

Jan-Henrik Meyer, The 1975 referendum on Britain's continued membership in the EEC

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The 1975 referendum on Britain's continued membership in the EEC

by par Jan-Henrik MEYER, Université Humboldt de Berlin - *Institut für Europäische Geschichte* à Mayence

On Thursday 5 June 1975, roughly two and a half years after its entry into the Common Market, 40 million British voters were asked to take a decision on Britain's continued membership in the European Communities. The question put to the electorate read as follows: 'The Government has announced the results of the renegotiation of the United Kingdom's terms of membership in the European Community. Do you think that the United Kingdom should stay in the European Community (Common Market)?'

In the referendum, 17 378 581 British citizens voted 'yes' and only 8 470 073 voted 'no'. The turnout in this, the first ever national referendum to be held in the United Kingdom, was comparably high: at 64.5 % it was only 8 percentage points lower than in the previous general election, in October 1974. The overwhelming majority of 67.2 % in favour of Britain staying in Europe dealt a blow to the Eurosceptics in Britain. However, it did not end the debate on Britain's role in Europe.

Quite paradoxically, in view of these results, it was the Eurosceptics who had championed the idea of a referendum. Just a few days after the Hague Summit in December 1969, where Georges Pompidou eventually accepted the prospect of British EC membership, a motion was brought before Parliament to hold a referendum on the entry into the European Communities. Its proponents argued that a referendum was necessary because voters could not voice their preference on Europe in the general elections, as the leaders of the three major parties officially supported accession. With only 55 Members of Parliament voting in its favour, the motion failed. However, having been supported by leading anti-Marketees in both the Labour and Conservative Parties, the idea of a popular vote on the issue of EC membership was not going to go away.

In opposition since 1970, the Labour Party severely criticised the conduct of the negotiations and the results achieved by Prime Minister Edward Heath's new Conservative Government. Labour promised the renegotiation of the British terms of entry if they returned to power.

Initially, Labour agreed with the Conservatives that Parliament, rather than the people directly, would decide on accession. It was only in March 1972 that Labour's position on the referendum issue suddenly changed. Seeing a chance to weaken the Conservative Government, Labour supported the Conservative Eurosceptics who were calling for a consultative referendum before entry.

Consequently, at their party conference in October 1972 and in their 1974 election manifesto, Labour committed itself to renegotiation that would be subjected to a referendum.

When back in government in 1974, the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, demanded concessions from the European partners. At the Paris Summit in December 1974 and the Dublin Summit in the spring of 1975, the British Government achieved the introduction of the Community's regional policy that benefited British regions in decline, a budgetary correction mechanism and market access for cheap New Zealand dairy products.

With these successes at hand, the Wilson Government recommended that the electorate should support continued membership on the renegotiated terms in the national referendum to be held on 5 June 1975.

With the Conservative and the Labour Parties deeply divided, the two campaign organisations that were set up operated beyond party lines. Britain in Europe (BIE), the pro-European campaign, was supported by the European Movement, the business community, the press and even the Anglican Church. These supporters proved to be generous: almost £1.5 million were donated to it by May 1975, the biggest sum ever amassed for an electoral campaign. It was also the more professionally organised of the two campaign organisations. Their campaign argued that Britain gained economically, in terms of employment, in external strength and even in the security of food provision. It warned against the consequences of leaving.

Their opponents, the National Referendum Campaign (NRC), consisted of left-wing Labour politicians, right-wing Conservatives and people from the nationalist parties of Ulster, Scotland and Wales. The organisation was hampered by its internal divisions, given that it represented such a wide range of views. Moreover, the NRC's image suffered from the radicalism of its leaders, many of whom were very unpopular politicians. The campaign lacked a prominent leadership. Moreover, the NRC only managed to collect £250 000 in donations. Therefore, it had to rely more heavily on the government subsidy of £125 000 that both of the campaigns received. The NRC warned against rising food prices due to the common agricultural policy, a loss of jobs to the continent, and the cut-off of trade links with the Commonwealth. The loss of sovereignty was another central issue.

In the ten days before the referendum, three extensive campaign pamphlets were distributed to the citizens via the Post Office: BIE's 'Why you should vote "yes"', the NRC's 'Why you should vote "no"' and the Government's 'Britain's new deal in Europe'.

While accepting dissent within in the Labour Party, Prime Minister Wilson tried to limit public opposition to their own government. Cabinet Ministers were prohibited from discussing their differences in public, on the same platform. In Parliament, dissenting Ministers had to go along with the government line. This adversely affected the anti-EC much more so than the pro-EC camp, robbing it of its most prominent speakers.

What may have, eventually, been most important for its result was the timing of the referendum. After two and a half years of EC membership, citizens did not find the warnings of the anti-EC campaign very convincing. Moreover, the NRC was not able to dispel the widespread mood — particularly in the insecure economic situation of the mid-1970s — that it was risky to pull out of the EC, particularly with no clear alternative at hand.

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