

## Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain

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Until recently, Britain's first referendum on its membership of the European Community (EC), the forerunner of today's European Union (EU), had not exactly featured prominently in the nation's collective memory: few people seem to have known that such a vote had ever taken place at all. The 2016 referendum, of course, changed things completely, as suddenly 'Remainers' and 'Brexiters' popped up from everywhere to profess their unrivalled knowledge of what allegedly had – or had not – taken place in 1975. Robert Saunders' thoroughly-researched and stylishly-written study therefore could not be timelier. In over 350 pages, it takes us on a colourful and lively journey into 1970s Britain, showing how the European debate in 1975 was inextricably interwoven with myriad other issues and concerns of the day. Whilst readers looking for neat historical analogies and unequivocal 'lessons from history' will be disappointed, the book nonetheless raises some bigger issues about Britain's delicate relationship with European integration from 1945 right up to the present day.

The key premise of Saunders' book is that the 1975 referendum can only be understood by embedding it firmly in the particular historical context of 1970s Britain. As Saunders puts it in the introduction, the book thus seeks to use 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' (p. 23). These other issues and controversies were, first and foremost, shaped by an acute sense of national crisis which hung over the whole period. From the very beginning of the book, the reader gets a sense of the profound political and economic challenges Britain faced at the time: the balance of payments fell from a £1 billion surplus in 1971 to a £3.3 billion deficit in 1974, the stock exchange had at one point lost 73 per cent of its value, and inflation peaked at almost 25 per cent in 1974–5. Politicians and commentators alike thus painted a dark picture of Britain's future, with Foreign Secretary James Callaghan professing in cabinet that he saw 'no solution' to Britain's difficulties and Tony Benn predicting 'the final collapse of capitalism' to be only 'a matter of weeks away' (pp. 20–1). This sense of doom and gloom more than anything else seems to have determined the outcome of the referendum: in a hostile and unfriendly world, membership of the European Community seemed like a comparatively safe bet – and leaving it a high-risk venture with preciously little short-term advantages or alternatives. Supporters of Britain's continuing EC membership correspondingly centred their campaigns on the relative advantages of membership – food security, price

stability, employment – and painted the alleged consequences of leaving in the darkest terms, predicting food shortages, widespread unemployment and even a potential return to rationing. In the 1970s, this first edition of ‘Project Fear’ worked rather well: the referendum result showed a decisive 67.2 per cent vote to stay in the European Community, even though commentators at the time already pointed out that the British commitment to EC membership seemed to be ‘wide’ rather than ‘deep’.[\[1\]](#)

The study is divided into three main parts: the run-up to the referendum and the respective campaigns, the key themes and issues at stake, and the regional variances of the debate in the context of devolution. The first part illustrates the striking power disparities between the official campaign to stay in the EC, the so-called ‘Britain in Europe’ campaign, and the ‘National Referendum Campaign’ which worked towards a British withdrawal. Whereas Britain in Europe was a well-endowed and highly professional organisation chaired by Labour’s home secretary Roy Jenkins and supported by a strong cross-party coalition of political heavyweights like Ted Heath and Jeremy Thorpe, the ‘National Referendum Campaign’ by contrast seemed like an ad-hoc, amateurish, and grossly underfinanced get-together consisting primarily of political extroverts and outsiders as diverse as Tony Benn and Enoch Powell. It also did not help that it enjoyed (quite possibly unwanted) support from the extremes of the political spectrum, such as the IRA, the National Front and the Communist Party. The impression of an overwhelming power imbalance between ‘Britain in Europe’ and ‘The National Referendum Campaign’ was lent additional credibility by strong support for Britain’s continuing EC membership from the business community and the press: indeed, the Communist *Morning Star* and the *Spectator* were the only two national newspapers campaigning for a British withdrawal. Such a powerful lobby created a strong sense that staying in the EC was the safe and obvious choice at a time of acute national crisis, even though Saunders also stresses the inadequacies and mistakes of the anti-EC campaigners. ‘Divided on tactics, chaotically managed and woefully under-resourced’, he concludes, ‘the Antis played a poor hand badly’ (p. 131).

As regards the actual content of the European debate in the 1970s, it might perhaps be surprising from today’s perspective that, contrary to widespread myth, the issue of national sovereignty actually did feature prominently: key advocates of a British withdrawal like Neil Marten, Tony Benn and above all Enoch Powell continuously stressed the constitutional consequences of EC membership and tirelessly banged on about the transfer of power from Westminster to Brussels. Their problem was, however, that nobody seemed to care: at a time of perceived national emergency, voters were much more concerned with food prices, employment and inflation than with rather more abstract issues like sovereignty and independence. It was a battle that the Pro-Marketeers won largely without fighting, as the issue remained a ‘low-salience’ one even amongst those ‘most opposed to membership’ (p. 233). A similar pattern emerges when it comes to the question of empire. Instead of drawing on the popular but highly problematic link between post-imperial nostalgia and the rise of British Euroscepticism, Saunders instead shows that the end of empire did not automatically result in a rejection of European integration. Indeed, many advocates of Britain’s continuing membership regarded the EC as a potential substitute for the country’s erstwhile global influence, arguing that Britain could still lead Europe in the global arena. Yet again, however, it was a theme that resonated little amongst a populace concerned more with inflation and food supplies than with Britain’s future international role: had the absent-minded imperialists perhaps turned into the absent-minded Europeanists?[\[2\]](#)

Nonetheless, the uneasy search for a post-imperial British identity is perhaps the key underlying theme of the book, even if it is not always addressed explicitly. It comes out most clearly in its final section, where Saunders looks at the regional variations of the European debate in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Here, the 1975 referendum became deeply interwoven in simultaneous debates over devolution and the postulated ‘break-up’ of Britain. It is important to recall that, whilst the eventual referendum result showed sizable majorities in all counting areas except for the Shetland Islands and the Western Isles, support for continuing EC membership was markedly stronger in England than in Wales or Scotland at the time: not least because Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin, and the Democratic Unionist Party had all campaigned for a No vote during the referendum campaign. The debate in Northern Ireland was particularly tense, since questions over national sovereignty and power-sharing had evident political implications even if

the actual referendum result eventually mirrored the UK's more general emphasis on economic rather than constitutional concerns. In Scotland, the final outcome also reveals a rather similar picture to the rest of the United Kingdom, as the SNP's attempt to use the European issue as a launching pad for greater Scottish autonomy largely failed to mobilise voters.

*Yes To Europe!* has received lots of praise over recent months, all of which is entirely justified. It is a riveting read full of eccentric characters and colourful anecdotes, ranging from the *Daily Mirror*'s agony aunt Marjorie Proops to Paul McCartney's bizarre comparison of Common Market withdrawal to the breakup of the Beatles (pp. 106, 136). The key analytical strength of Saunders' work is that it refuses the temptation to embed the 1975 referendum in a neat *longue durée* narrative about an allegedly irresistible rise of British Euroscepticism, but instead stresses the many unpredictable twists and turns of that story. With historical vigour and style, Saunders demonstrates that the 1975 referendum was shaped first and foremost by the distinct historical context of 1970s Britain – an event that may well have had an entirely different outcome a few years earlier or later. In fact, the introspective and highly contingent nature of the 1975 referendum might be one of the reasons why the European question refused to fade away even after the fairly overwhelming endorsement by two-thirds of the British electorate: since the arguments made in 1975 were so deeply rooted in their time, they were also highly contextual and thus easily susceptible to historical change.

It is perhaps inevitable, then, that Saunders' book ends up saying rather more about 1970s Britain than about the wider history of Britain's relationship with European integration. Nonetheless, there are some broader structural patterns that can be identified, not least with regard to the 2016 EU referendum. The most obvious one concerns the origins of the referendum, as both Wilson and Cameron applied the 'renegotiation & referendum' strategy primarily to appease a deeply divided party by outsourcing the European question to the electorate. 'Cameron', Saunders writes, '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 (p. 2). Whatever the respective wisdom of their decisions, the fact that two such different politicians like Wilson and Cameron felt the need to apply a strikingly similar tactical ploy over the same policy issue more than 40 years apart raises some bigger questions not only about political leadership, but also about the continuing primacy of the domestic in the formulation of Britain's European policy. It is, indeed, a constant threat running from the conditionality of Harold Macmillan's first ill-fated EC application in 1961 right up to present-day debates over the potential shape of 'Brexit'.<sup>[3]</sup> Although domestic politics of course play a significant part in the European policies of all other member-states as well, the extent to which British positions have so frequently been dominated almost exclusively by the respective governments' perceived domestic needs is nonetheless striking. As Saunders puts it, 'the temptation to adopt the role of St George, battling for Britain against the European dragon, was one that few subsequent administrations could resist' (p. 375).

The question of why that is leads to the other structural parallel between the two referenda, namely the transactional and largely negative way in which the European issue was debated in both 1974–5 and 2016. To be sure, Saunders does highlight some instances where unequivocal and positive arguments for EC membership were advanced in 1974–5, not least by churches which strongly supported EC membership on more idealistic grounds like Christian internationalism, peace, and a more general commitment to European unity. The overwhelming tone of the 1975 debate, however, remained strikingly materialistic and grounded in the alleged short-term advantages or disadvantages of EC membership. The 1975 referendum thus also illustrates the more general lack of a powerful and positive British narrative for participation in the European integration process. Whilst all EC members obviously embraced their EC membership primarily because they regarded it as conducive to their national interests, key founding member-states like France and West Germany had by the 1970s nonetheless managed to embed their EC commitment in bigger, positive national narratives of post-war economic rehabilitation and international rehabilitation. Britain failed to come up with a similarly powerful narrative for EC membership, due not least to the country's unfortunate pre-history in the European integration process during the 1950s and 1960s and its subsequent joining under most adverse international, economic, and institutional circumstances.<sup>[4]</sup> Again, it is a pattern that has changed little over subsequent decades.

Perhaps it is in this regard, then, that *Yes to Europe!* also offers some longer-term explanations of how we got to the 'Brexit' vote of 2016. What it illustrates above all is the inward-looking, contingent, and highly transactional way in which the question of EC membership was debated at the time, and how 'Europe' – or, more precisely, the European Community – still constituted a somewhat distant and alien 'other' for 1970s Britain. Already at the time, as Saunders shows, campaigners and commentators alike 'constantly lamented the ignorance and incuriosity of the public about how the EEC worked, what it did and why it mattered' (p. 22). This, indeed, constitutes the most intriguing parallel between the two referenda: in both, 'Europe' eventually came to feature not as the political and economic entity that it was; but rather as an abstract and vague entity against which all sorts of hopes, fears, and identity constructions could be projected seemingly at random.

<sup>[1]</sup> D. Butler and U. Kitzinger, *The 1975 Referendum* (Basingstoke, 1976).

<sup>[2]</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>[3]</sup> N.P. Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>[4]</sup> David Reynolds, 'Britain, The Two World Wars, and the Problem of Narrative', *Historical Journal*, 60, 1 (2017), 197-231.

I am grateful to Dr Haeussler for this generous, thought-provoking and insightful review, and for providing such a helpful and perceptive account of the book's key themes.

#### **Other reviews:**

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/29/yes-to-europe-robert-saunders-review-tony-benn-vote-leave> [2]

Times Higher Education

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-yes-to-europe-robert-saunders-cambridge-university-press> [3]

Spectator

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/04/britain-was-utterly-wretched-in-1975-no-wonder-europe-seemed-a-better-bet/> [4]

New Statesman

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/03/original-remainers-how-1975-produced-successful-pro-europe-referendum-campaign> [5]

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