer have around them a shield of invincible American power ... They must stand as a united Europe, or fall’.⁵⁴

The European Community did not, of course, have a direct military function, though the idea had been under discussion since the 1940s. It did, however, fortify the economies of western Europe, binding its members into a prosperous, free market bloc that was resistant to Soviet influence. Speaking at the NATO Council a week before the referendum, Harold Wilson told the assembled ministers that ‘it is no good having a credible external defence if our economies collapse’.⁵⁵ The existence of the EEC, as the shadow defence secretary, George Younger, put it, provided NATO with ‘a firm economic base’, giving potentially unstable countries a stake in the prosperity of the West.⁵⁶ Heath urged the public to remember the fate of ‘the weak and divided nations of Eastern Europe after 1945’, now reduced to the status of ‘Soviet satellites’. ‘British withdrawal’, he warned, would constitute ‘the biggest blow to the defence of the West in the past 20 years’.⁵⁷

If, as even right-wing newspapers believed, American influence was now in retreat, it was more important than ever that Europe should find ‘a common purpose against Communist ambitions and subversions’.⁵⁸ This gained urgency as countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain began to emerge from decades of authoritarian rule. Shirley Williams told supporters that, if Britain withdrew, the Community ‘would be subjected to powerful strains which might even break it up’. Without that support network, ‘the emerging democracies of Greece and Portugal would be damaged, perhaps fatally’.⁵⁹ Roy Jenkins warned that withdrawal would put the security of western Europe ‘more heavily at risk than at any time since the Marshall Plan and the foundation of NATO’.⁶⁰

The Communist threat was a particular feature of Heath’s rhetoric. In a series of apocalyptic speeches, he claimed that a ‘vote against the Market could lead to a Soviet invasion of Europe’. Isolationist tendencies in the US, he believed, would be exacerbated by the spectacle of a continent quarrelling among itself. Divided at home and friendless abroad, western Europe would become ‘a sitting target for a Soviet

Union with an insatiable appetite'.⁶¹ Some feared that Britain itself, outside the shelter of the Community, could fall victim to Communist penetration. It was enough for some on the Right that the USSR and the Communist Party of Great Britain wanted the UK to leave (though Communist China wanted Britain to remain in), or that a No vote was the outcome favoured by the Labour Left.⁶² A vote to leave, warned Tory literature, would give 'Bennery' the biggest electoral endorsement it had ever received, heralding a 'siege economy' and the return of rationing.⁶³

Anti-Communist rhetoric could reach levels that would have embarrassed Senator McCarthy. The *Daily Express* likened anti-Marketeers to those Nazi sympathisers who would have welcomed a German invasion in 1940, and wondered which side Tony Benn would be on if the Soviets threatened Britain.⁶⁴ A Scottish industrialist told a meeting in Glasgow that the only alternative to the Common Market was 'to draw close to, or perhaps even become a member of the Communist bloc'.⁶⁵ In similar vein, the Conservative MP for Bournemouth East, John Cordle, told constituents that Britain 'would become a communist state if we were to leave the market'. 'Each one of us, if we really wanted to do something to help Britain, would be knocking on the doors of everyone in sight and saying: "For God's sake, it's a question of communism"'.⁶⁶

At a time when ministers felt the need to ask voters 'Who Governs Britain?' even some on the Left feared for the survival of democratic politics. George Brown, a former foreign secretary, stressed 'the narrowness of the margin ... between maintaining present democratic institutions and losing them, perhaps for ever'. Unless Europe stood together, a 'concerted effort at a Communist takeover could swamp the democratic heritage of Western Europe'.⁶⁷

For a Conservative anti-Marketeer like Neil Marten, who had never so much as waved a red flag, the idea that a No vote would sweep in the Communist millennium was absurd and offensive. In a brave stab at humour, he accused his opponents of introducing 'RED herrings' into the debate, and of whipping up a McCarthyite frenzy to disguise the fragility of their case. At the most recent national elections in each country, Communist parties had won 17,000 votes in Britain, 5 million in France and 9 million in Italy. 'Surely,' he concluded, 'if Communism is the main enemy, the Conservatives should be saying "keep away from the Common Market – it's loaded with Communists"'.⁶⁸

Marten blamed 'American public relations people' for the anti-Communist flavour of the Yes campaign, and accused Tory pro-Marketeers of lacking faith in their ability to defeat socialism at the ballot box.⁶⁹ Yet this oversimplified the pro-Market case, which emphasised both the economic dangers of withdrawal and the need for solidarity against the Soviet threat. It did not help that anti-Marketeers on the Left tended to play down the issue, viewing the Community as a relic of a conflict that was now drawing to a close. Judith Hart, for example, dismissed it as 'a product of the cold war atmosphere of the 1950s' that was 'totally irrelevant to the needs of contemporary Britain'.⁷⁰ Michael Foot, likewise, insisted that Cold War tensions had been 'relaxing' for years.⁷¹ In this respect, the timing of the referendum was unfortunate for the Antis, coming as it did at a moment of rising international anxiety.⁷² Polling companies warned the 'Out' campaign that it would have to tackle the fears associated with communism, but this was something it never successfully achieved.⁷³

FINDING A ROLE?

Cold War tensions fed off wider anxieties about Britain's place in the world. It was only ten years since a Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, had boasted that Britain's 'frontiers are in the Himalayas'; yet by 1975, that vision felt as remote as the days of Pitt and Palmerston.⁷⁴ In a famous speech at West Point in 1962, former US secretary of state Dean Acheson claimed that Britain had 'lost an empire', but 'not yet found a role'.⁷⁵ The question was not only whether it could find that role in the Community, but whether doing so was compatible with what it meant to be 'British'.

Questions of national identity had always been bound up with Britain's role in the wider world. In becoming an empire, Britain could be seen as having burst the confines of western Europe, extending its trade, its military power and even its national sports across the globe. The Victorian statesman Benjamin Disraeli had boasted in 1866 that Britain was no longer 'a mere European power'. As 'the metropolis of a great maritime empire', she had 'outgrown the Continent of Europe'; 'she is really more an Asiatic power than a European'.⁷⁶ From that perspective, the attempt to recalibrate Britain as a European power could be seen not simply as a recasting of British policy – perhaps 'the most decisive moment in British history since the Norman conquest or the

loss of America' – but as a shrivelling of status; a retreat to parochial irrelevance by an exhausted and diminished power.⁷⁷

That sense of defeat could carry overtones of cultural, as well as political, surrender. In everyday language, 'Europe' tended to mean 'the Continent', understood as 'a geographical area which does not include the British Isles'. Britons talked of 'going to Europe' on holiday; universities taught 'British' and 'European' history in separate courses; and both sides in the accession debate spoke of 'joining' or 'leaving Europe'. In consequence, talk of 'becoming European' could easily conjure fears of 'ceasing to be British'.⁷⁸ Asked in the summer of 1971 whether Britain would lose some of its national identity within the Community, 62 per cent of those polled thought that it would. Only 27 per cent thought that it would not.⁷⁹ This was not simply a post-imperial nostalgia on the part of metropolitan elites. In Scotland and Wales, as we shall see, nationalist parties were deeply suspicious of the cultural homogenisation they associated with membership, while the Somerset band the Wurzels had a minor hit in 1967 with the song 'When the Common Market Comes to Stanton Drew', a rumination on how farmers would adapt to a world of spaghetti, flamenco and late-night drinking.⁸⁰

The mood in Whitehall was more optimistic. The government's Referendum Information Unit, which took calls from members of the public, told enquirers that 'Britain needs new ways of exerting influence'; 'we have to find a role to replace the one we played up to and immediately after the last war'.⁸¹ The *Sun* put it more bluntly. 'After years of drift and failure', it told readers, 'the Common Market offers an unrepeatable opportunity for a nation that lost an empire to gain a continent.'⁸² Pro-Marketeers projected their opponents as isolationists turning their backs on the world and on Britain's role within it. Roy Jenkins mocked the Antis for seeking 'a return to the womb', adding (rather incongruously) that withdrawal would condemn Britain to 'an old people's home for faded nations'.⁸³ Yet anti-Marketeers insisted that it was the EEC – a group of white, post-imperial states, huddled behind a tariff barrier – that was insular and parochial. The slogan 'Out of Europe and into the World' was blazoned across press conferences, in a rebuke to what the Scottish Nationalist Winifred Ewing called the 'narrow European "regionalism"' of the Market. E.P. Thompson, the celebrated socialist historian, dismissed the Community as 'a group of fat, rich nations feeding each other goodies', united by nothing more elevated than an 'introversial white bourgeois nationalism'.⁸⁴

CRISIS BRITAIN?

All this fed into a wider atmosphere of domestic crisis, which was both economic and political in character. The referendum came at an exceptionally difficult period for the economy. Oil prices had quadrupled as a result of war in the Middle East, triggering power cuts across industry. The balance of payments collapsed from a £1 billion surplus in 1971 to a £3.3 billion deficit in 1974, comfortably the worst since the industrial era began.⁸⁵ The same year also witnessed one of the great stock market crashes of the twentieth century – a slump which, according to the City editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, made 'the inter-war crash look like a dent on the bumper'. At one stage in 1974 the stock exchange had lost 73 per cent of its value. 'Hardly a week goes by', one journal complained, 'without another large stockbroking firm putting up the shutters.'⁸⁶

When Labour returned to government in March, the new Chancellor, Denis Healey, told ministers that the 'economic situation ... might well be the worst which had ever been faced in peacetime'.⁸⁷ Wilson thought it 'the gravest crisis we have faced since 1931'.⁸⁸ Within a year inflation was running at close to 25 per cent, fuelling a wave of strikes as workers fought to protect the purchasing power of their wages. No democracy had ever survived a sustained period of inflation at this level, fuelling predictions that spiralling prices might destroy British democracy in the 1970s as surely as in Germany in the 1930s. Writing in *The Times*, Peter Jay warned that if Britain could not tame inflation, democracy might 'pass away within the life-time of people

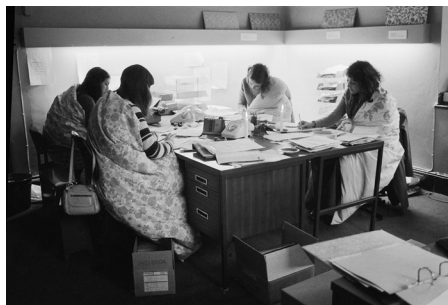


FIGURE I.4 Workers in Bond Street wear duvets to keep warm during power cuts, in the winter of 1973–74.

Source: Evening Standard, Hulton Archive: www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/2669881

now adult', while an NOP poll in 1974 found that 65 per cent of those questioned thought that there was either a 'serious threat' or 'some threat' to the survival of democracy.⁸⁹ The collapse of parliamentary government in Northern Ireland offered a grim reminder of the fragility of democratic institutions, and of the human cost of their collapse.

Throughout the referendum period, the strapline in the *Sun* read simply: 'Crisis Britain'. This was part of a wider genre of journalism, affectionately nicknamed 'Doomwatch', which charted with sadistic relish the evidence of impending disaster.⁹⁰ It was a mood that was echoed at the highest levels of government. The foreign secretary, Jim Callaghan, told the Cabinet in 1974 that 'every morning when he shaved he thought that he should emigrate, but by the time he had eaten breakfast, he realised there was nowhere else to go'. 'There was no solution that he could see to our problems.'⁹¹

The same grim mood was evident in business. The supermarket magnate John Davan Sainsbury warned of 'the most serious decline in business confidence' for a quarter of a century, while Marks & Spencer breezily told customers that the days were gone 'when we can take for granted hot radiators, endless supplies of hot water from the tap' and 'even electric lights'.⁹² A volume of essays published by the Institute of Economic Affairs, entitled simply *Crisis '75 ... ?*, warned that the economy required 'new thought and unpalatable action if it is not to collapse or disintegrate'. As a trading nation that imported most of its food, Britain's ability to feed itself depended upon the export of goods and services to the rest of the world. What was at stake was not simply prosperity or the rate of economic growth; it was the UK's survival as a first world economy.⁹³

Both sides in the referendum campaign invoked this apocalyptic spirit, though they shaped it to different ends.⁹⁴ 'In' campaigners warned that withdrawal would trigger the collapse of the currency, a public spending crisis and massive job losses. Heath predicted food shortages and a return to the ration book, while a Tory MP in Scotland claimed that 'a No vote would ... mean the closing of schools and hospitals and the stopping of roads, railways and mines'. 'Out' campaigners replied that it was membership that was draining the lifeblood from the economy. Tony Benn claimed that 500,000 jobs had been lost in the first two years of membership. Staying in, he predicted, would mean 'total disaster' for manufacturing and mass unemployment across the country.⁹⁵

The result was what one commentator called an 'auction of fear, a competition to make your flesh creep'.⁹⁶ Another called it 'a spine-chilling horror epic', with 'the defenceless voter' trapped 'in the middle of a nightmarish duel between Dracula and Frankenstein'.⁹⁷ The apocalyptic tone of the debate seems to have resonated with voters, because it tapped into their personal experience. For a generation that had lived through rationing, seen oil prices quadruple in 1973 and queued for sugar in 1974, the prospect of economic catastrophe was not something abstract. Private polling in May found that more than half of voters expected 'an immediate economic and political crisis' in the event of a decision to withdraw, a conviction that hung like a storm cloud over the campaign.⁹⁸

Some welcomed the evidence that an old order was passing away. Tony Benn, who was on the front line of the economic battle as secretary of state for industry, wrote in his diary in December 1974 that 'the final collapse of capitalism might be a matter of weeks away'. The country, he believed, faced a historic moment of decision: 'whether to adopt Tory measures' (such as EEC membership) 'in order to prop up the old system or to go forward with something else'.⁹⁹ From this perspective, the referendum signalled a parting of the ways. The word 'crisis' comes from the Greek word for a 'judgement': it is a moment of decision, not a moment of panic. The conviction that Britain faced a choice of direction loomed large over the referendum debate, and extended far beyond its relationship with the EEC. Should the UK bind itself into an expanded market capitalism, or explore new forms of socialist planning? Did its future lie in Europe or on the open seas? Was democracy enhanced or diminished by pooling sovereignty with others?

'COMMON MARKET OR BUST?'

Such questions provide the starting point for the current book. What follows is not a study of diplomacy, of summit meetings or even, for the most part, of politicians and governments. Instead, it follows the referendum debate out of Parliament and into the country: to the churches, women's organisations, paramilitary groups and business meetings at which the European question was being thrashed out. It shows how attitudes to European integration were shaped by the other great issues and controversies of the 1970s: such as the women's liberation movement; secularisation; the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland; the

rise of nationalism in Scotland and Wales; the Cold War; and the end of empire. In so doing, it seeks to break down the divide between 'British history' and 'the history of Britain in Europe', two fields that have rarely embraced free movement.

The result is as much a social history of the 1970s as a political history of European integration. Despite the strength of feeling among activists, polls suggested that the EEC was a low-salience issue for most of the public. It rarely featured when voters were asked to name 'the most serious issues facing Britain today', coming far behind concerns about employment, inflation and trade union power. Campaigners (and voters themselves) constantly lamented the ignorance and incuriosity of the public about how the EEC worked, what it did and why it mattered.¹⁰⁰ Yet precisely for this reason, voters projected onto the European debate the things that they *did* know and care about. Released from conventional party allegiances, and deprived of many of the cues by which they commonly cast their ballots, voters made the referendum an arena for a much wider set of debates and controversies. In consequence, what might have been a dry, technocratic campaign was liberated into something bigger, becoming a debate about the direction of British politics and society, who to trust in public life and Britain's sense of its own identity.

It is this that distinguishes the book from previous accounts of the referendum. The years immediately following the vote produced three excellent studies, to which the current volume owes a substantial debt. In 1976 David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger co-authored a study of *The 1975 Referendum*, based on interviews with many of the protagonists and extensive access to the papers of the two campaigns. Part of a series covering every general election since the Second World War, it charted the decision to hold a referendum, the renegotiations, the formation and activities of the two campaigns, and the roles played by the press, the television companies and the polling organisations. That same year, the Conservative MP Philip Goodhart published *Full-Hearted Consent*, a lively account that focused particularly on the campaign to procure a referendum. These two volumes were joined, in 1977, by Anthony King's *Britain Says Yes*, which set the referendum within the longer history of the European debate and paid special attention to party opinion.¹⁰¹

All three volumes had strong credentials. David Butler was – and remains – the doyen of electoral analysts, and he brought to

the referendum thirty years' experience as Britain's leading psephologist. Anthony King, likewise, had published extensively on electoral politics, including studies of the 1964 and 1966 elections, and had a special expertise in the study of public opinion. Uwe Kitzinger had worked as an economist at the Council of Europe, as a political advisor in the European Commission, and was one of the founders of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*. His 1973 study of *Diplomacy and Persuasion: How Britain Joined the Common Market* was praised even by those who did not share his enthusiasm for entry; and it remains one of the most elegant and perceptive studies of its subject.¹⁰² Philip Goodhart was one of those who had fought to secure a referendum, and he brought to the subject a ready wit and an insider's perspective.

The current book draws on all three volumes, but the questions it seeks to answer are different. It uses the referendum as a window into the political and social history of the 1970s, exploring how the European debate intersected with – and was shaped by – other issues and controversies in the period. Voters did not shed their wider identities on entering the polling booths: they brought to the European question their beliefs and experiences as men and women; employers and workers; Catholics and Protestants; consumers and producers; trade unionists, nationalists and immigrants. For some, the central issue of the campaign was the economy and the challenge of post-war decline. For others, it was nationhood and the campaign for self-government. In Northern Ireland the campaign focused intensively on the border, the defence of Protestantism and the future of Partition. Depending on one's perspective, the EEC could be a bulwark against communism, a site of religious awakening, the spawn of empire or a vehicle for women's rights. In this respect, the ballot paper functioned as a political Rorschach test, with responses ranging from nightmare to nirvana.

For this reason, the book ranges more widely than is normal in books on 'Britain and Europe', both in its subject matter and in its source material. Parish newsletters, fashion magazines, farming journals and paramilitary writings all feature, as do pop songs, tabloid newspapers and interviews with some of those who participated in the campaign. Such material allows us not only to explore public attitudes towards membership, at a time of unusual voter salience; it also shines a light on the hopes, fears and world-views of the electorate in one of Britain's most troubled decades.

The book is divided into three main sections. Part one charts the road to the referendum, showing how this alien form of decision-making burst out of the stomach of Britain's parliamentary democracy. It explores why it was so difficult to contain the European question within conventional party lines, and why the issue proved especially disruptive for the Labour Party. It also introduces the main campaign vehicles on either side, exploring the role of the media and assessing how the pro-Marketees outgunned, out-generalled and outclassed their opposite numbers.

A second part focuses on key issues and themes in the campaign, ranging from specific cohorts (such as women, business and the churches) to topics of special interest (such as food, sovereignty and the end of empire). Here, in particular, it seeks to reconnect the European debate to the wider history of Britain in the period leading up to the referendum.

The final section explores the territorial dimensions of the referendum. The period leading up to the vote had seen significant electoral breakthroughs for Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, as well as the disintegration of the Northern Ireland Parliament under the pressure of sectarian conflict. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all acquired their own campaign vehicles (England, significantly, did not), and separate chapters explore the debate in each. A closing chapter explores the lessons of the campaign and draws some comparisons with 2016.

Throughout the book, I use the contemporary terms 'pro-' and 'anti-Marketee' (or the 'Pros' and the 'Antis') to identify the two sides. These terms are not wholly satisfactory, for they derive from a nickname, 'the Common Market', which was itself not strictly accurate. Such labels are preferable, however, to most of the alternatives. 'Euro sceptic' was a word that only entered common usage in the 1980s and was never a very helpful descriptor. If 'scepticism' suggests a doubting, questioning mindset, it is more accurately applied to a reluctant *pro*-Marketee, such as Harold Wilson, than to a confirmed Anti such as Enoch Powell. Except in quotation, I have avoided terms such as 'anti-European'. The EEC (or even the EU) is not coterminous with 'Europe', and it is possible to oppose political integration without being hostile to European culture, trade or other forms of co-operation.

The organisation itself bore a number of different labels. Strictly speaking, there was no such thing as 'the European Community'. Rather, there were three 'European Communities', which were brought under a common set of institutions in 1967: the European Coal and

Steel Community (ECSC); the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom); and the European Economic Community (EEC).¹⁰³ In practice, it was common to talk of 'the European Community', and I have followed that usage here. 'The Common Market' was a nickname for the EEC that was mostly favoured by its opponents; it was placed on the ballot paper in 1975 at the insistence of the Antis, who wanted to remind Labour voters of its association with market capitalism. Those who favoured membership often cavilled at the term: Heath told the Commons in 1966 that 'the phrase "Common Market" under-estimates and undervalues the Community, and, for this reason, tends to mislead those who have to deal with it'. Like most enthusiasts for membership, he preferred to talk of 'the Community', suggesting partnership and fraternity between countries who were 'living and working together'.¹⁰⁴ I use both labels interchangeably in the chapters that follow.

Problems of nomenclature go deeper still. Well into the twentieth century, it was common to talk of 'England' and 'the English' when referring to any of the peoples and regions of the United Kingdom. Today, 'Britain' and 'the British' are used in the same way, though neither is satisfactory for Northern Ireland. It would be more accurate to talk of the United Kingdom but, as late as 1975, ministers were concerned that this would be 'an unfamiliar term to some voters' if it was included on the ballot paper.¹⁰⁵ Since it is a cumbersome term when used to excess, and has no convenient adjective, it is used here interchangeably with 'Britain', despite the formal inaccuracy.

This book takes no position on membership of the European project, either in 1975 or in 2016. Instead, it seeks to understand why voters in 1975 took the positions that they did – and to do so in the context of their own times. The past is a foreign country, which maintains its independence with the same fierce determination as any 'Brexit'eer'. In revisiting the decisions and dilemmas of those who lived there, it is not necessary to conclude either that one referendum or the other produced the 'correct' result. In understanding their decision, however, we may gain fresh perspectives on why the UK joined when it did, why opposition was so durable, and why the vote to stay in did not, as Harold Wilson had expected, bring fourteen years of debate to a close.