



Looking Back to Look Forward:  
40 Years of  
Referendum  
Debate in Britain

Calls for a referendum on European have dominated UK politics in recent years. [Andrew Glencross](#) looks back at the only previous vote on Britain's relationship with Europe, in 1975, and finds plenty of similarities with the present day, and some stark differences, too.

**L**et the people decide! It is a simple and seductive formula, especially because it cuts through the prevarication and indecision that the political establishment typically resorts to when debating the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union. But it is often forgotten that the British electorate had an opportunity to decide on its relations with Europe once before.

In 1975, the first ever nationwide referendum was held to determine whether the UK should remain in the then European Economic Community (EEC). Complaints from that time about the EEC sound strikingly familiar: the UK pays too much for too few benefits. Europe is too inward-looking. All this, accompanied by an overall feeling that it is fine to participate in an economic arrangement, but that Britain must stay aloof from federal blueprints for monetary integration. Yet the result was a clear two-thirds majority (on a turnout of 65 per cent) for staying in. So why, 40 years later, has the demand for a referendum arisen anew and what clues does the somewhat forgotten 1975 episode offer about the nature of a future vote on the EU?

### 1975 Europe referendum

Last time around, it was the Labour Party that had the gravest misgivings about European integration. Following two earlier unsuccessful applications in the 1960s, the UK managed to join the EEC under the Conservative government



of Edward Heath in 1973. However, the Labour manifesto of February 1974 reiterated the party's residual, twofold concern with this arrangement: the terms of membership and the method of obtaining popular consent. Labour argued that EEC rules imposed too many costs and constraints, while also pledging that the party would 'restore to the British people the right to decide the final issue of British membership of the Common Market.'

The fact that David Cameron is fighting the May General Election with an identical strategy – renegotiating EU membership followed by an in/out referendum – demonstrates neatly the continuities in this decades-long debate over Britain's place in Europe. Yet there is a risk of overstating the parallels. In the 1970s, the chief political challenge posed by European integration was to Labour, whereas today the biggest internal party cleavage occasioned by Europe is found in the Conservatives. Why this shift has occurred can be traced to an issue absent from the

1975 campaign: immigration.

### Immigration

In 2015, the EU question in Britain is entangled with a broader debate over migration, notably that from EU member states with much lower standards of living. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has made huge inroads in European elections, and is threatening to do the same at Westminster, on a platform combining dislike of the EU with shrill calls to curb immigration. It is no coincidence that at the top of David Cameron's renegotiation agenda, is the idea of restraining the fundamental EU principle of free movement of people.

Labour is also rather vulnerable to the UKIP accusation that EU membership entails burdensome immigration. Tony Blair's government underestimated the scale of potential labour migration and chose not to impose transitional controls, after the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004. So the argument for a referendum today is that dramatic changes in what EU

Figure 1.



membership entails for Britain, dictate the need to renew public consent.

### Differing concerns

By contrast, the essential point of principle that exercised Labour politicians and party members alike in the 1970s, was the issue of whether EEC rules constrained statist solutions to UK economic woes, of which there were many. Opponents of the EEC, personified best by Secretary of State for Industry Tony Benn, worried that nationalisation and other hard-left industrial policies they favoured would run afoul of Brussels. That these considerations no longer register on the political radar should give pause for thought about how far the UK economy – and the political debate about the economy – has evolved in the intervening period.

The dividing line in the Conservative Party further highlights this economic transformation. The Europhile wing accepts that the advantages of capital and labour mobility offered by EU membership, outweigh constraints imposed on the UK by the EU in immigration policy and other areas of legislative autonomy, a form of self-binding unpalatable to UKIP-leaning Conservatives. Yet, as with Labour in 1974, David Cameron's tactic is to assuage doubts over Europe, by renegotiating terms of EU membership and overcome internecine struggle by holding a referendum. On both counts, the EEC precedent suggests the odds are stacked against him.

### Renegotiating with Europe

Negotiation by the Wilson government hinged on the same two factors applicable today: the scale of the ambition and the ability to forge partnerships with foreign capitals. Foreign Secretary James Callaghan outmanoeuvred EEC-sceptics like Benn by settling for policy reform (notably regarding the budget and the Common Agricultural Policy) rather

than treaty change. This move reassured other leaders, by showing that British unilateralism was nevertheless compatible with the existing rules of the game.

Ultimately Callaghan claimed that the majority of renegotiation objectives from the February 1974 manifesto had been achieved, although the fact that the budget issue came to a head again not long after under Margaret Thatcher tells a different story. Labour's narrative about a successful renegotiation proved highly persuasive in the referendum campaign. The final result represented a marked swing. Gallup polling in January 1975 had shown a 55 per cent majority for leaving the EEC, but by June more than two-thirds voted in favour of staying (see figure 1).

Opinion surveys today similarly suggest a preference for accepting EU membership on the basis of new concessions to UK interests. The problem for any politician seeking to satisfy this desire in 2015, is that British exceptionalism is now deeply engrained within the EU system in a way that was not the case 40 years ago.

With little fanfare and devoid of domestic public recognition, the UK has profoundly shaped EU development since the end of the Cold War. Enlargement and expanded foreign policy powers were key British objectives, while in other key areas the UK now benefits from a bespoke system of opt-outs (Schengen and the Euro) and special treatment (such as the double majority voting system of the European Banking Authority). In these circumstances there is little room for accommodating new demands, especially those that go against fundamental EU principles.

### Brexit?

The probability of desultory re-negotiation helps explain why Eurosceptic Conservatives openly envisage an alternative arrangement, as in the 'generous exit' mooted by Boris Johnson. 'Brexit', generous or otherwise, is certainly

a very realistic outcome of any referendum campaign on EU membership. The swing registered in 1975, occurred with the backing of the press (including the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*) and because the yes campaign outspent the opposition by a factor of 15. Neither looks likely nowadays. A pro-EU campaign today is likely to face significant obstacles: a lack of headline-grabbing renegotiation goals, a querulous media environment, and populist opposition from Eurosceptic Conservatives as well as UKIP.

Any future vote on EU membership will not resemble the 1975 debate directly. Yet what is fundamentally at stake in a referendum on Europe remains unchanged.

Firstly, the decision concerns Britain's place in the world, perhaps more obvious in the post-imperial throes of the early 1970s. Yet the current debate over Britain's terms of EU membership, shows the enduring divide over whether the UK still can and should go it alone in global affairs.

Secondly, the EU debate has become a de facto UK constitutional issue. In 1975 the worry was that Scottish voters would reject the EEC (polls initially showed a 16 point lead for withdrawal in Scotland); four decades on, roles are reversed, with Scottish National Party First Minister Nicola Sturgeon even calling for a Scottish veto on a UK-wide Brexit result. The referendum debate outlived the 1975, result precisely because terms of membership and the nature of popular consent are contestable. Ultimately, it will be a tall order, perhaps an impossible task, for a new referendum to finally resolve these issues and bring catharsis to parties and voters split over Britain's place in European integration.

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