

'More influence for Britain in Europe' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (28 May 1979)

Caption: On 28 May 1979, the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung examines the attitude of British political leaders and the British public towards the first direct elections to the European Parliament, due to take place one month later.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. Hrsg. Eick, Jürgen; Fack, Fritz Ullrich; Deschamps, Bruno; Fest, Joachim; Reißmüller, Johann Georg; Welter, Erich. 28.05.1979, Nr. 122. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Mehr Einfluß für England in Europa", auteur:Grudinski, Ulrich , p. 10.

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More influence for Britain in Europe

Britain informs the Community of its conditions of trading

By Ulrich Grudinski

'Vota Comunista!' booms out from a loudspeaker van in the city of Peterborough, to the north of London. The inhabitants are somewhat startled by this. It really is true: the Communist Party of Italy, not, as you might think, its rather feeble British brother, whose membership list has shrunk to 22 000 names, is campaigning here with much noise and energy for the European elections, while, as everywhere in Great Britain, the local Labour, Conservative and Liberal Party Associations are making only half-hearted attempts to overcome the lethargy of the public at large. The industrious PCI sent its own activist from Rome to gather the perhaps 300 postal votes from the 4 000-strong colony of Italians living in Peterborough.

The arrivals are weaker

The arrivals from the Continent know exactly what is involved on 7 June in Great Britain. The average British voter, on the other hand, is only just beginning to understand, rather hazily, that this vote provides a chance to participate in determining the future of the European Community. A London housewife believed quite seriously that she 'would have to travel to Brussels to vote in the European elections'. Nevertheless: today, 19 % of the 40 million British people who are eligible to vote can name the election date, and the number of those who say that they will 'probably or certainly' vote has increased from 50 % to 60 % since April. Of course, this is still not a guarantee of a turnout of above the 40 % that is regarded by conservative pro-Europeans as the 'minimum to retain British credibility' in EC affairs.

The fact that crucial decisions for British trade, industry and agriculture, and for the British labour market, are made in the EC, as is emphasised in the Tory election manifesto, makes very little impression on the average voter while both parties are far more vociferous in calling for the reform of the EC 'in the national interest' and make strenuous efforts to ring-fence British sovereignty. British people see a genuine obligation taken on by their country and one that extends into the entire world in one and the same election manifesto as being in conflict with its ancient insular need for protection. It is not surprising, then, that they would like to follow their instincts and their old habits. 'I don't know', 'I don't want to' and 'I'm not interested' are still the most common reactions to the question about election fatigue. People are often heard to say: why elect a 'parliament' that, unlike the world model for parliaments in Westminster, is only supposed to act in 'assessing and advising' (and yet, on the other hand, would be rejected almost unanimously as a parliament with full powers, since it was a threat to British freedom)?

British intellectuals are amazed at the intensity of the election debate on the other side of the Channel. The Yorkshire miners and the Clyde shipbuilders are astonished at the television pictures of flag-bearing marchers at continental election rallies and the fairground hustle and bustle of electioneering. They look for familiar points of reference and in their opinion: either 'these Europeans are so obsessed with entertainment' that they have been looking for and have found an excuse for Carnival in May, or they are now utterly and finally 'Americanised' into an 'election circus'.

A fairly large proportion of the British electorate has been made to feel insecure by the European quarrelling between their own parties, the contradictions involved, and the whole two-facedness of party conflict. People are confused by the situation among the Tories, who actually enjoy the better European reputation, by the simultaneous existence of a 'commitment to Europe' and an almost foreign, police-style shielding operation, as soon as Britain is called to European action. However, people find it easier to forgive coarser behaviour in the bad-tempered Labour Party. On the subject of Europe, the family conflict in the Labour Party about whom to blame for their election defeat and the jealousy about the party chairmanship has now also been finally exhausted. Flushed with anger, the leader of the Opposition, Jim Callaghan, and the man who had been his Minister of Energy, Tony Benn, stood face-to-face after Callaghan had discovered that he was the only pro-European in his party's campaign committee for the European elections, while the other three members, Tony Benn, Eric Heffer and Barbara Castle, would really have preferred to end British

membership of the Community. Mr Callaghan said that he would not be 'rolled out onto the platform like a horse on wheels according to requirements'. The party succeeded in calming him down. However, the Labour election manifesto speaks quite openly of disillusionment with the EC and again indirectly threatens to leave: if Labour does not soon see the fundamental reforms that it demands being implemented, serious consideration would have to be given to whether or not British membership 'is still in the best interests of the country'.

Slant towards domestic policy

Each party tries to make the electors afraid of the other party in the name of Europe. Not even the most active Tory election campaigner, Edward Heath, was able to resist the temptation; the European Socialists, led by Willy Brandt, said Heath, feared the election of Labour representatives to the European Parliament 'more than anything else': Labour would be an 'unbearable thorn in their flesh'. Labour responded that Heath was a 'bogus saint for Europe'.

It is, of course, impossible that the domestic politics slant in the British European election campaign can be avoided. It is, ultimately, a question of power: 81 seats are up for grabs, and (after the exception made for Ulster) the first-past-the-post electoral system applying to 78 British constituencies deals all the trumps, as usual, to the two major parties. That sharpens their rivalry but not, however, their 'European awareness'. This awareness, as we hear in Britain, although always as an excuse, demands 'a certain amount of sentimentality, which British people do not possess'. There is never any tangible reference of making a combined effort on a European scale, only always of entering into partnership while strictly preserving British identity, customs, institutions and rights to freedom. 'Is Europe good for Great Britain?' is the main concern put forward unashamedly by both parties. They want at the very top of their list 'a better deal for Britain', a far more favourable financial package. In Scotland, where there are problems with the fishing zones, the Conservative Party has been campaigning for seats in the European Parliament with the even more specific argument of 'a better deal for Scotland'.

Therefore, given their complete agreement on the need to protect British national interests, Labour and Tories have nothing left to argue about except which of the two will best represent the demands made on Europe and which will manage to gain more influence for Britain in Europe, without sacrificing national customs, right down to the import of 'cheap, high-quality food products from Australia or New Zealand'. One part of the manifesto is strictly anti-protectionist, in another it is the opposite. However, claims are made for Britain to be given an exceptional position in the EC as a 'connecting link to the Commonwealth' or for 'consideration of welfare matters'. Integration? Only one Member of the European Parliament, apart from the British, the Member from Greenland, will not be elected in accordance with the principle of proportional representation accepted by all the other countries in the EC. Great Britain has also refused to give the right to a postal vote to its citizens living abroad, apart from soldiers and diplomats.

There is no shortage of brilliant preambles in the British election manifestos: the Conservatives see in the EC the creation of 'one of the twin pillars of freedom and democracy alongside our friends in the United States'. However, even here, there are overall, in the discreet reference to a British 'special relationship' with America, signs of the reservations that Great Britain has had inserted everywhere in the small print of its 'standard terms and conditions of trading' with Europe.