A Tale of Two Referendums: 1975 and 2016

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One of the more bruising comments on David Cameron's premiership is that it boils down to one recurring theme: 'doing what [Harold] Wilson did, only a little bit worse'.[1] In the wake of the referendum, that verdict now looks generous. Like Cameron, Wilson was a reluctant European who led a divided party at a time of rising euroscepticism. Like Cameron, he pledged to renegotiate the terms of British membership and put them to the public in a referendum. The difference lies in the verdict. When the polls closed on 5 June 1975, Wilson had won a landslide for membership, winning more than two-thirds of the popular vote. Every part of the United Kingdom voted to stay in, with the exception only of Shetland and the Western Isles.

By contrast, Cameron has presided over the biggest policy failure by a British government since the 1930s. The referendum has destroyed his premiership and set off an earthquake beneath British politics. What Stephen Bush called his 'Harold Wilson tribute band' looks more like an evening with Alice Cooper, complete with make-up, live snake and intimations of the apocalypse.

Comparisons between 1975 and 2016 are of course approximate, for Britain and the EU have changed significantly in the meantime. Yet it is still worth asking what went wrong, and why Wilson's referendum formula worked so poorly for his successor.

Renegotiations

Like Wilson, Cameron approached the renegotiations with a single purpose in mind. The object was not to transform the EU, for this could only have been done as part of a reforming alliance. The object was to give his own party members, who had spent years cursing the EU by bell, book and candle, permission to change their minds. That imperative was particularly pressing for Wilson, who had voted against the European Communities Act in 1972.

The difference was that Wilson had a clear sense of what he wanted to achieve. Wilson's renegotiation left untouched what he contemptuously called the 'theology' of the EEC, but targeted very precisely the complaints of moderate sceptics in his party. Left-wing euroscepticism centred on four core concerns: that it was a capitalist club; that it was a betrayal of the Commonwealth; that it was bad for poorer countries; and that it was draining money from Britain. The first group were offered a new regional development fund, together with assurances on industrial policy. For Commonwealth enthusiasts, there were improved terms of trade for New Zealand and other importers. Though not formally part of the negotiations, the Lomé Convention also suggested a new direction for the Community, offering to developing countries a massive aid package and improved terms of trade. A new funding mechanism provided a refund on Britain's contribution to the Community budget, though it would later prove hopelessly inadequate.

At the same time, the direction of travel for the EEC seemed relatively benign. Under the ill-fated Ortoli Commission, the movement towards 'ever closer union' appeared to have ground to a halt. Wilson assured Parliament that 'there is not a hope in hell—I mean in the Common Market'—of economic and monetary union in the immediate future.[2] Helmut Schmidt told a press conference that 'pontificating and proclaiming the European targets for the day after tomorrow' was 'European cloud-cuckoo-land'.[3] It was during the renegotiation period, in 1974–5, that the European Council was formally established, making heads of government, rather than the Commission, the central decision-makers of the Community. The future of the EEC looked to be intergovernmental, not supranational, diminishing fears of a European 'superstate'.

Cameron was neither so lucky nor so skilful. Having set on a strategy of

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renegotiation, he appeared to have not the faintest idea what he wanted to achieve. Where Wilson sought practical improvements that targeted specific grievances, Cameron was driven back onto the 'theology' of the EU, negotiating an opt-out from a commitment to 'ever closer union' that governments had always insisted was meaningless. Meanwhile, the integrationist pressures unleashed by the crisis within the euro zone provided a far less benign environment for public debate. While Cameron could parade his various opt-outs, this risked confirming a perception that Britain had lost control over the direction of travel.

Dracula vs Frankenstein

As a result, the 'renegotiations' proved irrelevant to the campaign. Instead, Cameron was forced back onto 'Project Fear', the strategy that had brought (short-term) victory in the Scottish Independence vote. Here, too, he was playing from the Wilson songbook. The 1975 campaign was described by one newspaper as 'a spine-chilling horror epic', with 'the defenceless voter' caught up in 'a nightmarish duel between Dracula and Frankenstein'.[4] Another called it an 'auction of fear, a competition to make your flesh creep'.[5] Pro-Marketeers warned that a vote to leave would mean 'the closing of schools and hospitals and the stopping of roads, railways and mines'.[6] Ted Heath predicted a Soviet invasion and the return of rationing, while the veteran trade unionist Vic Feather told a press conference that Britain would be 'knackered' outside the Community—'and I don't want to see us knackered'.[7]

Strikingly, those warnings resonated in the 1970s to a much greater extent than in 2016. This was partly because they connected with recent 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 1975—at a time when inflation was nearing 25 per cent—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 strongly favoured a Yes vote.[8] By contrast, warnings issued by the Treasury and the IMF in 2016 seem not to have hit home with voters who had no lived experience of shortages or power cuts. Polling in 2016 suggested that voters expected the country as a whole to be poorer in the event of Brexit, but did not envisage adverse consequences for themselves.

In any case, anxieties about the economy no longer worked automatically to the advantage of the Remain campaign. In 1975 it had been a truism that Britain was the 'sick man of Europe', outpaced on every measure by the dynamic economies of the Continent. Cartoons represented the UK as a sinking ship, its sailors paddling desperately towards the sanctuary of the Common Market. In 2016, by contrast, the euro zone seemed mired in debt, stagnation and soaring unemployment. Time and again, Leave campaigners repeated the slogan that Europe had the slowest growth rate of any continent other than Antarctica. For many voters, it was now the European ship that appeared holed beneath the waterline.[9]

'Take back control'

Debates about sovereignty also had a different character. Contrary to popular mythology, sovereignty was extensively debated in 1975. The slogan 'The Right to Rule Ourselves' was emblazoned across the literature of the 'Out' campaign, while a pamphlet sent to every household proclaimed that 'The fundamental question is whether or not we remain free to rule ourselves in our own way'.[10] Neil Marten, the Conservative MP who chaired the 'Out' campaign, told journalists that 'While food and jobs are vitally important, the real issue is whether we vote away our political birthright … There is no other issue'.[11] 'In' campaigners argued that it was economic weakness, not European integration, that threatened UK sovereignty. In the 1960s, Labour's 'National Plan' had been ripped up by the currency markets and the devaluation of sterling. Spending commitments had been struck down by Britain's creditors at the IMF. Margaret Thatcher dismissed as 'an illusion' the idea that Britain 'could regain complete national sovereignty' by leaving the EEC.[12] The hope was that, by

pooling some of Britain's formal sovereignty in the EEC, Britain would gain more effective power over its own destiny. Winston Churchill, grandson of the former prime minister, told voters that 'We have not gone into Europe in order to lose our sovereignty but to regain and enhance it'.[13]

At its best, this sparked a sophisticated debate on the meaning of sovereignty in a globalised world. The problem for Leave campaigners was that it barely registered with the electorate. 'Sovereignty' was a low-salience issue for voters more concerned with jobs and prices. In 2016, by contrast, sovereignty acquired a hook. 'Take back control'—the mantra chanted by Leave campaigners like witch-doctors performing an incantation—usually meant 'take back control of Britain's borders'. Immigration was so powerful a campaign issue because it did not only speak to concerns about race—though this was evidently part of the mix—but also made manifest something more visceral: a sense that voters were no longer permitted a say on something as fundamental as who could live or work here. That spoke to a wider sense of disempowerment, a sense that people's communities were changing and that no one had asked them whether they approved. Conversely, the argument that sovereignty could *only* be exercised in partnership had lost some of its resonance, for Britain had no recent experience—as it did in the 1970s—of the incapacity of government to function in isolation.

This fed, in more nebulous fashion, into the discussion of war. 1975 was closer in time to the First World War than we are today to the Second. Most of the leading campaigners in that referendum had direct experience of military conflict: Ted Heath had fought in the Normandy landings, Tony Benn had served with the Royal Air Force, while Willie Whitelaw won the Military Cross as a tank commander. Neil Marten had fought with the Resistance in France and Norway, while his opposite number in 'Britain in Europe', Con O'Neill, had interrogated Hitler's former deputy, Rudolf Hess. Ernest Wistrich, who ran the ground campaign for the European Movement, had escaped from Poland shortly before the Nazi invasion and subsequently fought with the Polish division of the RAF.

The language, memory and lived experience of warfare saturated the campaign in 1975. Advocates of membership used the poppy—the flower of remembrance—in their literature. 'Nationalism kills', warned a poster. 'No more Civil Wars'. Another reminded voters that 'Forty million people died in two European wars this century. Better lose a little sovereignty than a son or daughter'.[14] In a broadcast announcing the completion of negotiations in 1971, Heath had appealed explicitly to his own experience in war:

> Many of you have fought in Europe, as I did, or have lost father, 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.[15]

The language of wartime resistance was also claimed by the Out campaign. Anti-Marketeers published a newspaper called *Resistance News*, and the group of MPs around Marten was known as the 'R' Group for the same reason. Voters were urged to 'honour the memory of the dead of the two world wars who made the supreme sacrifice in order to maintain our freedom'.[16] Christopher Frere-Smith, who ran the Get Britain Out campaign, likened pro-Marketeers to the 'guilty men' who had betrayed their country at Munich in 1938.[17] Voters were warned not to be 'fooled by the press bosses and the establishment politicians. They were wrong about Hitler and they're wrong again'.[18]

In 2016, very few campaigners had experience of war. David Cameron was widely mocked when he tried to make the case for the EU as a vehicle of peace. More attention was paid to Boris Johnson's comparison between the EU and the Third Reich, while Michael Gove (ignoring his own advice to 'be careful about historical comparisons') likened those 'experts' who warned against Brexit to the Nazi smear campaign against Albert Einstein.[19] The trivialisation of the War—which seems to have morphed from 'their' to 'our' finest hour—was one of the most depressing features of the 2016 campaign. Certainly, it seemed to have lost its utility for Remain campaigners.

Collective irresponsibility

The conduct of the campaign was as different as its content. In 1975, as in 2016, Wilson suspended collective responsibility and allowed ministers to campaign on either side. That produced occasional moments of friction, as when Roy Jenkins primly declared that he found it 'increasingly difficult to take Mr Benn seriously as an economic minister'.[20] In 2016, by contrast, it produced such spectacular 'blue-on-blue' bloodshed that the media talked of very little else.

This cannot be explained solely by the coarsening of political debate in recent years, or by the echo chambers of abuse constructed on social media. It is also linked to the role of the prime minister. In 1975, Wilson played little public role in the campaign. With Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers leading the Labour charge to stay in, while Tony Benn, Barbara Castle and Peter Shore fought to get out, Wilson could present himself almost as a spectator, bemused by the 'exaggerated claims' and 'doctrinaire' views of both sides. 'They are screaming so hard at one another', he complained, 'that they will not merely deafen people, but confuse them'.[21] That position of baffled scepticism—dismissive of the 'theology' of the Marketeers, but reluctantly persuaded of their economic case—located him very close to the swing voters who would decide the result. As *The Guardian* commented, 'it is Mr Wilson's very scepticism about what he calls Common Market theology which makes him such a Pole Star for the wandering voter'.[22]

David Cameron did not have that luxury. With the Labour party convulsed by its own internal nightmares, under a leader whose own fervour for the EU burned less than bright, and with no one in his own cabinet willing to take a lead, Cameron had little choice but to run the Remain campaign himself. That disabled him as a mediator between the two sides, making it almost impossible for him to moderate the behaviour of Leave campaigners in his own cabinet. This was exacerbated by the fact that his own political style tends to the slashing and contemptuous—something Conservatives enjoyed less when it was directed at them, rather than at Labour. From the moment that Cameron returned from the negotiations and mocked Boris Johnson in Parliament, his authority to temper the debate was gone. The ensuing rancour would probably have ended his premiership even if the result had been different.

False prophets

In 1975, as in 2016, a great deal of ink was spilt on the likely consequences of the referendum. Yet looking back on the predictions made in the aftermath of the vote, it is difficult to find a single one that stood the test of time. The referendum did not, as Wilson predicted, bring 'fourteen years of national argument' to a close.[23] It did not strengthen Labour moderates against the extremes; it did not restore Ted Heath to the centre of British politics; it did not weaken Tony Benn or challenge the authority of trade union leaders (mostly anti-Market) to speak for their members. Nor did it, as the *Daily Express* exulted, mean that Britain was now 'decisively' and 'irrevocably' European.[24]

If the crystal ball proved so erratic in 1975—following a referendum that had gone entirely as predicted, and which endorsed the *status quo*—we should be wary of confident prophecies at a moment when the most basic assumptions of foreign and economic policy have been overturned. It is difficult to see clearly when the plaster is falling from the ceiling. One thing that may perhaps be said with confidence is that Harold Wilson's reputation has rarely stood higher. In winning a referendum on Europe and keeping Britain out of a disastrous US-led war, he achieved two feats that evaded his more celebrated successors. 'Doing what Wilson did' has proven harder than it looked.

Notes

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