‘WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST!’

The wives may stage a revolt!

*The Sun*, 27 May 1975

*It isn’t something we women can shrug off with a yawn and leave to the men. It’s our life too. It’s our children’s lives and their children’s lives.*

Marjorie Proops, 2 June 1975

*Think of it as the Common Supermarket. Well-stocked shelves ... Plenty of choice ... And just around the corner.*

*Britain in Europe*, May 1975

On 20 November 1970, fifty-eight women in swimsuits stepped out onto the stage of the Royal Albert Hall. London was playing host to the annual ‘Miss World’ beauty contest, one of the iconic events of the television year, with an audience of 24 million in the UK alone. The contest was won by Jennifer Hosten from Grenada, the first black woman ever to wear the crown; but as contestants traded allegations of racism and corruption, it was a very different group of women who caught the attention of the cameras. As viewers watched in amazement, protestors from the Women’s Liberation Movement rushed the stage, throwing flour bombs and unfurling banners. The historian and activist Sally Alexander, who was dragged from the stage by security guards, later described it as ‘one of the most spectacular consciousness-raising episodes’ in the history of the movement.

If the 1970s was the decade of ‘Women’s Lib’, the Miss World protest marked its coming-out party. The Women’s Liberation
Movement had held its first national conference earlier that year, bringing together more than 600 delegates, and local groups were mushrooming across the country. A new generation of feminist newspapers, like *Spare Rib*, *Red Rag*, *Shrew* and *Socialist Woman*, was challenging the more conventional content of magazines like *Woman’s Own* or *Honey*, and women’s groups had begun to build alliances with movements for gay liberation and workers’ rights. Britain had one of the highest levels in Europe of women’s participation in the workforce, and the 1970s saw a wave of strikes by groups like auxiliary nurses and night cleaners.\(^5\)

1975 found the women’s movement in full force. Designated by the United Nations as the ‘International Year of Women’ – inaugurating the UN Decade for Women – it saw not only a surge of social activism but also a renewed attention to women’s rights at the parliamentary level.\(^6\) 1975 was the year in which the Equal Pay Act, passed five years earlier, was to come into full operation, drawing renewed attention to the differentials in pay between men and women. A Sex Discrimination Act outlawed discrimination in employment, education, housing and the provision of goods and services, while an Equal Opportunities Commission was established to police the Act. Less than four months before the referendum, Margaret Thatcher became the first woman to lead a major British party, an event that attracted considerable attention from the feminist press.\(^7\)

Yet the 1970s was a paradoxical decade in the history of women’s rights, and Thatcher herself encapsulated many of its ambiguities. On the one hand, she had smashed the glass ceiling of British politics and challenged assumptions about the roles appropriate to women. Yet she was contemptuous of feminism and cast herself chiefly as a wife and mother.\(^8\) While the Equal Pay Act established the principle of fair treatment for men and women, it did little in practice to close the pay gap; for while it barred discrimination between a man and a woman doing the same job, it did not address the tendency for men and women to be recruited to different roles, at different levels of pay. Trade unions, which remained central to pay bargaining and the negotiation of working conditions, were overwhelmingly male-dominated and often slow to act on issues concerning women’s employment.

As if to underline the precarious state of women’s rights, a landmark legal decision in 1975 threatened to undo years of incremental progress on the treatment of sexual violence. In a brutal case of gang
rape, four men – including the woman’s husband – had taken turns to assault the victim, who fought back with sufficient force to require hospital treatment afterwards. The defence rested on a form of presumed consent: the husband had told the other three that his wife would pretend to resist, but that she was really a willing participant. In a case that went to the House of Lords, the courts ruled that a man could not be convicted of rape if he believed that the victim had consented – even if that belief was inherently ‘unreasonable’. The judgement drew a storm of criticism from MPs and journalists, who called it a ‘rapists’ charter’, but it was not fully overturned in statute until 2003.9

A referendum on the Common Market might seem an unlikely arena in which to debate the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Yet both sides paid close attention to women’s votes and crafted material specifically with women in mind. Britain in Europe employed two full-time women’s officers, who were among the highest paid officials in the organisation, while women like Barbara Castle, Judith Hart, Margaret Thatcher and Shirley Williams all took prominent roles in the campaign.10 On one level, this marked a recognition of women’s electoral power and of the need to craft appropriate campaign messages; yet the assumption that women formed a distinct electoral cohort also marked the continuing resonance of older ideas about ‘the women’s vote’ and the issues that were thought to define it. While men were assumed to have multiple and sophisticated political identities, determined not by their sex but by occupation, political allegiance, religious belief and regional identity, appeals to women still leaned heavily on a set of well-worn feminine tropes: the housewife, the mother and the keeper of the household budget. At a time when feminists were struggling to recast political language, women who campaigned in the referendum found that their voices were most likely to be heard when they spoke in the tones of the wife and mother. Like the traditional cry of the shipwrecked sailor – ‘women and children first’ – the attention paid to women voters was indicative less of their political equality than of their continuing status as a ‘special category’, outside the perceived mainstream of electoral politics.

‘A HIGH STREET REFERENDUM’

A week before the referendum, the Sun confronted readers with a terrible warning: ‘the wives may stage a revolt’. Britain, it warned, faced
a ‘High Street Referendum’, in which ‘cost-conscious housewives could swing the decision about whether Britain stays a member of the Common Market’. This echoed the findings of BIE’s own polling, that women were significantly more likely than men to favour leaving the Community. ‘Hard core anti-marketeers’, it discovered, ‘include a disproportionately high number of women,’ while women appeared more likely to ‘switch’ to the anti-Market side over the course of the campaign. There was some evidence, too, that women were proving resistant to lines of argument tailored to male voters. In April, for example, a Scottish poll found that men had swung in favour of membership by 43 per cent to 37 per cent, while women continued to back withdrawal by 36 per cent to 32 per cent. If BIE was to win on 5 June, women would require ‘special attention’.

What troubled the pro-Marketeers was not so much the hard core of ‘Antis’ as the larger number of undecided voters. Women, a private poll concluded, were among the ‘most volatile, the most weakly committed (and the most hostile)’ groups, while a poll for the NRC found that 66 per cent of potential ‘switchers’ were women. In a Glasgow Herald poll, 34 per cent of women described themselves as ‘Don’t Knows’, compared to just 20 per cent of men. Likewise, a poll for the Birmingham Post found that 18 per cent of women were undecided just days before the vote, nearly twice the number of men. That made women a crucial ‘swing’ vote, offering rich rewards to whoever could target them most effectively.

**WOMEN FOR EUROPE**

BIE began by establishing a dedicated Women’s Section. It was run by Lady Kina Avebury, a federalist who had stood as the Liberal candidate at Orpington in October 1974, and the Conservative Ann Money-Coutts, who had worked in the European Commission at Brussels. Like Avebury, Money-Coutts was from a political family: her mother, Lady Emmet of Amberley, had been a Conservative MP and a delegate to the United Nations Assembly in 1952, while her ex-husband, Hugo, was a scion of the banking dynasty. While Money-Coutts brought inside knowledge of the Commission and an extensive social and political network, Avebury was an experienced campaigner who spent much of her time on the road. At Newcastle City Hall, for example, she spoke alongside Ted Heath and Vic Feather, while she shared the platform...
The first task for the new organisation was simply to ensure a proper representation of women’s voices, in what threatened to be a very male-dominated operation. The National Liberal Club, which served as the headquarters for the European Movement, did not even admit women to full membership at this time, and it voted to uphold the ban just a month before the referendum. At first, as Avebury and Money-Coutts later recalled, ‘the whole tenor of advertising and publicity ... was consistently male-oriented’. Indeed, the first batch of posters ‘had no women in them at all’. Such material as was designed for women was either crassly chauvinistic – women’s T-shirts, for example, with the words ‘Europe or Bust’ blazoned across the bosom – or thoughtlessly so, like the posters of smiling children labelled ‘Jobs for the Boys’. One voter was so nettled by such ‘male chauvinist’ material that she wrote to protest, wondering what such slogans said about ‘the prospects for girls? Or do you accept that we women shall retain our second-class status in a European future?’

If the campaign’s own material was problematic, press coverage was even worse. Slogans like ‘Europe or Bust’ lent themselves readily to the increasingly pornographic culture of tabloid journalism in the seventies. The Mirror had featured a series of ‘Euro-dollies’ during the accession negotiations in 1971, and in 1975 it hired a twenty-two-year-old model called Beverley Pilkington, who posed for the paper in her underwear and a ‘Europe or Bust!’ T-shirt that left little to the

![Figure 6.1](https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/3265968)
imagination. Pilkington had modelled for *Top of the Pops* and worked as an occasional Page Three girl for the *Sun*; she would later become famous as the face of ‘Big D’ peanuts. Under the headline ‘Busting out for Europe’, the *Mirror* sniggered that Pilkington would give voters ‘a point or two to consider’, adding lasciviously that readers ‘could be forgiven for wishing that the exclamation on her T-shirt was a question mark’. The paper also employed a Swedish model called Siv, a former girlfriend of George Best, who was pictured in a bikini composed of the flags of the nine EEC member states. Siv, the paper drooled, was ‘a curvy kind of flagpole’, who ‘always enjoys dressing up to the Nines’.20

Campaign events were strongly influenced by commercial advertising, which had also become increasingly sexualised. In Coventry, for example, a modern-day Lady Godiva – described by the organisers as ‘an attractive woman, mature in her ideas and against the Common Market’ – rode through the city wearing nothing but a body-stocking, waving a ‘No to EEC Taxes’ banner. (The event almost became a streak of a different kind, when her horse took exception to a protester ‘in full Punjabi dress, beating out rhythm on a Punjabi drum’.)21 Britain in Europe hired models to pose in the national costumes of the member states, and a row broke out at a meeting of ‘Students for a United Europe’ over plans for a ‘Miss Europe-Europa the Luscious’ event. The idea followed a well-established pattern – there had been a beauty contest to mark the enlargement of the Community in 1973, won by the Dutch model and star of the *Emmanuelle* franchise, Sylvia Kristel – but it stirred strong opposition from female delegates, who complained that it was ‘sexist’ and ‘inappropriate for a student organization’. In a misguided attempt to pour oil on troubled waters, a male delegate suggested that the event ‘would go down well in Oxford’, but might prove too racy for the provinces.22

One solution was for the Women’s Section to produce its own campaign materials, bypassing the largely male publicity office. Avebury and Money-Coutts duly produced a stream of literature, including one and a quarter million copies of a leaflet covering such issues as jobs, benefits, pensions, the cost of living, peace and security. When they drafted a pamphlet on the status of women in the European Community, the Executive Committee refused to allocate funds; so the officers simply duplicated copies and distributed them as widely as possible to speakers.23
As well as producing their own literature, Avebury and Money-Coutts fought to influence the wider tone of the campaign. They won the right to attend meetings of the Executive Committee and campaign breakfasts at the Waldorf, and to be consulted on all questions relating to broadcasting and publicity. They also fought to drive up the representation of women at press conferences. By the end of the campaign there was almost always a woman on the panel, with speakers including Betty Boothroyd, Linda Chalker, Lady Seear, Rita Stephen, Shirley Williams and Lady Young.24

This part of the job also involved co-ordinating and, where necessary, chivvying into action the regional organisers, to ensure that women were considered when devising their campaign strategies. Some needed more encouragement than others. Reporting on local groups at the end of May, Money-Coutts praised the work of activists in London, where meetings of the Townswomen’s Guilds, Women’s Institutes and Conservative women’s organisations had been flooded with publicity

**FIGURE 6.2** ‘I will always say YES to Europe.’ Racing cars and racy slogans in South Glamorgan.
Source: Media Wales
material. In Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, where the regional organiser was a woman, things were better still: ‘All women’s groups approached and covered since Christmas – all councillors approached and most villages in all three counties have had meetings which have been very well attended. The impression is of great efficiency and hard work.’ The West Midlands, by contrast, was ‘thoroughly wet’, while the campaign team in Northern Ireland was said to have ‘“No notion” of the situation regarding women’, and ‘a rather negative approach to women’s votes’. Scotland, too, was ‘badly organized as regards women’. The Welsh office, by contrast, had ‘done a good deal’, while Humberside and Yorkshire had run ‘good meetings with women factory workers’.25

The Women’s Section also undertook three more specific tasks. The first was to act as a point of contact for women’s media outlets, ranging from the ‘women’s pages’ in the press to sympathetic programmes on radio and television. Avebury herself appeared on Woman’s Hour and stayed in touch with its producers.26 In May, the office hosted a press conference exclusively for ‘women journalists and editors of women’s pages’, as well as representatives of women’s television and radio shows. Speakers included Janet Graham, who chaired the Housewives’ Trust and was an advisory member of the Food Panel Price Committee; Kim McKinley, assistant secretary in the Union of Post Office Workers; Pat Turner, national women’s officer for the General and Municipal Workers’ Union; and Rachel Waterhouse, a consumer affairs activist and historian who served on the council of the Consumers’ Association.27 This media function also involved a rapid rebuttal operation, responding to negative reports focused on or addressed to women.28

The second main task of the organisation was the supply of information, providing material crafted specifically for women voters. This was thought particularly important, because of the low level of knowledge professed by women on the Market issue. Pollsters consistently reported that women simply knew less about the European question – or, more probably, were less reluctant to confess their ignorance. A poll at the end of April found that 26 per cent of women ‘don’t know for certain if we are in Europe at present although 12% think vaguely that we might be’.29 One regional organiser told Avebury that ‘what is of most interest to women in this particular area ... [is] quite simply ... just to be told something about what the European Community means’.
Even when addressing ‘as political a group as a Co-operative Women’s Guild, I found that it was quite simply best to assume that they knew absolutely nothing’. Simple information, he stressed, was more important than arguments about why the Community was a good thing; indeed, it was more likely to be effective if it came ‘without excessive bias’.  

A third task was to plug into the extensive network of women’s voluntary organisations. Avebury and Money-Coutts began by writing personally to 250 national women’s organisations, ranging from the Association of Headmistresses and the Catholic Women’s League to the Farm Women’s Clubs and the Townswomen’s Guilds. Those that were willing to campaign were given advice on how best to reach women voters; for example, by setting up ‘stalls in major shopping precincts’ or ‘organizing small house meetings ... with a visiting speaker’. Others were consulted on the kind of information that might be useful to their members, so that literature could be produced accordingly.

The scale and reach of these organisations remained impressive, despite anxieties about a shrinking and ageing base. The Women’s Institutes (WI) recorded a membership in the early 1970s of 442,086; the Townswomen’s Guilds boasted 275,700 members in 1969; while the Mothers’ Unions had 380,000 members in the late 1960s. Though feminists were often critical of these bodies, lamenting their valorisation of housework and maternity, their ‘Jam and Jerusalem’ image belied a history of political activism. Organisations like the Women’s Institutes and the National Council of Women placed considerable emphasis on political education, and had campaigned on such issues as the payment of family allowances to mothers, maternity services and the provision of social welfare. Indeed, it was precisely because they valorised their roles as ‘housewives’ and ‘mothers’ that they insisted upon an active and capacious citizenship for women. For such organisations, as Catriona Beaumont has noted, ‘domesticity no longer demanded that women dedicate themselves exclusively to the demands of husband and children. On the contrary, domesticity was the means through which modern women could assert their right to participate in public life’.

It helped that women’s organisations already had extensive networks on the Continent. The 1970s had seen a conscious effort to build transnational networks, stretching not just across Europe and North America but into the Third World and the Soviet bloc. Membership of the EEC gave a particular impetus to this movement, in
a development that was cautiously promoted by government. In 1972, the Foreign Office had allocated £10,000 to help women’s organisations in the UK to strengthen their contacts with similar organisations on the Continent. The grant, which was increased to £15,000 in 1973, was disbursed by a new Women’s European Committee, with funds available for conferences, exchanges, visits and similar activities. Organisations that benefited included the Women’s Institutes, the Townswomen’s Guilds, the British Federation of University Women and the Farm Women’s Clubs. The amounts allocated were relatively small, but they helped to build networks between the voluntary sector and the European Movement.

These proved invaluable during the referendum. Pamela Entwistle, for example, used an invitation to speak at the annual general meeting of the Wives’ Fellowship to prepare an information pack for each branch, containing maps, leaflets, details of Britain in Europe’s ‘Speaker Service’ and contact details for their local regional organiser. As she told Avebury, it helped that ‘most of the secretaries are personally known to me’. A representative of the National Housewives Association corresponded with Avebury to discuss the kind of material that might suit its magazine, while the National Council of Women agreed to ask its membership what kind of information would be most useful. Similarly, the editor of the Women’s Institute newsletter got in touch with Entwistle to advise on the kinds of information her members would most value, resulting in ‘a couple of paragraphs in the News-Letter’ and further contacts with local branches.

Such organisations had, nonetheless, to be handled with care. Groups like the WI and the Mothers’ Unions were fiercely protective of their non-partisan status and resented any attempt to co-opt them into activities that might divide their members. For this reason, most women’s organisations took no formal position on the referendum. However, most agreed to communicate ‘information’, on the understanding that ‘the whole question is non-party political’. Some also communicated their views more obliquely. The National Federation of Women’s Institutes, for example, resisted attempts to recruit it to the pro-Market campaign; yet it had a proud sense of itself as a European and internationally minded body, and gave considerable coverage to the European Year of Architecture in 1975 and to its growing links with bodies on the Continent. Regional federations had received £1,500 from the Women’s European Committee in 1974, to pay for
exchange schemes and visits to like-minded organisations in Europe. During the campaign, the organisation ran a number of study groups and meetings, designed to increase women’s understanding of the issues. The assumption of political neutrality allowed the organisation to operate as a clearing house for campaign information, the quality and quantity of which was always higher from the pro-Marketeers. An editorial after the result was announced gave a thinly veiled welcome to the verdict, advising its readers that ‘we must now find ways to speak with one “European” voice’.

The Townswomen’s Guilds were more overtly pro-Market. The Guilds had opposed a referendum, complaining that ‘Ninety per-cent of the electoriate in Britain are completely uninformed,’ and had voted to condemn the idea at their national assembly in 1974. While the organisation remained formally neutral, it was determined that ‘the 200,000 Townswomen’ would be ‘the best informed people in the Country on the Common Market issue’. Its magazine, the *Townswoman*, adopted an educative tone, but the balance of content leaned heavily towards membership. Opportunities were given to members of the Commission to explain their roles and to clear away ‘myths’ about the EEC, while no significant coverage was given to anti-Marketeers. At the National Union’s special conference on Europe in 1975, the opening speaker was Valerie Williams, who worked in the Commission’s London Office. The *Townswoman* also published articles by a Dutch economist for the Commission, Theo Hustinx, and by Inger Nielsen, chief advisor to the Directorate dealing with General External Relations. Nielsen, in particular, was held up as an example of how women could succeed in Europe. Marjorie Rice, the national chairman, warned that a No vote would leave Britain in the ‘wilderness’. ‘I almost rate the loss of influence in world diplomacy more highly than the economic and trade repercussions, which would be considerable.’

‘THE HOUSEWIVES’ CHAMPION OF EUROPE’

Appealing to female voters was not solely the responsibility of the Women’s Section. The sheer voting power of women – and the fear that they would vote to leave – meant that all parts of Britain in Europe had to be sensitive to female voters. On taking up his post as director of publicity for BIE, Harold Hutchinson sought advice from Sheila Black, the first woman to write for the *Financial Times* and its Women’s
Editor until 1972. The Conservative MP for South Gloucestershire, John Cope, announced that he would hand over the writing of his referendum address to a housewife from his constituency. The short straw was drawn by Mrs Gillian Woolley, a thirty-nine-year-old with two children, whom Cope declared ‘the constituency’s typical housewife’. Woolley herself was more circumspect, telling journalists that ‘I don’t think anybody really regards themselves as the average housewife’; but her 750-word message made a good story for the local press.

One publicity agency had more ambitious plans, offering to ‘co-ordinate a force of intelligent and highly trained lady demonstrators’. This crack team would fan out across shopping centres and ‘plazas’, handing out leaflets and chatting to women as they shopped. The women would be selected to match ‘the socio-economic profile’ of their region, and the agency estimated the cost of a ‘100-girl operation’ at £24,000, exclusive of fees. The proposal never got off the ground (‘Not f__g likely’, wrote an official), but the idea of deploying women in shopping precincts was widely used.

Britain in Europe placed considerable emphasis on what would later be called the ‘leadership effect’: the tendency of voters to take their cues from those whose judgement they trusted on other matters. For this reason, it lined up as many prominent women as possible, selected for their appeal to particular electoral cohorts. Campaign material in Northern Ireland, for example, deployed the Olympic gold medallist Mary Peters and the veteran peace activist Sadie Patterson. While Peters embodied youthful vigour, Patterson offered a more reassuring figure for older voters, expounding on the merits of the Community while pouring tea from a pot. Betty Boothroyd canvassed factory girls in the Midlands, while Lynda Chalker and Baroness Young addressed meetings of Conservative women. The campaign also mobilised columnists and broadcasters, such as the religious writer Barbara Ward Jackson and the Daily Mirror’s celebrated agony aunt, Marjorie Proops.

It was particularly important to appeal to working-class women, who were less susceptible to the middle-class sociability of the Townswomen’s Guilds or Women’s Institutes. Labour activists were crucial here, such as the MP for West Bromwich West and future Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd. Boothroyd’s internationalism was not purely European: she had worked on John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign in 1960 and spent two years as an assistant to the Republican congressman Silvio Conte. Yet Europe
had always been central to her politics. She was close to the Labour MP Geoffrey de Freitas, who had served as president of the Council of Europe, and she described Shirley Williams as her political ‘heroine’. Outside the Community, she feared, Britain would decline into a low-skill, low-wage economy, reduced to ‘taking in the world’s washing’. She also looked to the Common Market to champion consumer rights, her other political passion and the subject of her maiden speech in Parliament. As a Member of the European Parliament, she would later gain a reputation as ‘the housewives’ champion of Europe’.47

Boothroyd focused her efforts on factory workers. In textile districts, in particular, working-class women were usually in paid employment, and Boothroyd had made a point of canvassing them in the workplace. Having driven to the factory gates before opening time, she would greet the women as they arrived before joining them for a discussion over their mid-morning tea-break. She also persuaded Chambers of Commerce to arrange lunchtime meetings in the canteen, at which she and other women could speak.48 Boothroyd was particularly anxious that the campaign should address women as workers, not simply as wives and mothers. As she impressed upon Lady Avebury, this was especially vital in the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire, where factory work was commonplace.49

Quick-witted and an impressive speaker, Boothroyd became a familiar figure at meetings, facing off against No campaigners such as John Prescott and Richard Body. Speaking at organisations like the Nottinghamshire Federation of Women’s Guilds, she found the women ‘interested in all matters, especially food, social services, jobs – they recognized the question of [the] third world – asked intelligent questions and were mainly pro-Europe needing only a push’. In particular, the women ‘responded to the bit about their responsibility in deciding their children & grandchildren’s future’.50

‘MARKET MOTHERS’

The need to establish new campaign vehicles, outside the confines of the established parties, created new opportunities for women in regional and municipal organisations. Elizabeth Ward, for example, became a regional organiser for BIE, with responsibility for Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. In this role, she set up twelve local campaigning groups in provincial towns and co-ordinated a network
of speakers, canvassers and activists. Politics was not a new arena for Ward – her husband, Christopher, had briefly been a Conservative MP – but the referendum established her as a political figure in her own right. In the words of the *Sunday Telegraph*: ‘Having been hanging on to her husband’s shirt tails for the past 10 years, she now ... has a job of her own with a salary of £250 a month.’ ‘Letters come in and they’re for me,’ she told the paper, ‘which is super.’

Likewise, Caroline Neill became an activist for the No campaign, organising meetings and writing a pamphlet on the judicial implications of entry. She, too, was from a political family: her father, Sir Piers Debenham, had fought a by-election in 1962 as an ‘anti-EEC’ candidate, while her husband, Patrick, chaired the Bar Council. Yet she now found herself for the first time at the centre of the action. Evicting her six children from the top floor of their Chelsea home, she set up her own ‘think tank’, with the floorboards groaning under the weight of pamphlets, leaflets and correspondence.51

Such women attracted a great deal of attention from the press, but their activities were narrated in distinctly conservative terms. A profile of Caroline Neill and Elizabeth Ward, for example, was headlined ‘Market Mothers’, and placed particular emphasis on the domestic sacrifices imposed by the referendum. Their campaigning activities were taken to be a temporary, and regrettable, suspension of their domestic duties. As the *Sunday Telegraph* told its readers, Ward had cut out dinner parties, coffee mornings, stopped short her plans to go to French classes, and put away her embroidery (‘that was heartbreaking’). Now she gets up earlier, at seven, sees the children off to school, and has her immediate chores done by 9 a.m.

Neill, likewise, had been compelled to banish her children from the study, an observation that would not have been made of a male activist. In a trope that would become wearily familiar to Margaret Thatcher, journalists tended to explain these women’s politics by reference to their husbands and fathers. The *Sunday Telegraph*, for example, simply took for granted that Neill’s barrister husband had supplied ‘her knowledge of the British constitution and the leaflet she has produced’.52

This media interest gave women a platform from which to speak on the referendum, but it also stereotyped them within a set of conventional gender roles. The *South Wales Echo*, for example, ran a
feature on ‘Women who have made up their minds’, which focused on
the pro-Marketeer, Carol Cobert, and the No campaigner, Margaret
Leonard. The article was presented as an insight into how ‘housewives’
viewed the Common Market, though Leonard was a successful busi-
esswoman, while Cobert had worked as a full-time trade union official
and was now employed by her local housing authority. Questioned on
her reasons for voting Yes, Cobert began by discussing the prospects for
international relations, prosperity and job security; but she was pressed
by the paper on the ‘positive benefits to women’. She replied by noting
the higher level of family allowances in France and Belgium, together
with the Community’s commitment to equal pay and improved facil-
ties for married women at work. Leonard told the paper that ‘I don’t
know much about the status of women in the EEC,’ but speculated that
higher VAT might particularly concern women.53

As such articles demonstrated, women were more likely to find
an audience for their views if they spoke from the vantage point of
the wife and mother. Not surprisingly, many did precisely that, rep-
resenting their participation in the campaign as an extension of their
maternal responsibilities. Elizabeth Ward claimed to have got involved
because she didn’t want her children ‘peddling tourists’ trinkets to vis-
itors’, while Caroline Neill stressed that her ‘six children’ gave her ‘a
large stake in the future’.54 Even women with an established profile
adopted a similar language. Marjorie Proops, the Daily Mirror’s pop-
ular agony aunt, was one of the most famous names in journalism,
and her face was plastered across BIE’s material. Yet she addressed her
audience ‘as a mother, a grandmother, a housewife and a woman’. In a
feature for the Mirror, she posed with her grandsons under the head-
line ‘These are the two main reasons why I shall vote YES’. She fronted
a pamphlet listing the issues that ‘We women care about’, identified as
‘our husbands’ jobs’, ‘our children’s future’, ‘our own jobs’ and ‘the
cost of living’. It was an ordering of priorities that said much about the
campaign.55

The same theme was evident in a pamphlet on The Housewife
and the Common Market, by the barrister and former code-breaker,
Diana Elles. Elles had served as British president of the European
Union of Women and, after receiving a peerage in 1972, led for the
Conservative Party in the House of Lords on foreign and European
affairs. As the title indicated, however, her pamphlet focused on those
questions ‘which affect us ... as housewives and mothers’: such as
‘family allowances’, ‘our husbands’ jobs’, ‘the cost of living’ and, ‘of course, ... food prices’. She also emphasised the long years of peace since 1945, for which women, ‘as wives and mothers’, should be especially grateful.56

The extent to which this language was internalised was illustrated by the Newport Business and Professional Women’s Club, which held an open meeting on the European question. Such meetings were commonplace in male business organisations, but the club president, Mrs Olive Shields, emphasised her members’ status as women rather than as business people. It was women, she told journalists, ‘on whose shoulders the job of balancing the weekly budget falls’, and women were ‘perhaps more directly affected by our Common Market ties than their husbands, brothers or fathers’. Significantly, the invited speakers were all men.57

This was characteristic of a tendency for men and women to be allocated different roles in the debate. Women were expected to focus chiefly on food prices, women’s employment and peace, while the balance of trade, sovereignty and the operation of Community institutions were viewed as men’s terrain. Even Margaret Thatcher focused mainly on issues like food prices and the cost of living. Strikingly, when the magazine Woman’s Own turned to the referendum, it invited a man – the Mirror journalist Willy Wolff – to explain how the EEC worked. The article, which appeared in the political section edited by Deirdre Sanders, was written in almost embarrassingly condescending terms. The European question, wrote Wolff, was ‘boring’ but ‘important’. ‘It seems confusing only because those who keep on about it use words that play hide and seek with simple sense.’58

**‘THE COMMON SUPERMARKET’**

Polling evidence encouraged the crafting of messages to women that privileged domestic themes. In February, 54 per cent of respondents thought that membership would be good for the next generation, while just 25 per cent thought it would be harmful. By April, the former figure had risen to 60 per cent.59 Britain in Europe exploited this with a series of posters and newspaper adverts, depicting smiling children under the strapline: ‘For their future – vote YES.’60 An advert signed by Marjorie Proops, Katie Boyle and Eirlys Roberts was headlined ‘What every mother in the country should know’. ‘Think of your children,’ it
urged. ‘Their future is more important than yours.’ An article in the *Mirror* portrayed a group of children from an international school in Brussels, playing together in the schoolyard. The British child, Dermott, ‘stands slightly to one side, as if he’s not sure whether to join in and play. Just like Britain in Europe, perhaps?’ ‘For the lad outside,’ it urged readers, ‘VOTE YES.’ Anti-Market material also tapped into maternal themes. An advert in the *Labour News-sheet* portrayed a colossal child in a paddling pool, towering like Godzilla above the waters. ‘He deserves the best life you can make for him,’ said the paper, so ‘Let’s fight with both hands.’

Polling also defined a second key battleground: the prospects for the housewife confronted with an increasingly strained household budget. In the inflationary climate of the 1970s, the cost of living was a serious concern for any family on a fixed income. Polling showed consistently that, of all the issues cited by opponents of membership, ‘much the most important is prices, particularly food prices’. Despite compelling evidence that men also ate and drank, the cost of food was presented almost exclusively as a woman’s issue. Britain in Europe, for example, claimed that ‘British housewives have been saved a total of £139m’ in the Common Market, while Sir Henry Plumb of the National Farmers’ Union insisted that membership ‘had paid off “hands down”’ for the housewife’. A broadcast for the National Referendum Campaign portrayed Eric Deakins, a junior minister at the Department of Trade, in conversation with a group of women out shopping (helpfully labelled ‘1st Housewife’, ‘2nd Housewife’ and so on).

The housewife had been a focus of political campaign material ever since the enfranchisement of women in 1918, and canvassers were careful to flatter the canniness of the household manager. Pro-Marketisers, in particular, presented the housewife as a shrewd and wise figure, too experienced in the ways of the world to fall prey to the distortions of the No campaign. Diana Elles, for example, was contemptuous of the various shopping trips organised by anti-Marketisers, designed to show how much higher prices were on the Continent. ‘As the family’s main shopper,’ she commented, the housewife well knows that prices can and do vary enormously, for precisely the same article, let alone for two similar articles of different quality. She knows how the price of a packet of detergent can cost 3p or even 5p less in one store than in another down the road.
Adopting the brisk tones of the experienced housewife, she acknowledged that there would be costs to membership and that, in the short term, they would be significant. She likened this, however, to the expense incurred when a growing family moved to a larger house. Just as the wise housewife would budget for ‘new curtains or hiring a van’, so British business would have to absorb the short-term costs of preparing itself for more commodious living. In this way, Elles anticipated the household rhetoric later deployed by Margaret Thatcher, while simultaneously harking back to the ‘Conservative feminism’ of Tory electoral propaganda since the 1920s.67

Shopping baskets were central to one of the most audacious publicity stunts of the campaign, planned by the NRC a week before the vote. Barbara Castle, always one of the most colourful figures on the No campaign, went on a shopping trip to Brussels with Joan Marten (wife of Neil) and Castle’s seven-year-old great niece, Rachel Hinton. The idea was to compare the price of goods in London and Brussels, to show how much more expensive life would become once transitional arrangements came to an end. To ensure a fair comparison,
they visited the Marks & Spencer stores in London and Brussels, buying as nearly as possible the same items. At a press conference the next day, Castle showed off her two baskets, showing how goods costing £4.24 in London had come to £6.92½ in Brussels – a difference of ‘more than 64 per cent’.68

Unfortunately for Castle, BIE got wind of the operation – possibly from an informer inside the NRC – and despatched an activist called Vicki Crankshaw, who spoke Norwegian, on her own trip to Oslo. By demonstrating that prices were even higher in a country outside the Community – and one that was often held up as the desideratum of the anti-Marketeers – they hoped to discredit the comparison with Brussels. Unaware that she was being gazumped, Castle waited a day before revealing her purchases, allowing BIE to hold its own press conference first. Under the visibly unenthusiastic eye of Roy Jenkins, who had probably never purchased such items in his life, Crankshaw unloaded tins of beans and instant coffee that had cost almost twice as much in Oslo as in London.69

**Figure 6.4** The ‘blond and vivacious’ Vicki Crankshaw shows off the results of her own shopping trip to Oslo.

Source: Evening Standard, Hulton Archive: www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/2638474
The message of the BIE event – that prices were just as high outside the Market – was less important than its success in stealing the initiative from Castle. What had been envisaged by the NRC as a striking media stunt, showing at a glance the threat to prices, lost its clarity when the story became about rival shopping expeditions delivering contradictory messages. It did not help that the blond and vivacious Vicki Crankshaw, described by The Times as ‘an attractive secretary’, proved rather more interesting to journalists than the secretary of state for health and social services.70

EQUAL PAY

The description of Crankshaw as ‘an attractive secretary’ spoke volumes about the assumptions of the press. Crankshaw had a long history of political activism: she had served as an advisor to the National Council of Social Services and was secretary of the Women’s European Committee. She spoke at rallies during the campaign and had published on women’s employment opportunities within the Common Market. Crankshaw was impatient with the political neutrality conventionally
expected of women’s organisations, warning that ‘when women were pressing for equality in its broadest sense, they had no right, as citizens and electors, to opt out of the major areas of conflict’. Interestingly, she had been the first choice of the European Movement as its Women’s Officer, but declined the post to continue her work with the WEC.\textsuperscript{71}

Press reports, however, routinely described her as a ‘housewife’ and ‘working mother’ (two identities that might once have been thought contradictory) and Crankshaw herself made motherhood central to her campaign. ‘Speaking as a mother,’ she told the Townswomen’s Guild, ‘I want Britain to stay in the Common Market because I do not want any more wars. I want peace, trade and jobs for our children and this is how we will get it.’\textsuperscript{72}

In private, however, Crankshaw was uneasy with the focus on domesticity. Writing to Money-Coutts in May, she warned that women were ‘interested in a great many things other than food and it would do no harm to have their other points of concern given some attention’. ‘Very little seems to have been said about the social fund and all that its provisions imply’, nor ‘the fact that the Commission is actually trying to DO something in International Women’s Year’. She urged a greater focus on the employment protections available to women as workers. There was ‘no need to go overboard on the Women’s Lib front (which is any way boring), but the Commission is looking realistically at women’s problems, both as members of the labour force and as equal partners in the social structure’.\textsuperscript{73}

Crankshaw’s concerns were shared by the Women’s Officers. Lady Avebury, in particular, was determined that women should not be treated as if they only cared about food prices and the household economy. Though under orders to tone down her own federalist commitments, she had no intention of restricting herself to what men considered ‘women’s issues’.\textsuperscript{74} This had been a subject of debate at an early strategy meeting among female MPs and peeresses. Lady Gaitskell, the widow of the former Labour leader, had argued that women should be treated as a ‘special group’, since they ‘tend to think of the Community only in shopping basket terms’. By contrast, the Labour peer and former editor of \textit{Nova}, Baroness Birk, was anxious to move beyond so-called ‘women’s issues’ and ‘the economics of the stomach’. Instead, she wanted a more pluralistic campaign, in which issues of interest to both sexes were made relevant to women. Concerns about sovereignty, she suggested, could be portrayed as ‘as an expression of male
chauvinist pride’, while the campaign should play up Britain’s capacity to lead in Europe. ‘National pride is, after all, not the monopoly of men.’

Avebury had hoped to interest the organised feminist movement in the campaign, but the response was distinctly frosty. ‘Radical’ feminists largely ignored the referendum, viewing it as a distraction from more pressing debates about marriage, patriarchy and the family. ‘Socialist’ feminists also paid little attention, though they tended to share the broader socialist critique of the Common Market. *Spare Rib* published only one substantial comment on the referendum, which was written by the left-wing economist Jean Gardiner. Taking a conventional left-wing position, Gardiner castigated the EEC as a vehicle for ‘large multinational firms’, which wanted to drive down wages and slow the advance of ‘left labour policies’. If the oppression of women was rooted in the power structures of capitalism, the Community seemed to have little to offer but subordination on a continental scale.

The indifference of the Women’s Liberation Movement was in some respects surprising. Women’s Liberation had always been conceived in transnational terms, for the struggle against unequal pay, discrimination in the workplace, oppressive marriage laws and patriarchal cultural systems clearly transcended national boundaries. As pro-Marketeers never tired of observing, the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ had been written into the founding documents of the EEC, forming Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome. Women’s organisations on the Continent had played an important role, both in the drafting of Article 119 and in the struggle to enforce its application.

Pro-Marketeers made much of the Community’s work in this field. In February 1975, after extensive and co-ordinated pressure, the Commission had issued a landmark directive clarifying that equal pay should be given not only for the *same* work but for work ‘of equal value’ – a way of tackling the tendency for men and women to do different kinds of work within a single organisation. The directive required national governments to prepare legislation in accordance with that principle, an initiative that would lead – after a court case against the UK government – to the 1983 Equal Pay (Amendment) Regulations. (In a curious twist of fate, the regulations were put before the House by the notorious womaniser Alan Clark, an unlikely champion of equal pay. Arriving in Parliament after a spectacularly boozy dinner, Clark...
made little secret either of his inebriation or of his contempt for the measure he was introducing. When challenged, he breezily informed MPs that ‘a certain separation between expressed and implied beliefs is endemic among those who hold office’.\textsuperscript{79}

Article 119 and the 1975 Directive were hailed by pro-Marketeers, not only as a symbol of the Community’s commitment to equality, but as a legally enforceable right that gave women a weapon in the courts. Campaigners assured women that ‘The Common Market leads the way on equal pay for equal work, better training, and child care facilities for working mothers. Community funds already pay for women over 35 to train for new jobs, and to brush up their old skills.’\textsuperscript{80} A pamphlet distributed to speakers reported that the Commission was already pursuing further initiatives, particularly with reference to the male-dominated professions. Over the coming year, wrote Ann Money-Coutts, the Commission would table proposals ‘to eliminate all remaining discriminations still existing in the labour market, in training facilities and in promotion prospects in the professions’. The result would be ‘a “Magna Carta” of women’s demands’, bringing new freedoms to women in the workplace.\textsuperscript{81}

The campaign also emphasised the prospects for part-time workers, who made up roughly a third of the female workforce. Briefing notes issued by the Women’s Section laid particular emphasis on the right to flexible working hours for women with young children. ‘Objectives high on the Community’s priority list’, it was claimed, included greater freedom of choice for women in the labour market; recognition of ‘the social dimension of maternity’, so that women could ‘reconcile their family responsibilities with their professional obligations’; better social security against illness, maternity and disability; and more robust mechanisms for challenging discrimination.\textsuperscript{82}

Like other distressed areas, women voters were also to be enticed by the riches of the European social fund. At the time of the referendum, the Commission reported, it had not received a single application to support women’s employment, so governments were encouraged to submit formal proposals for ‘integrated programmes ... where training and re-training for women workers can be co-ordinated with information campaigns, child care facilities and job improvement schemes’. The \textit{Star}’s women’s magazine reported that Europe would fund ‘training schemes for women over the age of 35 who want to go back into employment: for young workers of both sexes below the age
of 25; for special projects aimed specifically at increasing opportunities for women’s employment’.83

One of the more curious publications of the period was *The How and Why Wonder Book of the Common Market*, part of a series of popular children’s books whose other titles covered such topics as *Dogs*, *Dinosaurs* and *Primitive Man*. Written with no pretence at impartiality and a distinctly uneasy grasp of British history, it represented the Community as a defence against the shirking of parental responsibilities by men:

One of the best results of the Market is that it is now no longer possible for people to run away from their responsibilities toward home and family simply by crossing a frontier. A poor Irish woman who was left with two children discovered that her husband had a good, well-paid job in Germany. In the old days she would still have been helpless. Under Common Market rules, her husband in Germany must contribute to her support; and if he does not, a German judge will see that the money is stopped from his pay cheque in Germany to do so. ‘Thank God for the Common Market’, she said when a British social worker told her the news.84

Appealing to a similar demographic, Avebury penned an article for Gingerbread, the charity for single-parent families, the vast majority of which were headed by women. Britain, she noted, was the only country in the EEC that did not pay family allowances for all first children. With its commitment to ‘a common social policy’, she argued, the EEC would bring the UK up to the level of other states and ‘eradicate those pockets of real need still to be found in Britain’. Working parents would also benefit from the commitment to equal pay, flexible working hours and ‘the reconciliation of women’s dual role as contributors to economic life, and as potential wives and mothers’.85

**CONCLUSION**

By the time the campaign entered its final week, the gender gap identified by the polls had all but disappeared. A poll in the *Birmingham Post* found women in favour of membership by 54 per cent to 28 per cent, only slightly lower than the 60:30 split among men. A poll for the *Sun* found that women’s support had risen from 53 per cent to 58 per cent in the last week of May alone. The number of ‘Don’t Knows’ remained
higher among women, but the prospect of a female No vote had ceased to be a political reality.\textsuperscript{86}

There is no single explanation for the failure of the No campaign to capitalise on its early lead among women. Female voters made their decision for as many and as diverse reasons as men. Nonetheless, it is striking how little effort was made by the anti-Marketeers to speak directly to women voters. In an intelligence report on the anti-Market campaign, written at the end of March, Diana Villiers noted that neither the Common Market Safeguards Committee nor the Get Britain Out Referendum Campaign had produced a single pamphlet addressed specifically to women. Nor were there any significant women’s groups associated with the No campaign. The most promising outlet, ‘Women Against the Common Market’ (WACM), had peaked in the years before entry and never recovered from the early death of its founder, Anne Kerr, in 1973. Kerr had won Rochester and Chatham for the Labour Party in 1964 and 1966, and was a well-known campaigner for racial equality. In the early seventies, she masterminded a series of eye-catching events, collecting money in shopping baskets and handing out bags labelled ‘No Common Market’ to shoppers, as well as lobbying MPs in the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{87} Her loss deprived the No campaign of a charismatic figurehead, and there is no evidence that the organisation was still active by 1975. By the time of the referendum, the press officers for Get Britain Out were unable even to find a postal address.\textsuperscript{88}

The Common Market Safeguards Campaign recognised the scale of Kerr’s loss, but made little effort to compensate. The Labour MP Renée Short volunteered to write to women’s organisations in 1973, but despite tempting readers with a copy of \textit{Resistance News} and a pamphlet on \textit{Why Meat is Dear}, received only four replies and no orders for literature. Rather than revise its approach, the committee decided that ‘the formation of a new [women’s] organization was not a practical proposition’.\textsuperscript{89} In consequence, the No campaign lacked any institutional mechanism for targeting women voters.

The most vocal women’s group to campaign against membership was the British League of Housewives, founded by Irene Lovelock in 1945. The League had been a significant force in the post-war era, but by the 1970s it had dwindled into a somewhat cranky entity preoccupied by solidarity with the white colonies, resistance to Marxism and an enthusiasm verging on mania for the white government in Rhodesia. The League’s campaign focused on the inflationary consequences of entry, the
threat to sovereignty and the loosening of ties with the Commonwealth. Its rhetoric was unapologetically inflammatory – describing the EEC as ‘a totalitarian regime’ and likening pro-Marketeers to Goebbels – but its impact was minimal. Ward described it cheerfully as ‘another nut’s group!’ while Boothroyd had seemed unaware a year earlier that the organisation still existed.

By contrast, the Women’s Section of BIE had been active, savvy and able to call on the services of a wide range of popular and respected women. It had produced well-targeted literature, distributed through a network of contacts with the voluntary sector, and had worked to moderate the tone of the wider organisation. In all these respects, the pro-Marketeers outperformed their opponents in their ability to target and mobilise women voters. Yet they struggled to move beyond conventional gender stereotypes, which privileged maternal and domestic expressions of women’s political identity.

All this posed a challenge to the Women’s Liberation Movement, with which this chapter began. The WLM demanded new ways of thinking about politics and sexual identity; yet what is most striking about the women’s campaign in 1975 was the caution and conventionality of its gender politics. The appeal to women as mothers, housewives and consumers would not have been out of place between the two world wars; nor would the campaigning techniques on display, with their reliance on women’s voluntary networks and public meetings, the production of dedicated leaflets and flyers, and the use of prominent women to address female audiences. From this perspective, the novelty of the referendum inspired a campaign that was remarkably conservative. That trend was almost certainly exacerbated by the need to build campaign vehicles outside the established party system, relying on networks that privileged personal engagement above the ‘new’ media of television and radio.

Yet there had also been voices pushing beyond the conventional gender politics of the campaign. These did not come from the WLM, which largely ignored the vote, but from working women like Crankshaw and Boothroyd, who wanted a greater focus on women’s employment. This reflected significant changes in the economy, as the proportion of women in the workforce increased, as well as a prescient sense of the EEC’s potential to influence the labour market. Avebury’s appeal to single mothers was also striking, identifying a cohort that would grow in importance during the 1980s.
Reflecting on the campaign shortly after its end, Avebury and Money-Coutts hoped that ‘there was some correlation between our activities and the final result on June 5th’. Given the unusually large swing among women voters, this was almost certainly the case. Yet they stressed, too, that the impact of the Women’s Section should not be measured simply in terms of votes cast. ‘In retrospect’, they wrote, ‘we feel that our main success was in getting more women involved in the Campaign, both at national and local level – in “humanizing” some of the issues, and broadening the scope beyond bread and butter arguments.’94 Thanks in large part to their efforts, BIE had not simply approached women as an external voting bloc; it had created new opportunities for women’s political participation and ensured that women’s voices were heard at the highest levels of the campaign. At a time when women’s roles were so dramatically in flux – when attitudes to the family and to paid work were evolving so rapidly, and when feminist movements were opening up such new and challenging forms of political discourse – it is no surprise that the messages generated by the campaign were sometimes mixed. In the ‘International Year of Women’, however, it was only fitting that a debate about Britain’s place in the world should have provided such a vibrant forum for the discussion of women’s politics.