

Brexit: The 1975 and 2016 Referenda Compared

Written by Philip Towle

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PHILIP TOWLE, MAY 14 2017

Older people usually vote against change. The BREXIT vote was therefore unusual because younger people often supported the 'remain' campaign while many older people voted to leave. The latter frequently justify their votes in the 2016 referendum by arguing that they were 'tricked' into voting to remain in the European Community 41 years earlier. They believed in 1975 that they were supporting a free trade area which became more like a federation. The implication is that Edward Heath, the Prime Minister who led the country into the Community in 1973, was disingenuous about what was involved. Certainly, Heath's official biographer, Philip Ziegler suggests Heath thought it wise to stress the economic advantages of joining the Community rather than hypothetical developments towards supranationalism. He dismissed the warnings of the Lord Chancellor, Lord Kilmuir that this would cause trouble later. Heath also said little about his hopes for a European monetary union which would lead to the further transfer of power from the member states.

But it is questionable how far electors were 'tricked'. Politicians transmit messages but recipients select those which fit their picture of the world. There were plenty of reports about the political demands which EU membership might bring. The public's natural skepticism, born of experience, led many to dismiss forecasts that Europe would become a federation because they believed European peoples would refuse to give up their sovereignty. They had seen the centrifugal processes in the British Commonwealth which had by 1975 become a mini-United Nations. They had also seen the idealism of the UN dashed by the Cold War. Why would Europe with its violent history be any different? In contrast, Europhile idealists believed this very violence justified the attempt to form a 'community'. In his passionate defence of the remain campaign Douglas Hurd claimed that their emphasis was on the consolidation of peace in Europe which after all its wars seemed so precious and unlikely.

Politicians and public also turned to Europe because Continental nations had overtaken Britain economically. In 1968-9 the British GNP was estimated at about \$110 billion, the French at \$104 billion and the West German at \$125 billion. By 1972 the British GNP was believed to be \$151 billion, the French \$202 and the West German \$259 billion. At the same time British labour relations were deteriorating, inflation increased and the government had to float the pound. British self-confidence collapsed.

The Community appeared to have benefitted Continental economies why not the British? Some, including the commentator and historian, E.H.Carr, believed that only large nations, such as the United States and Soviet Union, could prosper in the 20th Century. Even Margaret Thatcher, no great Europhile in later life, backed the vote to remain in the 1975 referendum. But there were, nevertheless, some knowledgeable sceptics. David Hall, who had been an economic advisor to the Foreign Office in the 1970s, recalled in a letter to *The Times* in January 2013 being summoned along with other government economists to a meeting with the Chief Economic Advisor to the Treasury in 1971. The Treasury official told them that the government could not make the political argument for joining the Community. But, while the official recognised that the economic arguments were weak, he reminded the civil servants they had to do their best to support them.

In the end the 1975 referendum confirmed Britain's membership by some 17 million votes to 8 million. At the start of the year 50% of the British public told Gallup that it had been a mistake to join the European Community in 1973 against 31% who disagreed but, as Heath and others made their case, the number of disaffected fell to the high thirties. By March just over 50% said they would vote in the June referendum to remain. However in later years the

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balance oscillated reflecting general uncertainty; by September 1976 37% told Gallup the Community was a 'bad thing' for Britain against 33% who disagreed and through much of the 1980s a majority remained hostile. But in the 1990s this pattern was reversed and in December 1992 42% were in favour of the Community and 26% against.

Against this background, there were contrasts and similarities between the 1975 and 2016 campaigns. There was a parallel between skepticism about prospects for European federation in 1975 and the widespread dismissal of the warnings about the economic dangers of BREXIT in 2016. But the two sides in the 2016 debate were more evenly balanced in terms of media support and political leadership, and the public were better informed because they knew more of what membership of the EU involved. Where the debate was inferior to 1975 was in the bitterness of the losers. There were no serious suggestions in 1975 that another referendum should be held to overturn the outcome, nor was there the disparagement of leave voters which was widespread in 2016.

The swings in opinion about the EU in the 1980s and 1990s show that ideas based on past experience can be moderated or accentuated by current events and trusted leaders- Heath in the 1970s, Thatcher in the 1980s, Major and Blair in the 1990s. Knowing this Blair hesitated to hold a referendum on joining the Euro after he lost credibility following the 2003 Iraq War. The 2016 referendum occurred when Britain was flourishing while the Euro had impoverished southern Europe and when the EU was shaken by the refugee crisis. But the pro-BREXIT vote would probably have been much greater had Heath or Blair led Britain into the Euro. The remain camp have described BREXIT as a 'populist revolt' against the elite but journalists and politicians were divided and so were others between young and old, varying economic interests, traditionalists and progressives, Anglicans and non-Anglicans, mobile and immobile. If the past is any guide opinion will continue to swing as the effects of BREXIT unfold but these effects are as obscure as those of the decision to remain were in 1975.

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